

John Robertson

By Richard Crockett

Robertson & Caine boatbuilders celebrate their 25th anniversary this year. John Robertson, Executive Chairman of the company speaks to Richard Crockett about his career in boat building, and the success of his company which is recognised internationally.

How did you get into boat building?

I grew up at Zeekoeflei which was the nursery of many of the top sailors in South Africa. We grew up one house from the yacht club and my father was into sailing and built his own Sprog. I have a vague memory going back to when I was two or three, wearing a big bulky kapok lifejacket while positioned near the centreboard while sailing around the Vlei. So I literally grew up in boats.

Later on when I grew up, and after some reprobate gap years I went to Cape Technical College and got my engineering diploma and did the practical with de Beers Diamond Mines in KleinZee - up in Namaqualand just south of Port Nolloth. I was earning quite good money, and I figured out that if I wanted to retire when I was 35 years I would have to start my own business.

Although everyone thinks boat building is mainly carpentry and joinery, it is not really as it is about engineering and systems. I realised I was qualified to run a boat building business, so that's the route I went. I had a motorcycle accident when just out of high school and I received insurance compensation which I used to start John Robertson Yachts. Gary Lytle and myself started the company and we built the Charger 33s. I had built boats previously, like dinghies and Dabchicks, and then also the Impact with Bobby Bongers - who taught me most of my boat building.

What is it that most interests you in boat building?

Production boat building for sure - which is probably due to my engineering background. To me it is so easy to build a custom boat as you just open a cheque book and you write cheques until the boat is finished. Production boat building isn't like that as it has so many different facets. You have to build a beautiful boat which has to be the right price, and it has to be of the right quality. Plus it has to be built on time - you simply cannot be late with production boats.

There is so much that goes into making a production boat which makes it really challenging, and that is what excites me about boat building. The best thing about boat building to me is all the systems behind it which contribute to make this beautiful product.

How and why was Robertson and Caine established?

John Robertson Yachts carried on for about 10 years. Jerry Caine joined me mid-way through that when we started building L34s. Gary Lytle in the mean time left boat building and was bought out by Jerrold Salamon. I should have seen the light, instead I carried on hitting my head against a brick wall. Ultimately Jerry and I bashed our way through that wall! We had the success of our Holiday 23 which we started in 1983 with Jerrold - who at the time gave me one of the best pieces of advice I have ever had in my life! He said: "John why don't you get off your high horse, forget about racing boats, forget about all this Admiral's Cup stuff, and build a 'mom and pop' boat" - and that is why the Holiday 23 was born. We built about 180 of these little boats and followed that with the L34.

Unfortunately others joined the business and this ultimately resulted in an unpleasant breakup. Jerry and I decided to go it alone as by then we were minor partners. We had a good bond and that's when the two of us started Robertson & Caine.

We started with a custom build, the Richeigh 63 project. We then did *Broomstick*, a 70-footer which won the Rio Race. The problem with



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custom building is that every time you finish a boat you sweep out the workshop and wait for the next order. That's a bit hair raising, so we decided to get back into production boats and did projects like the Fast 42.

Obviously Robertson & Caine is a success story as 25 years later you are still going strong. What do you attribute this to?

I think our values. I really believe that we run a really honest company. We try to have very good and honest relationships with all our suppliers. In addition to that we have a policy of not compromising on quality. Jerry Caine was fanatical on quality.

Obviously we have had times when quality does sometimes dip, and it is really painful. If we grow too quickly quality can dip, and it is horrible. We have just recently been through a situation like that which we have now fortunately corrected.

Do people still ask about the 'Caine' connection in the Company name?

Yes they most certainly do. Tragically Jerry was killed in a motorbike accident when a pedestrian stepped off the road into him. It was a time in our business when we spent long hours together building the business. He is still remembered strongly by us all because of his non-compromising attitude and the fact that he was such a likeable guy.

It is a tough industry and it is one in which you have survived. What is the secret to surviving the tough times in this industry?

