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THE EQUESTRIAN LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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FALL FASHION
FEATURE

Meet Equine Artists
NIGEL FENNELL AND
JEAN ABERNETHY



Nigel Fennell

FROM SHOEING HORSES TO SCULPTING THEM

The artist's steel depiction of Secretariat, "God's Boy 31-2.24," breathes new life into racing history.

By Anna Sochocky

Photos Courtesy Nigel Fennell

British farrier and blacksmith Nigel Fennell has turned and shaped steel for 32 years, achieving worldwide recognition. But he had long harbored a different dream: to build a life-sized horse from the tools and materials of his trade.

These plans first gathered steam after he and his wife, Susie Fennell, were unable to move from England to the United States a few years ago.

"We were meant to be moving to Kentucky, but our first visa application failed," Nigel says. "I gave up three-quarters of my work and had a lot of time on my hands while we tried to figure out what to do. Susie told me, 'Why don't you build that horse you've always wanted to build?'"

"I think it goes back to a saying I've always liked: To achieve or gain something you've never had, you have to do something you've never done and pursue something new," he continues. "Everybody has a new chapter of their life. I've never built a horse, but I thought it was achievable."

An Andalusian stallion named Magico served as the model for Nigel's first sculpture, "Maximus." Designed from Magico's measurements and one photo of the horse under

saddle, Nigel invested over 500 hours in six months to build the stallion. Using farrier rasps, round blacksmith files, bike chains, gears and scaffolding pipe, among other materials, Nigel hand-cut, hot-forged, shaped and welded each piece of the body. Seventy rasps constructed the tail. The mane came to life with 40 rasps.

"He lives and breathes and eats and drinks everything about the sculpture. He'll talk about the sculpture, and we'll go to bed, and he'll be up at 3 in the morning," says Susie.

But Maximus was just the beginning for Nigel; he was about to discover another muse in the form of racing legend Secretariat.

LIVING HISTORY MADE OF STEEL

After a second visa application and a delay due to COVID-19 lockdowns, Nigel and Susie were finally able to relocate to Irvine, Kentucky, in October of 2020. There, a friend asked Nigel what he was planning to build next.

"I said I didn't know and hadn't thought about it. He said, 'Why don't you build Secretariat?' I had heard of Secretariat but haven't followed American racing, especially vintage American racing. I just fell in love with the story," Nigel says.





Nearly 1,000 feet of round bars form the body cage of “God’s Boy 31-2.24,” Nigel Fennell’s steel sculpture of Secretariat.

The story that captivated Nigel took place on June 9, 1973, when Ron Turcotte stormed to Triple Crown victory at the Belmont Stakes (New York) riding a chestnut colt named Secretariat. Turcotte and Secretariat won the race by 31 lengths in a record-shattering 2 minutes and 24 seconds. The iconic photograph of Turcotte turning around on the final stretch of the Belmont gripped Nigel’s imagination.

Armed with three photos of Secretariat hanging in his shop and a book of images of the stallion, Nigel found inspiration in people building sculptures from scrap, including Scottish artist Andy Scott. “He’s an incredible equine artist. He actually builds horses from square and rectangle steel pieces,” he says.

“John Lopez, a bronze and scrap iron artist in South

Dakota, and an Australian artist called Jordan Sprigg also motivated me,” Nigel continues. “They build fantastic sculptures from scrap, car and farm parts, but I wanted to use a different medium. I love the color of steel in its rawest state.”

He may have a long list of artists who inspire him, but Nigel insists that he doesn’t count himself in that category.

“I’ve spent 32 years being a farrier and won many awards at world championships and passed the highest exams,” he says. “I’m happy to call myself a professional farrier because I’ve earned that right. I don’t have an engineer’s brain. I can’t sit down and do endless drawings and measurements. I don’t call myself an artist as I’ve only been dabbling in sculpture for three years where other people have been doing it for a lifetime.”

Nigel used the exact measurements of Secretariat—thanks to the horse’s veterinary records—when he built the sculpture’s body. He also enlisted jockey Jon Court, similar in size to Turcotte at the time of the Belmont, to serve as the human model.

“When I finished one leg, I

remember showing it to my wife. She said, ‘Oh my God, I think this will work.’ I was excited. After I’d done all the legs, the accumulation of hope began to build,” he says. “It also gave me what I call creator’s fear. I wasn’t just making a horse. I was making *the* horse.”

