



Peter, when did you first start to experience a love of the ocean?

After my parents learned how to sail dinghies, we moved up to trailer sailers in the mid 70s. Our first was an Australian-built Timpenny 670 with lift keel and self-tacking headsail. We explored the Myall Lakes and Port Stephens, but for our big holiday we drove it up to the Whitsundays behind our Holden Statesman. We spent four weeks aboard exploring beaches that appeared as if no-one had ever visited them before.

In 1980, dad went to the Sydney International Boat Show and bought what I thought was the best boat at the show – a Farr 7500 (25-foot) trailer sailer – for AU\$20,800. You couldn't miss it with its shiny red hull and big yellow stripe. We would spend four days driving up to the Whitsundays, then anchor in the bays, eating oysters off the rocks whenever we wanted, snorkelling with turtles and the odd dolphin, even some small reef sharks. All this wildlife gave me a real appreciation for sealife, as did the extreme storms that hit us on our little lift keeler.

What is your first memory of being on a boat?

In the early 70s my father bought an 11-foot Frisco sailing dinghy and joined the Frisco Sailing Association. We sailed out of Botany Bay.

When I was only a bit over two years old, my dad Paul and sister Sue took me out for my very first sail from Clontarf. A massive storm hit and we capsized. All I remember is my sister pushing my body up out of the water as the waves kept

Team Windcraft

Passionate about cutting-edge design and build quality, Peter Hrones has brought some of Europe's best boats to our shores. Here, he talks straight to Hillary Buckman about everything from being honest in business to what's next for him.

coming, and my Dad trying to get the boat back up again. It was a traumatic time for them both. I swallowed half of Middle Harbour. I'm just glad I'm still here to tell the tale.

You've been in the industry for 30 years and have developed one of the most successful yacht dealership business models. How did you start out and what is the backstory to Windcraft?

In the mid 80s I sold windsurfers in Mona Vale when they were all the rage. Then, when I left school in the late 80s, I worked at a yacht brokerage called Lamoore Yacht Sales at Palm Beach. This was my apprenticeship in yacht brokerage, and my introduction to selling new European yachts from Germany.

We imported Bavaria Yachts in the late 80s to the early 90s through the recession. When I went overseas, I couldn't believe how many brands were offered to Europeans. I was drawn to the distinguished offerings, like the Scandi-looking designs with a modern rig for easier handling. We

didn't have this choice in Australia or NZ.

I arrived back to Australia just in time to do the 50th Sydney Hobart Yacht Race on a Holland 44 Deck Saloon built by a friend of mine for his father in Mona Vale. After returning to Lamoore Yacht Sales with my girlfriend Catherine (now my wife), I realised it was time to find a boat to import into Australia. There seemed to be a couple of French brands and one US brand, and that was it. So Catherine and I drove around Europe, the US and Canada, visiting 22 boat factories over two years.

I eventually came to the conclusion that northern Europe, in particular Scandinavia, built the strongest boats for what seemed to be harsh waters and hardy sailors. They were real sailor's yachts that could be cruised around the world. Without too much convincing, when my father came over for my wedding in the UK, he bought a Scanyacht 391 with hull number 99 from Sweden.

In 1997, Catherine and I returned to Australia with the Scanyacht agency, and Windcraft was born the following year. Catherine worked nights

as a nurse and I worked part-time at Whitworth's. We did shifts taking care of our first son, who came along in January 1999.

In late 1999, I realised that I needed a bigger range of boats. Scanyacht only had one size model, and things were moving very slowly with our Swedish friends. So, in October 1999, I drove to the former East Germany. I met the famous Michael Schmidt, owner of Hanse Yachts and Admiral's Cup winner on boats like *Pinta* and *Dusseldorf* in the 70s.

Michael had bought the older moulds of many Scandinavian brands that had gone broke, and that's how he started Hanse Yachts in 1993. He was also a lover of the self-tacking headsail like my parents and I, and every Hanse had to have it.

For so many years I had dreamed about what a boat should look like, from the size of the cockpit to the rig set-up and, most importantly, the hull shape and look of the cabin and windows. Then I spent 12 hours watching the first Hanse 371 being finished off and loaded onto a truck for the Hamburg Boat Show. It was three days late, but nothing was going to stop Michael and his dream.