It is a roller coaster ride. The worst ever time, and it still stands out above all the bad times, was in 2003. We were building a really bad product. When I say bad product, don't take it the wrong way as it was a learning curve. It was the first power cat that we were involved with which we called the Lion 46. It was a good boat, but it was a bad product for our business as we were learning about power cats and we were losing money on every single boat that we delivered. It was terrible, and there was nothing we could do about it. At the same time we were finishing our new factory expansion as things were going well, plus it was the end of the year - and at the same time the Rand had really strengthened. The bank called us up and they said they were really worried about our export business selling in Dollars, and informed us they were cutting our overdraft.

At that point I had already moved to the United States so I flew out immediately to work our way through it. How we worked through it shows just how being straight and honest with suppliers works as we went to each and every one of them, explained the situation, and every one extended our credit terms.

I went to The Moorings and informed them of our situation and gave them our plan to recover from it. They immediately agreed to pay us for two boats in advance. It showed the relationship we had with them, and it shows that integrity in business is so important.

Since then we have had a few minor hiccups, but nothing like that. I learnt another lesson from this, and it's very relevant right now - and that is not to grow fat when the Rand weakens. You must always imagine that the following year the rand will strengthen and you can't be artificially buoyant through currency fluctuations.

Why did you base yourself in the USA?

As we grew we realised that we were becoming an international company and that product support was important. At that stage 80% of our equipment came from Europe and 20% from the USA, and the follow-up we needed was in the Caribbean and United States. As a result we needed to source more from America, so we planned to open an office there to start sourcing parts and equipment. At the same we realised that our link with The Moorings was exceptionally close, and that we needed

to camp on the doorstep of their head office in Clearwater, Florida.

Funnily enough, 15 years later, we are still buying more from Europe!

Robertson and Caine are ranked in the top three in the world for building catamarans. Is this something you aimed to achieve or is it something that has come with your growth automatically?

No, we never aimed for this. I had a very immature vision that I wanted to retire when I was 35, and when that came along I said what about 45, and then 55? I finally got to a point when I could retire and I thought what the heck is this retirement all about? I think I retired for a day and then I realised that I would never retire. I think this immature thing at the beginning was about financial success, but then I realised that as we were building really nice boats we would obviously make money doing it. The whole reason you are in business is to make money and be financially successful, and it was never to be the biggest in the world. We simply aspired to build the best boats possible.

What you are really saying is that you have got to this position of being one of the top boatbuilders, well catamaran builders, in the world purely by being the best?

Yes I would like to think so.

The biggest turning point was our association with The Moorings and Tui Marine.

One of my previous ventures before John Robertson Yachts was with Ton Cup Yachts and Lex Raas and Rick Nankin. Lex and I had a very strong relationship, and in the mid-1980s he left South Africa and went to work with Beneteau. From there he became the operations director at The Moorings. In about 1995 Lex had the vision that catamarans were the future of yacht charters. We didn't know anything about cats other than finishing off two cat HDBs. At the time South Africa was one of just two countries which were quite advanced with multihulls, the other being France. Lex persuaded The Moorings to increase the number of cats in their fleet. He brought the decision-makers onto one of our Richleigh 63s at the Annapolis Boat Show where the CEO was so impressed with the quality that he asked Lex to investigate the company who built it. Because of my relationship with Lex the rest is history.

So basically your reputation went before you in terms of uncompromising quality?

Yes, that was a stamp of approval, although there was a second one too. Ellian Perch had joined us the previous year and he was into this whole Mumm 36 thing. People from the Bruce Farr design office came out to visit us and they gave us the stamp of approval and licenced us as one of only four builders in the world who could build the Mumm 36. That gave us an international stamp of approval - so we were no longer just this little South African company on the southern tip of Africa. We had a boat on the Annapolis Boat Show and a stamp of approval from the Farr Design office. So when you say our reputation preceded us, it was these two events that really helped us sign off on The Moorings contract.

Robertson & Caine is a massive operation in South Africa now. How many boats will you be building this year.

I think it is about 183 for this year.

