



THE SURTEES STORY

New Zealand's Surtees Boats has an enviable reputation for strength, ride and value, so we sent John 'Bear' Willis across the ditch to uncover the secrets behind its success.

STORY **John Willis** PHOTOS **John Willis, Ellen Dewar, Supplied**



Neil Surtees started building steel jet boats for his own use a good many years ago. They were (and still are) made from sheet steel to slide across rock bars with greater ease and with less damage than aluminium. "He's always been good with his hands, but was no great academic!" said one of Neil's teachers in a chance meeting. It's little wonder that he followed in his father's footsteps to become a second-generation boilermaker. His chosen occupation and pastime is creating mechanical devices with a particular love for all things that go, be it cars, motorbikes, tractors or boats.

Back in the early 1990s Neil (now 55 years old) turned his hand to building an aluminium fishing boat. He was living in a little house in Kawerau and building boats for his friends with an aluminium head and feed for his MIG welder. "They turned out pretty well, in fact the first one is still around somewhere," exclaimed Neil as he proudly showed us over his latest jet boat with a supercharged Suzuki engine and Hamilton Jet – highly modified of course.

Neil's boat designs fitted well into the New Zealand market from day one. He listened and learned from talking to other manufacturers and users about what was essentially wrong and right with the available products of the time: "Anything that was said as negatives about any other boat I wrote in a book and redesigned into my boats as positives. I basically built the boats that others wanted but made sure that they were ideal work spaces – I'm a working kind of guy!"

"I like building things, but not the same things over," says Neil, and so he sold the business to



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Australia's Greatest Boat 2017 winner the 700 Game Fisher during testing in Hervey Bay; The 495 Workmate is a Trade-a-Boat favourite; Functional storage for days; On board the rugged 750 Game Fisher off Tasmania

a group of investors and directors in 2005. Paul Wills took the reins initially, however the better-known and highly-popular Phil Sheaff took over as managing director for around ten years. The handover was at a difficult period in time for Neil with a major family tragedy affecting his enthusiasm. He had purchased a larger property with one shed on State Highway 30 in between the beautiful coastal towns of Whakatane and the thermal centre of Rotorua, just inland from the Bay of Plenty on New Zealand's North Island.

Business prospered with the development of a range of models starting with the ever-popular 6.1, followed closely with the 5.5 then the 6.7, and even quite a number of larger custom boats with Volvo stern drives.

Neil designed and initially built the 5.5, 6.1 and 6.7 himself, plus the prototype of the much-loved and respected pocket rocket 495 (an evolution of the 475 then 485 - see around Australia). Yet as times got busier he expanded with more staff, eventually selling the business with around 40 staff but staying on as a director.

Interestingly, around 36 hulls over 18 months were originally introduced to Australia via brothers Peter and Warren Cleland and their company Bar Crusher. The brothers were initially importing partially-built boats and parts, then assembling and manufacturing components for more efficient production, before eventually breaking away altogether with their own brand. The two brands and their evolution are often confused, however both manufacturers now make and distribute exceptionally successful yet individual ranges, but with shared DNA.

“Surtees Profisher Centre Consoles are ideal for the hardcore sports fisho that demands a well-balanced fishing platform with 360-degree fishability”



ABOVE Surtees' General Manager, Adam Dyck, indicating up to where has had it with Bears' line of questioning



PRACTICAL, ROBUST AND SIMPLE DESIGN

"The flooding keel was far from a new idea but it's all too easy to get wrong. There is a lot of testing along the way and it isn't overly easy for production," said Neil.

"I hate f***** plastic! When I build a boat it's for life. You'll never see plastic windscreens in my boats. When I sell it to you I wave you goodbye with the fond knowledge that I'll probably never see you again! Perhaps I'm silly as I'll never make any money out of you again but it doesn't matter. I get one shot at you then we all move on!" he grinned.

All of Neil's boats were produced with 4mm marine-grade aluminium hulls and 3mm sides, and to his knowledge all of them are still performing to this day. "We now build boats with five and six-millimetre bottoms only due to market demands but we don't really need to due to our inherent construction strength. If aluminium doesn't move it won't fatigue and crack and that's why we have never had a return, simple as that," he said.

Neil was the first to produce a successful folding hardtop for storing in garages. It was perhaps a forerunner to the popular fully enclosed hardtops of today that have taken our boating market by storm. He was always careful to produce fully welded floors where hooks and sinkers couldn't make their way into nooks and crannies and cause electrolysis.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Neil believes construction strength sets Surtees apart; Specimens like this Whakatane Kingfish are par for the course on a Surtees; Our faithful editor enjoying the open air on a Game Fisher.

From the helm with Adam Dyck

Adam started with Surtees in November 2014, originally in a marketing role and then training under the highly-respected Phil Sheaff to take over as managing director.