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It was at that point that I realised I had met a man who had a similar vision, and wanted to produce a range of affordable yachts that were easy to sail short-handed. Best of all, they are fast, with a pedigree design team behind them. They're also a real sailor's yacht that can be cruised or raced single-handed. Australians love these best-of-both-worlds boats, like the Australian-Kiwi-built Cavalier and Northshore, which, best of all, are built for Australian conditions and their private owners, not charter.

I knew from the very first day at the Hanse factory – when my stomach had butterflies with excitement and my heart was pounding – that I'd found the perfect yacht for Australian and New Zealand sailors. I knew I was about to embark on an amazing journey with this slightly eccentric but absolutely visionary man. He had an eight-year plan for Hanse Yachts and, as they say, the rest is history. In the past decade, he has become one of the largest, most innovative and fastest-growing sailing boat builders in the world.

Windcraft didn't need to look for any more boat agencies as, under Michael's savvy know-how, the Hanse Group simply kept buying out well-known companies such as Fjord Motor Yachts in 2005, then Moody in 2007, and Dehler Yachts in 2009. All great brand names that needed

a new direction. There was no better man than he to either make a new market sector for selected brands like he did with Moody, or to just tweak pricing and design and revive Germany's most famous brand like Dehler.

In your earlier years, you were a dinghy sailor. What did that teach you about yachts?

I couldn't afford my own dinghy when I sailed out of Avalon Sailing Club. My parents raced their trailer sailer, and I eventually found a place on a Flying 11 as crew. My skipper was a good sailor from a famous sailing family at the club. We travelled around Australia competing in championships with over 100 Flying 11s, but what I learned (after sailing with two different F-11 owners then owning a Manly Junior of my own), was that there is no need to scream on a boat, there is no need to get into a panic, as you will most likely make the wrong decision.

What I really came to understand was the feel of the wind, sea and tides, as we didn't have instruments like today. I realise now that this sailing upbringing

was priceless. When it comes to feel, it's not something you can teach people. Either you have it or you don't. Today people just use their instruments as a guide to sail well or not.

You are currently divesting the Team Windcraft side of your business. What brands are under the Windcraft umbrella and what is your reasoning behind this move?

Team Windcraft has three mainstream brands under the HanseGroup banner – Hanse, Moody and Dehler Yachts – and two premium brands – Solaris and Brenta.

Team Windcraft is my baby; it was born at the same time as my first son Chris, who is now 18 years old. It's a mature company that has been running very well under the management of Allan Bridge (the Group GM), and my longest, most-devoted HanseGroup sales leader Mary Bickley, who was my first full-time employee in 2004. I hired Mary right at the time we really took off, and the Hanse brand became a real player after five hard years spent building this unknown brand.

Selling Windcraft has been a hard decision, especially since we have an amazing model that no-one in the monohull sailing boat industry has come close to. In 2007, we started the Windcraft Group Service Centre that

FAVOURITE THINGS

Favourite regatta?
Hamilton Island Race Week and Geelong Race Week.

Local holiday destination?
Sunshine Beach and Noosa.

International holiday destination?
Italy. It has great food and you can go skiing and sailing. They are passionate, family people.

Which yacht do you currently sail on?
I just sold a Dehler 38C for inshore. Offshore, I sail in comfort on the Moody 54DS *Moody Buoy* (Rolex Sydney Hobart Yacht Race 2014 and 2016).

Racing or cruising?
I like doing twilights, either on a Soling at Woody Point or a Monday Royal Motor Yacht Club twilight race on a Hanse or Dehler. I want to cruise the Mediterranean and New Zealand next.

Favourite boat show to attend?
Dusseldorf has lots of new releases, and Cannes because it's like being on holiday.

Favourite yacht designer?
Who else? Bill Dixon.

Someone you look up to?
My Dad and my Grandfather, who I spent a lot of time with growing up.

Favourite car?
I have many favourites, but I still love the Aston Martin DB4 and Ferrari Dino 246GT.

today has seven in-house specialists/technicians. We even have our own boat builder/surveyor in Australia and New Zealand, and marine electrician.

