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# theROCKET factory

This year marks 15 years in business for Force Boats. It might be a small factory in the backblocks of Western Sydney, says John Ford, but with hundreds of trophies to its credit, Force can claim a place among the world's best.

## FAMOUS NAMES



When the current world waterski champions use Force Boats to drive themselves to victory and the observer from that same team commissions a no-holds-barred version for his social boat, then you'd think the Force brand has some river cred.

In a time when Australian boatbuilders are falling by the wayside because of the world economy, Force Boats is actually increasing production and in fact this year celebrates 15 years in business.

Rod and Kelly Bickerton run Force Boats from a property on the winding reaches of the Hawkesbury River, west of Sydney. The annual Bridge to Bridge Ski Race screams past their back door and they have plenty of

opportunity to see their work in action.

It all started when Rod was a lad, spending time on Pittwater with his father and grandfather towing him behind the old Haines and Savage family skiboats. As a youngster from the Pittwater Peninsula, water and boats were in his blood right from the start — and when he wasn't on the water he spent his time building model boats, which he found so fascinating. By day he worked as an apprentice panelbeater.

Gradually, Rod and his father progressed to skiracing and at the age of 17 Rod kicked his dad out and got behind the wheel himself, only to drive the winning boat in several championships in the Under 19, 175, SMOC and MOC classes.

He soon discovered he had a real flair

for working with his hands (even at age 12 he was in demand for skateboards, which he designed and made at home) and he enjoyed working things out for himself. He decided to try and build his own skiracer, and with advice from 18ft skiff-builder, Julian O'Malley, and boatbuilders Gary and Rob Newell, he made a timber plug for his first design. Working away at the design for three years, Rod estimates he made 400 changes to the hull, testing the modifications on the water each time to see how they worked.

He would glue timber stakes to the side of the boat, take it for a run, and examine how the change affected the handling. He did that 200 times and along the way designed, made and fitted 20 different running planks.



Above: A fantastic day out on the water with friends in the Force P24B Bowrider. Not all models are raceboats.

Left: Kelly and Rod Bickerton are the power behind the Force.



## FAMOUS NAMES



Above: The World Champion Force F19x.

Below: Chris, Tim, Daniel and Dylan fit out a Force F24

Bottom: The hardworking staff at Force HQ preparing the moulds.



Every change brought improvement and more understanding of hydro-dynamics, and by the time he was happy with the hull, he'd taught himself a hell of a lot about boat design. He figured out how little changes affect the way a hull works and found he was obsessed with getting it right. However, he knew he also had to find things out for himself. "I avoided asking other boatbuilders how they did things," says Rod. "That was their business and I didn't want to steal their ideas."

### GETTING IT RIGHT

Experimentation was a big part of learning and that inevitably meant some tough moments. For example, on one occasion Rod flipped his prototype test boat in a wind squall, which is when he realised it was too light and the weight distribution wrong.

When he was finally satisfied with the design, Rod completed a hull from his well-sorted plug and went on to race it in the SMOC class. He was immediately successful, winning the NSW title and Sydney Bridge to Bridge in record time. The original boat was called *The Force*, inspired by the popular *Star Wars* trilogy.

This racing success didn't go unnoticed and it wasn't long before Rod was receiving requests to build a boat just like his. From his original plug design he made his first production model, the F18. It was a hit and 10 F18s were built in the first year of full time manufacturing. These went on to win numerous titles, championships and skirace classics and the F18 still holds unbeaten records today.

Encouraged by the initial achievements, Rod set out to design a larger hull using the same principles that went into the 18-footer. The result was a 23ft foam-sandwich prototype hull that eventually

went into production with the addition of a small step in the chines.

At the time of the F23's release, the skiracing fraternity was not accustomed to boats of this size, so this model was initially sold to buyers who spent their days tripping to islands and heading offshore.

Rod then set about making a 21-footer which quickly raced to success in the 2005 World Water Ski Racing Championships. The F21, *Merc Force*, took out three titles, while an F19x took out two. Out of six categories, Australia won five and every skier was towed to victory by a Force Boat. This is an achievement that no other skiboat manufacturer has laid claim to in World Water Ski Racing title history. It's hardly surprising that more orders came in and the factory had to be enlarged.

The World Championships are held bi-annually and in 2009 the Force F1x took out the major title, towing Wayne Mawer as the Open Men's Champion behind *True Blue*, and the Force F1 took out the Junior Boys Title towing Jack Houston behind *Strings FI*. Over the last few seasons, teams using Force boats have taken out the Grafton Bridge to Bridge, the Southern 80, the Sydney Bridge to Bridge, the Murray Bridge to Bridge, the Hawkesbury 120, titles in New South Wales, Queensland, and South Australia, national titles. The list goes on...

Rod puts the success down to the fact that he personally monitors the production of every boat that comes out of the factory. Years of experience have shown him how things work, and his boats are built with emphasis on strength, correct weight distribution and attention to detail. He also credits his team and the passion they share. "I'm surrounded by a hardworking and clever team that I'm very proud of," he says. 