

Fast Forward THINKER

Randy Sweers has built his company FASTBOATS.com by combining a keen eye for styling and performance and an innate ability to drive just about anything fast with the latest in online technology.

By Eric Colby



L-R Whether he was playing hockey in his childhood, riding custom bikes or driving offshore racing and poker-run boats, Sweers has always gone first class.

Randy Sweers has always been ahead of his time. When most college students were working part-time waiting tables at a pub or restaurant, he was commuting back and forth between Canada and Florida finding boats for clients. Then when everyone was still overnighting photos of boats to potential clients, he built his business, FASTBOATS.com, by being one of the first brokers to email photos. The speed of the transaction often made the difference in getting the sale—provided the customer could get to a computer.

“I asked people if they had email and I’d say, I’ll send you a photo,” he recalled. “In the early days of my website, people would say, ‘I’ll get on my buddy’s computer’ and two hours later, they’d call back and say, ‘Wow I can see it.’”

Today, FASTBOATS.com is one of the best-known performance-boat dealers in the country, not just Florida, but the entire United States. Sweers, who is now 41, is that rare combination of a guy who learned the business the old-school way, studying at the feet of some legendary salesmen and boat handlers and someone who embraces technology. It’s a combination you don’t often see in the marine industry.

“We’re constantly looking at ways to partner with other companies to expand our business,” he explained. Among the websites FASTBOATS.com works with are boattraderonline.com, Usedboats.com, offshoreonly.com and boats.com.

But there’s a challenge to the luxuries that the worldwide web provides as well. “If you had knowledge of a Cigarette Top Gun in Oklahoma (before the web), nobody knew about it and you could control it,” said Sweers. “Nowadays everyone can go online and find every used Top Gun in the world.” He estimates that 90 percent of FASTBOATS.com’s business comes from online searches.

“Being in magazines gets you expo-



Sweers was instrumental in the development of one of the coolest Nor-Tech cats ever built, Ballistic, shown here at last Spring’s Sarasota Poker Run and his wife Kim is equally instrumental in every facet of business at FASTBOATS.com.

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sure and gets you on people's desks and coffee tables, but the guy looking for a specific boat, he's going on the Internet," added Sweers.

A busy guy, Sweers conducted this interview while he was driving across the state from his Pompano Beach, Fla., offices to the Nor-Tech Performance Boats factory in Cape Coral. His company is the largest dealer for Nor-Tech boats and the distributor for Dragon Powerboats with Craig Barrie. Sweers was headed to the Nor-Tech facility to test a new model before it was to be delivered to a customer. FASTBOATS.com is also a dealer for Baja and recently added Donzi Marine to its lineup.

Sweers' relationship with Nor-Tech has been of great value to the boat-builder. After taking Trond Schou and

Class Champion



Nils Johnsen, the owners of Nor-Tech, for a ride in a Skater 40, Sweers convinced them to build the popular Nor-Tech 50' cat. The boat was a big hit, but Sweers knew that the biggest market would be in the smaller 36' range.

"I was racing a 35' Motion, but needed something to sell to the public with no canopies and I wanted a head and a cabin," recalled Sweers. "Nils drew it up one day on a napkin and I gave them a deposit and told them I would take four of them." The