"I came from a corporate sales and marketing role with fast-moving consumer goods and have gradually eased into this position with a great deal of assistance from Neil, Phil and all of the employees. I must make mention here of Cliff Schick - he's an enormous asset and has learned this business inside-out over his eighteen years with Surtees. Cliff originally started on the workshop floor and is now a very well respected and loved Sales Manager.

BEAR: I SEE AN OBVIOUS PRIDE WITH ALL AT SURTEES, IS THAT A FAIR CALL?

ADAM: Yes, there is a real pride in producing premium quality products, but I think that is accentuated by the rural family atmosphere that we encourage throughout all of our employees.

BEAR: SO, WHAT'S CHANGED UNDER YOUR LEADERSHIP?

ADAM: I guess it's fair to say that Surtees has enjoyed enormous growth over the last couple of decades and it's now time to take stock of our range, reputation, facilities and production and then properly plan and forecast

future growth. Demand was well exceeding supply and hence we not only expanded our facilities but modernized our production and processes.

BEAR: WHERE'S THE FUTURE?

ADAM: We focus on a single-minded target around our motto of "Built To Fish" Fishermen are obviously our largest target market but they often have other needs as well. Fishos can be male or female. They may have families where the boat must double-up for other on-water activities. Some will want to ski, others dive, maybe just cruising and many other aquatic past times. We just need to meet their needs by understanding our customers.

BEAR: YOU ARE STILL GROWING QUICKLY?

ADAM: Growth has expanded exponentially through both Australia and New Zealand, but to satisfy the demand we need to reduce our lead times. That doesn't just happen through expansion, it happens through planned process.

BEAR: WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT NEW ZEALAND AND AUSTRALIAN FISHOS?

ADAM: Australia is a far more varied fishing climate to New Zealand. What is appealing in the far north may not work in the deep south of the country, yet there are a few common themes. The big one is fuel capacity. Aussies

are traveling enormous distances in search of fishing opportunities nowadays and we must adapt our designs to suit. It's not just a simple matter of adjusting the size of the tank either. Such changes have to be thoroughly researched, modeled and tested to ensure we maximize the ride and handling.

BEAR: WHAT IS COMING NEXT FROM SURTEES?

ADAM: There's an exciting new model being released at the 2018 Hutchwilco Show. It's a 540 Workmate Hardtop that should have great appeal in Australia and fills a large hole in our range. We are really excited by this latest release, but there's always more on the drawing board! We also have the freshly designed transom layout that improves our step and live bait tank area with a slide-up wall. It provides a better work area for fighting a large fish.

BEAR: ARE YOU LOOKING FURTHER AFIELD?

ADAM: We currently have a lot of interest from the USA and Europe but we are happy with our ANZAC relationship and intend to concentrate on it. However, our boats are already built to International CE specifications and we are getting more and more interest in military options including current orders for a couple of specifically designed 750s.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The Surtees stamp is even in Neil's shed at home; Neil's passion for travel extends past the briny; The Surtees homegrown style extends to its ex-farmhouse office; It seems Neil has a soft spot for all kinds of vehicles; Another view of one of Neil's most stylish toys



“Neil was the first to produce a successful folding hardtop for storing in garages. It was perhaps a forerunner to the popular fully-enclosed hardtops of today”



“Practical, robust and simple – all of the things you want in a boat. Its little things like when you put your phone on the dash and it doesn't fall off due to the retainers that also double up as grab bars. We also strive to standardize as many accessories as possible so that you can start with the basics and add extras should you feel the need and have the budget for. We developed our boat catch after I had smashed my right arm and needed a simple means of retrieval – it's all about development through need and personal experience.”

I asked Neil if there were any regrets: “Nah, I don't think I'd do anything much different. Maybe get a management degree or something because that side of things did my head in. But I am a hands-on kind of fella, I love the workshop. Have a good look at my original 6.1, there's not another boat in the world like that!”

Neil told us a funny story of the initial development of the Surtees Boats. He drew it up on the floor of the workshop and put the three-dimensional jigs together as the new hull

design grew. But of course, he was working on an upside-down hull and the only way he had to get a true perspective on his creation was to stick his head between his legs and view it right way up!

“My old man used to say that the two best days in a life were when you bought and when you sold your boat. I set about changing that by reducing the maintenance and making boating simple. I've made a point of making boats that you will love forever!”

Neil has remarried and has two step children plus one of their own. The family still lives on the property adjacent the factory and the offices are in his original farm house. We should have known we were in for a treat when he greeted us in his kitchen where a vintage motor bike lives above the cooktop! His sheds are choked full of hot rods, classic and vintage cars and caravans, rat rods, memorabilia, steam punk artworks, boats and classic motorbikes in all manner of condition from wreck to showroom. His final statement? “If you want to do something in life then don't hold back – just go do it!”