All our customers get a unique service, whether it's a warranty issue or an after-sales upgrade by someone who knows the boats better than anyone. These guys also commission the boats, so nothing is missed or not dealt with before handing the boat to our owner.

With such a strong, well-established team, the company is running seamlessly and is the number one importer of new yachts to Australia and New Zealand. I started eyachts in 2011, which was a big change for me, selling powerboats.

In 2015 we started TMG, The Multihull Group, which imports catamarans. It is simply too big for me now. It has outgrown me. And I don't want to just work; I have a family who also want to do a lot of travelling and sailing over the next five to 10 years before they all leave home.

For me, it's the right time to hand over the wheel of, some would say, the best yacht brokerage in the world, which is a complete honour.

The new owner will most likely be announced in January, and I will still consult on the bigger boats and projects.

Which brands are you keeping, and why?
Eyachts offers Sealine, Fjord, Axopar, Vanquish and Outer Reef; all powerboat brands, which have no effect on the Windcraft brands. For me, it's a change from marketing and selling yachts for 30 years. Two of my kids have their boat licences and are enjoying this type of day boating, and to own boats like the Axopar 37 ST is great for picnics and runs to local restaurants.

The building of new brands like Axopar is challenging, but I enjoy challenges in life. I'm also looking to do a new project with Outer Reef that will take a lot of time and money.

What is the hottest segment in the sailing market?

The market is different for everyone. It depends which new models are coming out within the brand they represent. The HanseGroup has three sailing boat brands, so we have at least three or four new models every year.

The Hanse 455 is a huge seller, and also our best seller into New Zealand right now. The 38 and 41 keep on selling throughout Australia, and we are doing some great packages on the 2016 European Boat of the Year, the Hanse 315. Half a dozen have been sold into Australia and New Zealand since its introduction 12 months ago.

For Solaris, the magnificent 50-footer, which was also Boat of the Year in Europe,

has a waiting list of over a year; 25 orders at this level of semi-production boats is amazing. I believe the Team Windcraft portfolio is currently unmatched for the future, as we will see the customer wanting more customisation and input into their pride and joy. A bit like when building your own house.

I'm currently working on a special Hanse 588 for the Aussie and Kiwi market. I can't say too much now, but it will have some innovations and ideas that I would want in my next boat to cruise and race with my family. As it is my semi-retirement present, Hanse has agreed to give it a go and we will present it at the Sydney International Boat Show in 2017.

You've worked with yacht designers in previously. Who is on your wishlist to work with in the future?
To me, design is everything when choosing brands for the Windcraft Group. All our brands have a cutting-edge feel and look, inside and out. Whenever I considered a new brand to represent, I wanted to know about the design team first. Build quality and engineering goes hand in hand with a good designer and good factory morals.

“MY FIRST CUSTOMERS SAID THAT IT WAS MY PASSION AND MY BELIEF IN THE PRODUCT THAT SOLD THEM”

Today, most factories only use the designer for the hull, keel and rig design for CE category Ocean A, B or C, then either an interior designer is contracted or the factory's in-house team does the rest of the boat. At the end of the day, it is the factory design team or the owner of the company with whom you can share your ideas.

Moody was unique. I bought the first Moody 45 DS and lived on hull number one with my family for six months in 2009. My passion for deck saloons took me a step further when the R&D and marketing team called me up. I was driving around Australia in our motorhome with my wife and kids when they said, “Peter, we want you to help design the first Moody 54 DS, but you must back it and buy the first one.”

At first I said no because I had too much on with new start-up companies like eyachts and two new offices in Auckland and Melbourne. Then the CEO of Hanse, Dr Jens Gerhardt, came over for a visit at Christmas. After a few bottles of red wine sitting around the pool one evening, somehow I agreed to buy the first boat as long as I had input on the design. This project gave me a good insight into how hard it is to design and build a two-level boat.

Working with Bill Dixon through the factory's team was brilliant. They always asked questions and listened, and we bounced ideas off each other until we all agreed. It was very time-consuming, but selling the first three off the plan, including one to myself, made it all worthwhile. A few of the HanseGroup staff have asked if I would do it again on a Moody 60-something, and I have foolishly agreed! This time it will be for a consultancy fee.

What is your dream yacht and why?