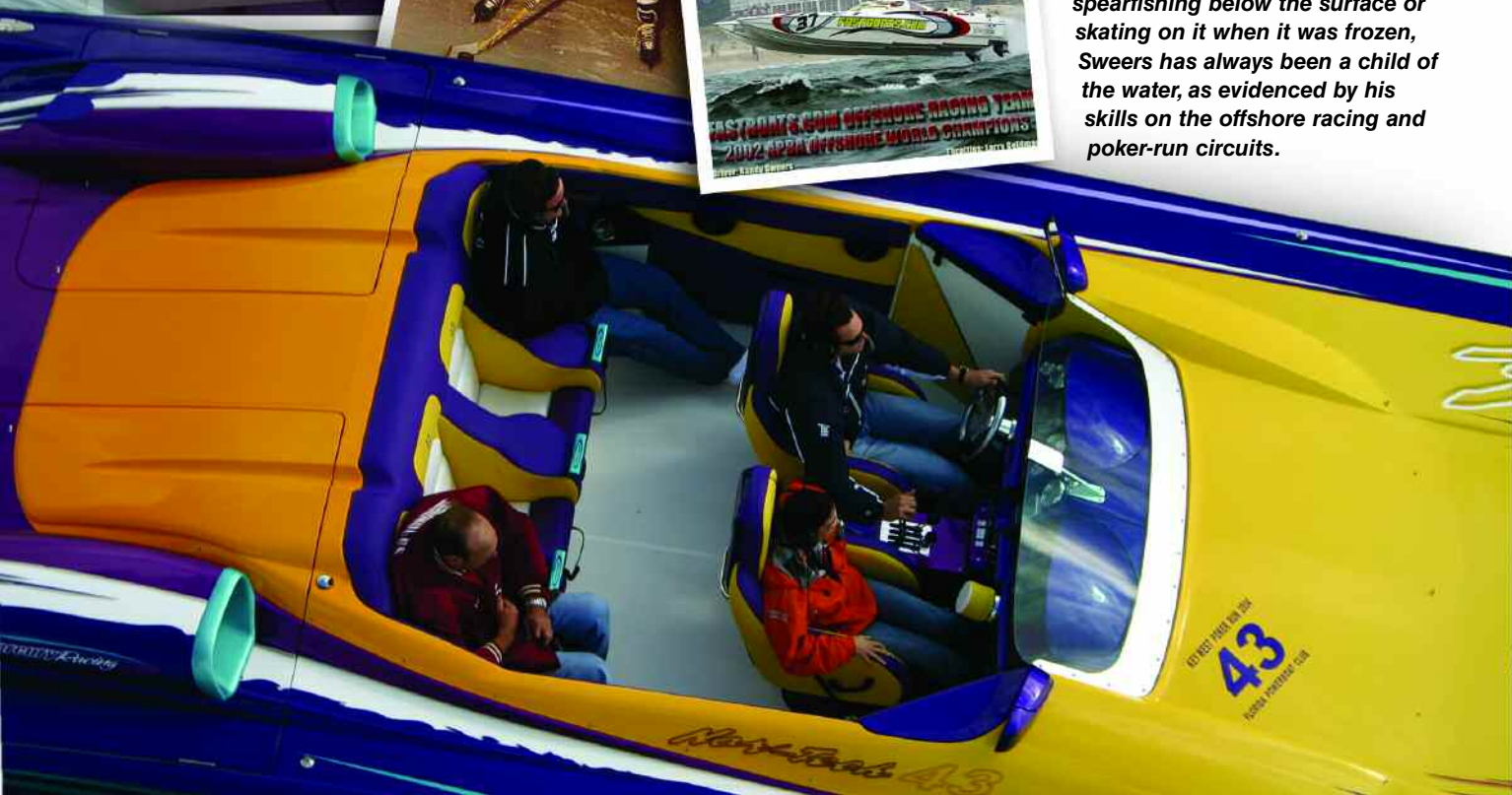
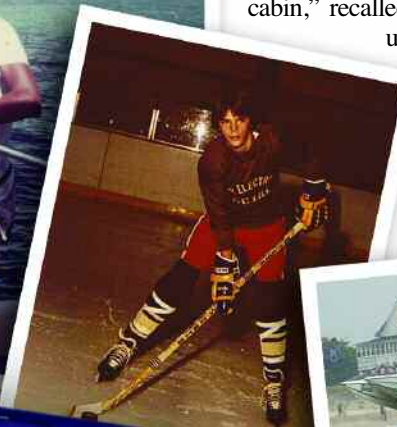
36' Super Cat made its debut at the 2002 Fort Lauderdale Boat Show 10 months later.

When testing a new boat, Sweers calls on experience that was developed at an early age. He was born just north of Toronto, Canada, but moved to Pompano Beach with his father Keith when the youngster was 12. His mom and six siblings still live in Canada.

His father had a 28' Carey with twin big-block engines in 1980. "That was a pretty serious boat for back then," said Sweers. Additionally, his father, who owned a heating and air conditioning company with about 60 employees, collected Shelby Mustangs as well as 1955 to 1957 T-birds.

The younger Sweers' first boat was,

Regardless of whether he was spearfishing below the surface or skating on it when it was frozen, Sweers has always been a child of the water, as evidenced by his skills on the offshore racing and poker-run circuits.





(L-R) Kim, Chase and Randy enjoy a quiet moment on Lake Ontario, where the family frequently spends time on vacation.

classically, a 13' Boston Whaler with a 50-hp Mercury outboard. "Most of them came with a 25 (hp outboard), but I had a 50-hp with a speed prop," he recalled. When he was 15 years old, he had a 17' center console boat with a 75-hp Johnson Stinger.

He spent his free time water-skiing, fishing, snorkeling and was an avid diver. Originally, Sweers was interested in marine biology and even won some awards in Broward County for his research. "Then I realized that there was no money in being a marine biologist," he laughed.