That's a lot of boats and looks as if you will be launching about four boats per week?

We do things differently in South Africa. We launch boats in the harbour and commission them there, whereas a lot of the international builders have test facilities in their factories and then they shrink wrap the boats and they go off on low beds. We have quite a strain down in the harbour with a boat arriving every day or so to be commissioned. Our new factory has a pool in it so we can commission in-house now.

As a company what have you done to promote the local industry and maintain jobs?

We haven't got formal social programmes as we just try to be really good to our staff and we try to make sure that we have good jobs for them and we do try and contribute to the community.

We have stayed loyal to South Africa as we think it is a great place to build boats. We have had ventures in other countries, but those petered out which made us realise that Cape Town is a really nice place to build boats.

Obviously you are teaching your guys a lot of good skills to keep them with you?

Well that is something interesting. Cape Town traditionally was a good centre for building boats because we have a huge population of really good craftsmen and 'old style' tradesmen. We now employ 1350 people and about two years ago we suddenly discovered that the pool of skilled labour had completely dried up, which was a huge problem.

My personal belief is that the old tradesmen are clocking out and retiring. Plus worldwide, the youngsters today want to be computer experts, and experts in other fields, and they don't want to be blue collar workers.

To address this we have a huge programme in place and we hire people three months before they are needed on the line - and we train, train, train. These people are learning some really good skills.

How active a role do you play in the company these days?

The problem with our company is that it has always been something of a family business. I have always had my finger in everything, and it was quite difficult for me to stop micro-managing. I have slowly extracted myself and concentrate mostly on the technical side and the development of new models. So I am playing more of a mentoring role these days.

Of all the catamarans you have built, which is the cat you rate as your most favourite?

The very first Leopard 45. It was a really great boat for a number of reasons. It was profitable for both ourselves and The Moorings. It launched their catamaran fleet and I would like to believe it was the catalyst for a change in the whole world charter industry - led by The Moorings.

Of all the boats you have ever built which is the one you remember most?

There are two, The first being the Holiday 23. It was a very profitable boat which was the same price as a small car. In those days it was the price of a Ford Grenada and later the Toyota Cressida. We purposely kept the price to match those, and it was still profitable. More importantly it fulfilled its role as a 'mom and pop' boat which everyone in the family could enjoy. The Leopard 45 was similar as it too fulfilled everything perfectly.

Those two boats equally, in my mind, are the two greatest boats, and one isn't better than the other!

And in terms of the Holiday 23, obviously winning the H23 'Worlds' in 1988 must have been the highlight of your sailing career?

(Laughs) Yeah, despite having challenges with my crew members who were none other than Jerry Caine and yourself!. That was a great time and exactly the spirit envisaged by all who developed the boat. It was a fun event in every way as we had racing at sea, an overnight sojourn up the Berg River which included dropping our masts, and a host of other fun events and parties. This was a family event in which everyone who competed went away as winners.

Funnily enough I was quite proud to win that as we beat the likes of Dave Hudson and Rick Nankin who were crewing on other boats.

It's still an active class some 33 years later.

What advice can you give people in the industry - especially those new and trying to establish themselves in boat building?

My first advice would be to go into another business - seriously. It is an incredibly difficult business to get into. In South Africa the entrepreneurial spirit is brilliant and I draw the parallel between rugby and American football. In rugby you have to think on your feet as if there is a breakdown you 'maak a plan'. In American football if there is a breakdown you have time out and the coach refers you to a move in the playbook!

My first real advice is to think very carefully about it. Secondly, be true to your principles and unwavering with quality and business ethics.

What legacy will you leave boat building in South Africa?

I firmly believe that I have always done the right thing in business by being honest and straight, and being loyal to staff. I constantly think about quality and constantly innovate. So ultimately I would like to think that what I leave behind me is a business that is straight up and down.

I have often said that you have always been uncompromising in terms of quality, which is your strength. So that is probably also a legacy that you are leaving, as boatbuilders have aspired to meet your standard, in this country anyway?

That is a good point which on reflection is something I am very proud of. ↴