I've always been a big fan of Wally; stand-out design with clean minimalistic lines. There's something different about it. Best of all, it's a 150-foot boat that is easy to sail single-handed. That's probably why I've chosen the brands I have; they have all followed this design in some way.

I might have to compromise to a Brenta daysailer in the 33- to 42-foot range for twilight racing, accompanied by a Fjord 42 or 48 for weekend picnics and long lunches at waterfront restaurants. I do love the look of all the new Solaris ONE models, but for now I'll keep working on the new Hanse 588 interior layout. It's great value and offers everything that my family needs for cruising and racing.

What do you think is the most important ingredient for success in the brokerage market?

I can only speak for the Windcraft Group. Its reputation has been built over 18 years. I believe in good, honest service from the first phone enquiry, but where most get it wrong is after the customer's boat has been delivered to them.

I don't mean just fixing a warranty issue, I

mean helping them with servicing their boat every year, showing them how to get the most out of their boat when racing, taking them out of their comfort zone with offshore sail-aways. Even my competition say we have set a new benchmark. This is something the industry has been lacking in the past, but it looks to be changing.

The other thing our owners enjoy is getting together for trips to Port Stephens, and yearly Windcraft regattas that now take place in Pittwater (Sydney), Melbourne and Auckland every summer. We also support our owners at Audi Hamilton Island Race Week and Geelong Race Week every year.

It's the Windcraft family of owners who now sell our boats for us; they are all great advocates and it's something of which we are very proud.

What is your take on the current state of the industry?

Every business is different. We sell around 180 boats a year in the Group including pre-loved, so it seems we are always busy, even when others are not. We don't worry what the rest of the industry is doing. Like yacht racing, it's best not to look behind. Just keep working on how to get further and further away from your competition.

New Zealand is booming, and we have recently expanded in this region to keep up. Our Hanse brand is hugely successful in there and has been sitting between 60 and 80 percent market share for the last 10 years.

I think in the case of the 35- to 55-year-olds, they are just getting on with life and wanting to enjoy it. We are seeing family syndicates and new

boat owners who had their eye on a Hanse for many years. And not to forget that 35–55 percent of Windcraft business every year is repeat.

Personally, I think some new innovation in design is due. Everyone has copied each other more than ever in the last six to seven years, so the player with a new innovation will shine in the market as the stand-out leader.

You have a great reputation for high professional business standards, which wasn't a feature of the industry when you first started. How did you change perceptions along the way?

I was younger than most, importing yachts in my late 20s. I sold my investment unit at Newport and all my shares in BT to start this business. It had my heart and soul in it from day one. Many have said that it is an extension of me and who I am.

It was frustrating and hard to break into the market with an unknown brand like Hanse, but I believed in the product and knew it was going to be the best fit for the market here and in New Zealand. My first customers said that it was my passion and my belief in the product that sold them.

I think an honest, straight-up approach is always the best policy. I have probably sold around 50 boats off the plan to date, but I always put myself in the client's shoes. In most cases, it is their second largest investment after their house.

It is so easy to get complacent when you are busy selling lots of boats, but it is a massive deal to the client. Especially the nervous newbies who are wondering if they are buying the right boat. They require a lot of time and energy, so I make sure that all my staff treat every customer the way they would like to be treated.

I like to think of my team as very good friends. I enjoy working and socialising with them. We all know that the industry is very, very small. If you do one thing wrong, everyone knows about it, but you have to do 20 things right before you get any acknowledgement. I'm extremely proud of the name we've built in the industry, but I couldn't have done it without an awesome team behind me.

What's something not a lot of people would know about you?

When I was five years old, I would draw up boat layouts on my Dad's engineering draft paper. My parents told me recently that I did this for many, many years. I remember it well. At least now I know why when I see a bad prototype layout I get so angry! And I don't sell people boats that I don't like. Life's too short.

So what does your future hold?

Lots of sailing all around the world in remote places and lots of holidays with my family while working from my laptop anywhere in the world. I have a couple of new projects to keep my brain active, like the Moody project.

My biggest fear is getting bogged down in the running of TMG and eyachts, but I will do my very best not to. I want to look over those two companies from afar, which is sometimes easier said than done. ○

www.windcraftgroup.com