He also raced motorcycles for about a year, and was a star basketball player in high school. Sweers put those basketball skills to good use, earning a scholarship to Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. The team wasn't all that good, but Sweers spent his time in college wisely, earning a Master's Degree in business.

While he was in school, Sweers worked at a boat dealership in Barrie, Ontario, where he dealt in a variety of boats up to about 35' long. He would go down to visit his father in Florida, buy a boat for a client and then bring it back to Canada. The selection, his experience with good boats and the exchange rate were all working in his favor. One of the boats he brought back for a client was a 1987 Wellcraft 38' Scarab KV Miami Vice Edition. "When that boat came to Canada, it was a pretty cool machine," he remembered.

After returning home from graduate school, Sweers went to work at Barnett Bank. "That lasted for an hour and 45

Both Kim and Randy are also very active within their community. The charities they support are at risk Women and Children throughout South Florida as well as Randy's hometown of Toronto, Ontario.

minutes. I realized I wasn't cut out to be a banker," he laughed.

He left the bank and went to interview at a brokerage called America's Yacht Sales. The management wanted to hire him. On his way back to Pompano Beach, Sweers also stopped in at a new dealer, Champion Marine that was opening up on NE 187th Street in North Miami, which was a hundred yards from the famed Thunderboat Row, NE 188th Street. Champion Marine was a dealer for Cigarette, Skater, Powerplay and others. Sweers handed his resume to the President of Champion Marine and world champion throttleman Richie Powers. He hired Sweers on the spot.

"That's where I got exposed to the offshore boats," said Sweers. He shared a desk with multiple-time racing champion Ed Cozzi and Sweers said that he "just listened when he was talking." He also went for every ride he could, going along with Powers on sea trials. "He showed me how to throttle a boat," said Sweers.

Soon, Sweers was taking customers out in Skater 24' and 32' boats. At the time, Jeff Soffer, who owned Champion Marine, was also building a Skater 40' cat to race in Open class with August Busch IV from the Anheuser Busch brewing empire. Sweers was part of the crew team for the Budweiser Dry offshore racing team and he was lucky enough to head out on some test rides.

The boat was powered by turbocharged McLaren engines and Arneson drives and when it ran, "It was a very fast boat back in the day. I remember running 143, 144 mph."

He was learning a lot, but sales were another story. "I didn't sell a thing there for the first six months," Sweers laughed. Then he met a Canadian Bob Waxman. He had gone to the Fort Lauderdale show to check out a Cigarette 42' Revolution, which was built with rounded dash pods in front of each bolster, almost looking like partial F-16 canopies in profile. Waxman was



Sweers and Jules Tremblay with one of their checkered flags, but if you were to ask Sweers today, he'd say son Chase is the greatest prize in his life.



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too short to see over the pods, so he decided to check out some other boats at the show.

"He came back and said, 'Hey listen, I found the boat I want to buy,'" said Sweers. Jack Kramer had his personal 41' Apache at the show and Waxman told Sweers, "That's the boat I'd like to buy."

Sweers didn't even know if the boat was for sale, but that didn't matter to Waxman. "Bob wrote me a check for \$100,000, said 'Find out how much it is, treat me fair and I'll buy the boat,'" said Sweers. At the time he got paid 20 percent of the net profit.

With his first sale under his belt, Sweers was a star on the rise. He frequently earned the Top Salesman honors at Champion Marine and somehow became the guy to see if you wanted to buy a Scarab 50' Meteor. He sold the first one with Caterpillar diesels and Kiekhaefer Number Six drives to well-known offshore enthusiast Pat Izzo.

After leaving Champion, Sweers spent time at Fort Apache Marina and even Sunny Isles. Finally, in 1994, Sweers rented office space from Ron Doller at Doller Marine and opened up Florida Powerboat Brokerage. Technically, the name Florida Powerboat Brokerage is still used, but when the FASTBOATS.com website was launched in 1996, that became the name the business would adopt. Today, the company has 25,000 square feet indoors, plus another 20,000 outside. Sweers estimates that the company moves about 120 boats each year, bringing in about \$25 million in sales.

"We're looking to purchase a dry storage facility and marina to expand the dealership," Sweers explained. Also, he's gotten into new home development and his father runs that side of the business.



When you start with two people as attractive as Kim and Randy, it's easy to see how Chase wound up so cute.

Among Sweers' most important member of the FASTBOATS.com team is the only one he has to answer to, his wife Kim. She's involved in the day-to-day management of the company and runs the company's in-house marine financing company, U.S. Financial Group.

The two met in June 1999 at an event to benefit the Covenant House charity for runaways in Islamorada, Fla. Sweers brought down a 30' Motion catamaran. "It was raining and one of my friends was trying to pick up one of her friends," Sweers recalled. "We ended up finding out we lived a couple of blocks from each other, knew a lot of the same people and been to a lot of the same places, but never met each other."

