



25 years

THE SURTEES BOATS STORY

Neil Surtees built his first aluminium boat 25 years ago. What began as a one-man band is now is a highly professional boatbuilding organisation employing nearly 60 staff and building over 400 boats per year.



It all began when 15-year old Neil Surtees left school to start work.

“I was never good at reading or writing, so I left school to work for Teddy Koia Motors in Kawerau, the local chainsaw guru,” says Neil.

His next job was with Best Insulation, where he learned to weld sheet metal and became the company’s best welder by age 18. After completing a three-year boilermaking apprenticeship with McKenzie and Ridley, Surtees moved back to Kawerau.

There he started building steel jet boats as a part-time venture. Steel-hulled jet boats were popular as they tended to slide over the rocks rather than puncturing. But steel is heavy and, to keep his boats as light as possible, Surtees used the minimum thickness – a 6mm centre strip, 3mm for the remainder of the bottom and 1.6mm on the sides and decks.

“People don’t realise you can make a steel hull as light as an aluminium one if you have the right approach.”

In the days before TIG and MIG became commonplace, Surtees did all his welding with an arc welder, which on 1.6mm





feature

25th Anniversary

WORDS BY
JOHN MACFARLANE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
NORMAN HOLTZHAUSEN
AND **SUPPLIED**



TOP What do you call five Surtees boats in a line? A lot of fun.

ABOVE There's a steady procession of vessels coming off the production line.

LEFT Different models, same quality.

25
years



steel requires a fairly deft hand, and he got pretty good at it.

One day a customer asked Surtees to build him an aluminium jet boat. Little did he know this would be the first of nearly 7,000 aluminium boats bearing the Surtees name. Then, most aluminium boats were of a fairly rudimentary design and, due to their light construction and flattish hulls, tended to bounce along on top of the water.

When, a little later, a fisherman approached Surtees for an aluminium offshore boat, he knew the design would be critical. Despite having no formal design background, he developed several innovative features early on, and they've been so successful they've barely changed in 25 years.

Designing, he says, was largely done by eye. "I like things to

"People don't realise you can make a steel hull as light as an aluminium one if you have the right approach."

TOP One of the icons that's remained ever-popular – the Surtees 5.5m Workmate.

ABOVE Yes, they are built for fishing pleasure.

RIGHT Want your boat to reflect your more colourful view on life? Easy – what colour?



look elegant and pleasing to the eye.”

While a deeper V forward was an obvious solution for a better ride in a seaway, a light aluminium deep V hull is tippy and unstable at rest.

“A deep V hull without ballast is a horrible thing – you’d never own one. But when you introduce lots of water – not just a spoonful but a ton or more – it completely transforms the hull. So you’ve won twice, a smooth ride at speed and stability at rest.”

Initially the Surtees water ballast system was automatic; the tanks filled as soon as the boat stopped and emptied as it moved forward onto the plane.

A later refinement was a manually-operated flap so the driver can choose whether the ballast tanks flood or not. This allows ballast to be retained for a steadier ride in a chop, or conversely, an empty ballast tank for less draft when navigating shallows or remounting the trailer, particularly off beaches.

To improve steering at speed, Surtees kept his chines as small as possible and doesn’t use planing strakes – “the hulls are so light they don’t need any extra lift.”

Through his sheet metal experience Surtees developed a strong, light construction system that was relatively quick to build.

All Surtees boats are built upright – “I’ve never turned a boat over in my life” – and even today they are built using the same techniques established by its founder 25 years ago. The bottom panels are pulled up into shape over six, full-length longitudinal stringers (three either side of the keel), which are fully welded before the sides go on.

Transverse gussets at 600mm centres between the stringers combine with a fully-welded chequerplate floor, make an incredibly strong, box-section hull that comes with a 10-year warranty. “We’ve never had to repair the bottom on any of my boats.” The



Around the world with Pantaenius



Please call Ross Lewis
on +64 (02) 21 56 63 87
to find out more.


PANTAENIUS
Sail & Motor Yacht Insurance

Sydney • Phone +61-(0)2-9936 1670 • pantaenius.com.au

25
years



gap between the two innermost stringers in the keel area forms the ballast tank, while the areas either side are sealed buoyancy compartments.