Surtees' history

PRE 1900s

Neil builds his own jet boats in his spare time

EARLY 1900s

Neil Surtees builds aluminium fishing boats in a backyard workshop at Kawerau

1993

The 5.5 Workmate and 6.1 Workmate released and a larger property purchased

1994

The 6.7 Sportfisher and 6.1 Barcrusher introduced

1995

Release of first folding hardtop for garage storage

1997

5.5, 6.1 and 6.7 Centre Console released

1999

Brothers Peter and Warren Cleland and their company Bar Crusher begin importing partially built Surtees boats and parts to Australia, before eventually breaking away altogether with their own brand now known as Bar Crusher

2005

Neil sells Surtees Boats and remains as a director entrenched in the business

2005-2018

Factory expansions continue



“My old man used to say that the two best days in a life were when you brought, and when you sold your boat. I set about changing that by reducing the maintenance and making boating simple”
– Neil Surtees



WORKMATE (AVAILABLE MODELS 495, 540, 575, 610, 650, 700)

Workmates are the foundation of the Surtees range. They are built with Neil Surtees' home-spun values with the KISS principle prominent (keep it simple stupid); the theory is simple and uncluttered, and the boatbuilding principles are complex. Surtees build the Workmate range for the unbridled fisherman or diver with a reduced cabin and maximized deck space, creating serious work places for active aquatic action.

The Workmate series is available as a Hardtop (540, 575, 610, 650, and 700 only) or an ingenious fold-down roof that enables garage storage and reduced wind drag for trailering.

THE CURRENT RANGE

All Surtees hulls are built to the exacting quality and revolutionary designs perfected over many years of testing. They incorporate the famous 'Anti-Roll' stability ballast with the soft riding deep-V 'Razortech' hull. Surtees 'Tough Deck' underfloor construction incorporates a high level of 'Safety Buoyancy' for total peace of mind, but is also the backbone of the engineered construction that allows Surtees to offer a world-wide 10-year structural warranty.

Surtees also fit the "Anti-Roll Lock" shut off gate to all of their hulls. It allows water to be trapped in the water ballast tank when desired,

giving more stability at rest and a softer ride with terrific balance in the rough. Simply open the gate for a lighter load in good conditions, shallow water or when trailering.

Surtees boats deliver the perfect balance of cabin and fishing space packed to the gunnels with Surtees SiQ™ technology and features. Over 90% of the boats are treated with Nyalic, a paint-like substance that protects the aluminium hulls from harsh environments that cause corrosion, oxidation, stains and pitting, or alternatively there is a full range of optional paint finishes.



CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN Performance and stability are hallmarks of every Surtees; The next generation of New Zealand fishos; Surtees is a part of the NZ fishing culture; A Surtees owner's proudest catch.

2006

Phil Sheaff takes over as managing director

2008

4.7 Workmate released

2009

4.7CC, 5.8 Workmate, 5.8 Game Fisher and 6.7 Coastal Explorer introduced

2010

7.3 Game Fisher, 5.5HT, 6.7 Game Fisher Enclosed and 6.7 Game Fisher Open released

2011

4.85 Workmate and 4.85 Centre Console released

2011-2013

8.5 Game Fisher introduced

2014

850 Game Fisher Wide Body, 495 Workmate, Pro Fisher (CC), 575 Workmate, Workmate Hardtop and Pro Fisher all released

2015

Major range overhaul occurs with releases and variants of the Workmate, Game Fisher and Pro Fisher variants for the 610, 650, 700 and 750

2018

The smallest Hardtop on the market and Pro Fisher versions of the 540 introduced

“Neil’s boat designs fitted well into the New Zealand market from day one. He listened and learned from talking to other manufacturers and users about what was essentially wrong and right with the available products of the time”




ABOVE Why can't all tests be this exciting?
RIGHT Surtees' Game Fisher series combines purposeful design with exciting performance



GAME FISHER SERIES

The Surtees Game Fisher series add protection through a hard top combined with an upgraded array of standard equipment. The Game Fisher Open Series are open to the cockpit, however the Game Fisher Enclosed has a fully enclosed rear bulkhead with French doors providing the ultimate climate protection and lockable security. Game Fisher models include the 610, 650, 700, 750 and the flagship 850.

PROFISHER CENTRE CONSOLE

Surtees Profisher Centre Consoles are ideal for the hardcore sports fisho that demands a well-balanced fishing platform with 360-degree fishability. These state-of-the-art pelagic weapons also feature the Surtees-strengthened Deck System and Original Stabilising Ballast Technology. The combination of these two design innovations gives you an incredibly stable boat built with the same premium boatbuilding ability supplied by the inherent Surtees SiQ™ technology and features. Surtees Profisher Centre Consoles are available in 495, 540, 575, 610, 650 and 700 sizes with a full range of power, accessories and T-top options. 



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