A MOSAIC HORSE IN A MILLION

Nigel crafted the legs, head and entire body cage of the horse from 1,000 feet of a 5/16” round steel bar. The round bar shaped the body piece by piece, beginning at the hindquarters and moving across the barrel. Nigel also cut sheets of steel plates to weld to both halves of the body, but once Secretariat’s skeletal body stood completed, Nigel found himself stumped.



The bodies of Secretariat and jockey Ron Turcotte are composed of thousands of mosaic tiles—made by Justin Frank—on Nigel Fennell’s “God’s Boy 31-2.24.” The reins include the famous quote from Belmont Stakes (N.Y.) announcer Chic Anderson.

“I was looking through my phone at dozens of pictures of Secretariat. I saw all these pictures of him galloping, and suddenly a light bulb went on. What if I did tiny Secretariats galloping and welded together on the body to represent one horse in a million?” says Nigel. “The pattern of the mosaics would heighten the feeling of movement and the ambiance of the body.”

Nigel enlisted his friend and fellow farrier and blacksmith Justin Frank to help create mosaic tiles for the horse and jockey.

“When Nigel asked me to design the mosaics, I jumped at the chance,” says Frank. “Nigel sent me the concept of what he wanted. I have a computerized plasma cutting machine. I designed four designs on my computer—a galloping Secretariat, a large horse head, a smaller horse head, and the jockey—and started cutting them out.”

Each set of 1,000 mosaics took 120 hours for Frank to complete. He shipped six batches of completed mosaics for Nigel to weld onto the body cage and jockey.

“I had to cut each piece and clean each one on a grinder, so Nigel could just take each one out of the box and weld it in place,” says Frank.

To hide the sculpture’s hardware, 4,608 mosaics cover most of the body cage. The legs alone have 575 individual mosaics, and 581 jockey silhouettes envelop Turcotte’s body.

“Each mosaic, individually welded onto the frame, had to be fitted to move on to the next piece. I laid hundreds out on the shop floor to figure out a pattern early on,” Nigel says. “I soon realized that if you put one on the contour of a bar, the next one won’t work, so I had to start bending the mosaic. Each piece took me up to 15 minutes to set, which was excruciatingly frustrating sometimes. The body cage alone, without the legs, took nearly 200 hours.

“The way the bars are on his body and his muscular cage, I was aware that the way the bars go is the way the mosaics had to flow,” he continues. “The galloping horses had to go the way the bar was going. When I came close to the end, I looked at him and realized that everything you can see is because of everything you can’t see. And that’s exactly the

same with the horse. I see the skin and the muscles, but it’s all defined within.”

SECRETARIAT’S HEART BEATS AGAIN

Turcotte still thinks about his special mount daily.

“Secretariat was a generous horse,” he says. “He was a very intelligent horse. He and I would have had a good conversation if he could have spoken. I never thought about where I wanted to place him. He just listened like an excellent student.”

Turcotte once declared that he could feel the power of Secretariat’s heart surging and the horse’s rhythmic breathing during the history-making race. Secretariat’s actual heart weighed between 21 and 22 pounds, nearly three times the size of the average Thoroughbred’s. When Nigel learned that story, he resolved to celebrate the stallion’s heart.

“I could see the shadows against the back plate coming through the mosaics. I put a little plate inside, so the red light could come out the front of the shoulder of the chest,” Nigel says. “I wanted to document a moment in time. This sculpture is the only steel representation of Secretariat. I knew when I decided that I was going to build it, it had to be

something special. The work is titled ‘God’s Boy 31-2.24’ and celebrates Turcotte’s incredible win that set a record still standing today.”

“God’s Boy” may be for sale one day, but for now Nigel enjoys sharing the legacy of the dream team—the indomitable Secretariat and his faithful jockey. As to building steel stallions in the future, Nigel is circumspect.

“If I could make the sculptures successful, maybe get some commissions, maybe

use different materials like copper in the mosaics, but the transition to actually building sculptures for a living is a different issue,” he says.

Turcotte hopes Nigel’s Secretariat finds a permanent home in the National Racing Museum in Saratoga, New York, or the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington.

“There will never be another horse like Secretariat,” he says. “I called him the iron horse, and now he’s made of iron because of Nigel Fennell.” **🐾**

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—NIGEL FENNELL



Nigel Fennell unveiled his steel tribute to Secretariat at the 2022 American Horse Publications annual conference in Lexington, Kentucky.