There's no production line as such at Surtees boats. Each boat is built by a single boatbuilder, who signs off his work by welding his initials under the swim step. While there are stock models, each boat is customised to order. For example, the finish can be bare aluminium, Nyalic, or painted any colour. Any brand of engine can be fitted, as well as all the usual options in fish finding and navigation electronics.

While structure is critical, just as important to the end customer are the refinements. More than most, Surtees has mastered the art of adding features to make boating easier and more comfortable for the end user. That's not by accident.

"I'm a very practical person. I sit in my boat and think there's a space, what can I do with that? And I like to see things in a boat that not only look good but are also functional – it's a working space and it has to work well." An example of Surtees' thinking is the Quik-Hitch, an automatic lock on/lock off system for single-handed launching and retrieval.

Surtees started as a one-man band selling his boats solely through word-of-mouth. The first genuine production model was a 6.1m fishing boat, which was followed by a 5.5m version. These two boats were aimed at the serious fisherman and sold so well that Surtees had to employ staff to meet demand, which didn't necessarily suit his hands-on style.

Wise in the ways of metal, tools and boats, Surtees' lack of formal schooling imposed limitations on progress, one being the lack of a legal agreement with overseas dealers.

Surtees Boats began exporting boats to Australia through a



local dealer in the early 2000s. One particular model was branded the Bar Crusher and proved very popular. Sadly, this dealer secretly set up a factory to build his own boats, which he branded Bar Crusher.

Unashamedly, the Bar Crusher boat was a Surtees copy, hook, line and sinker, including all the unique construction features. "They're just burglars," says Surtees.

Sadly, many Kiwi yacht designers have had similar experiences with boatbuilders plagiarising their designs without credit, let alone royalties. They found, as did Surtees, that offshore legal remedies are prohibitively expensive, with no guarantee of success.



Another limitation Surtees found was managing staff – “I’d much rather be on the tools” – and as the company grew so did his stress. So much so that in 2003 he sold Surtees Boats to a group of investors. He gave them the option whether he remained with the brand or not. Wisely they retained him as a design consultant and part owner.

Since then, while the basics of a Surtees boat – the deep V, water ballast and the unique construction method – haven’t changed, the boats have continued to be refined and improved.

While these refinements used to come from Surtees himself, these days they tend to come from a dedicated R&D team and input from Surtees staff. This continual refinement has seen the brand win numerous awards over the last two decades, in the process lifting the bar for all aluminium boatbuilders in New Zealand.

The boats are sold through a dealer network, five in New

Dyck is only too well aware of this and has addressed it with tight operating procedures. “All our machinery has health and safety considerations to make sure the right procedures are followed. That’s [Health and Safety] not something we want to rest on our laurels about – it’s a constant process we’re managing.”

Neil Surtees still owns the land and buildings in which the company operates (just outside Kawerau), but he lives elsewhere and spends most of his daylight hours in a large man cave working on cars.

Yes, cars have replaced boats in his life, especially modified cars and hot rods, of which he has a large collection. Nearly all have been rebuilt, modified or built from scratch. Apart from upholstery, Surtees does everything himself.

His current project is an early de Havilland Gypsy Moth Major air-cooled aeroplane engine, which he recently bought at a swap meet. Surtees’ is also building a 1920s replica race car to house the engine.



FAR & CENTRE

LEFT The high-precision components are assembled by individual craftsmen.

LEFT AND TOP

Neil creates other pieces of magic in his man cave.

Zealand, six in Australia and one in New Caledonia.

While strategy and marketing aluminium boats in an increasingly cluttered marketplace is an ongoing challenge, says CEO Adam Dyck, attracting suitably qualified staff to the area remains his biggest challenge.

“It’s our number one problem. We’re currently looking for [aluminium] boatbuilders, fitters, engineers and CAD designers.” The company operates an in-house orientation system whereby new boatbuilders are buddied up with an experienced one for 12 to 18 months before building their own boats.

Aluminium boatbuilding equipment is potentially dangerous.

“I might do a few vintage hill climbs when it’s finished.”

And what of the future for the company? Dyck says the future vision is twofold: pursuing the ultimate fishing boat and continuing to shift the innovation goal posts.

The Surtees Boats story has lessons for any New Zealand company. Once again, it’s proof a good tradesman with a great idea and an excellent work ethic can more than succeed. There’s also a more pertinent lesson: it’s a wise man who understands his limitations and knows when to pass the baton onto others.

Surtees Boats – building serious boats for serious fishermen for 25 years and counting. **BNZ**