When the rain stopped, Sweers took her for a 100-mph ride and since then she's been over 150 mph. The two married on March 23, 2002, at the Boca Raton resort.

At the time, Kim was working for the largest Internet provider in Latin America and one of the company's

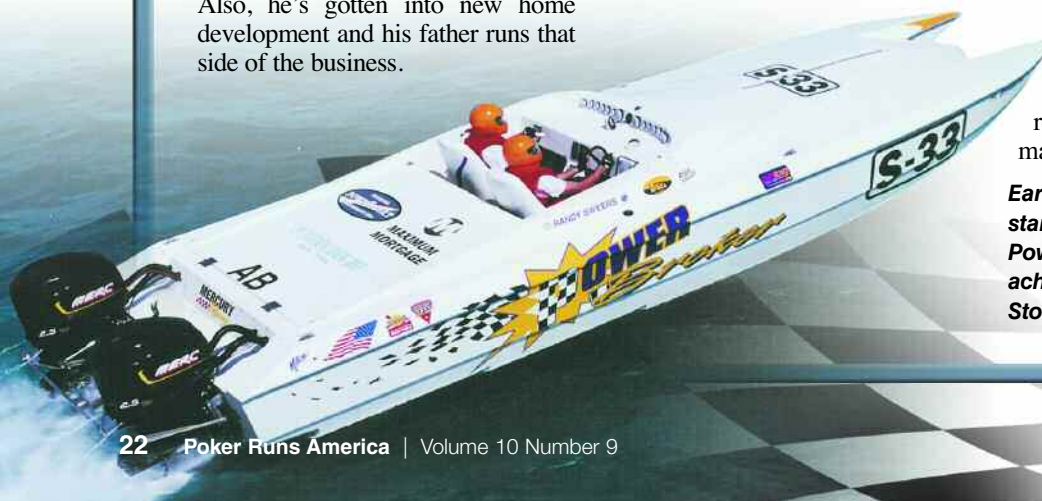


key areas was Argentina. The country fell on hard times, which killed off the business. She took some time off and then in 2003, started working with her husband. In December 2005, they had a son, Chase, and of course, he's already gone faster than 100 mph in a boat.

In addition to enjoying poker running, fast cars, and fast boats, Sweers is an avid snowmobiler. Lately, he's enjoyed mountain riding in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. "Bang for the buck for the speed and performance, you can't beat a snowmobile," said Sweers. "For \$10,000 to \$15,000, you get something that runs 130 mph, has incredible acceleration and you can't even get a set Hering props for that."

Among the key employees at FASTBOATS.com are Dana and Rob McLean. The two were recently married. Dana is the office manager and Rob is Sweers' go-to-

Early in his racing career, Sweers started driving the 30' Motion, Power Broker, and the team achieved instant success in the Stock class.



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guy for solving any problem. He was with Sweers on the test drive of the 43' Nor-Tech the day we spoke. They were married on 9/15/07. Kim Sweers officiated the wedding. It was an honor to marry two of our employees that have become like family.

He's also built an impressive team at FASTBOATS.com including the likes of former president of Cigarette Racing Team, Craig Barrie, Marc Jacob, who has been in the performance-boat world for years, Scott Smith, formerly of Cigarette, as well as a talented service staff. It sounds cliché, but Sweers said, "There's no I in team," that's why much of his marketing and advertising says "Team FASTBOATS.com."

Not surprisingly with all that time going fast in boats, Sweers got into racing. When he was 19 years old, he did some flatbottom racing in Canada in a Jay Craft powered by a 65-hp outboard, but only ran three times.

He started in offshore boats in 1997 in a 30' Motion with twin Mercury Racing 2.5 EFI offshore outboards, racing in the Super Stock class. The original name was Power Broker, but the name was quickly changed to FASTBOATS.com. Sweers started with Rob Nunziato, who provided the hull, while Sweers bought the motors and provided all the equipment necessary to campaign the boat successfully.

He raced with Nunziato for three years. Then Sweers sold Doug Kelly a 35' Motion to race in the Super Cat Lite class in Super Boat International. Kelly tapped Nunziato to drive the boat and Sweers teamed up with Larry Goldman in the Montano Motorsports-sponsored 35' Motion.

Kelly called his boat Bankbeaters for one of his many business ventures, while Sweers and Goldman



Randy at the 2007 Ferrari/Maserati Rally for Sick Childrens Hospital. Just one of the many Charity organizations they are involved with.

changed their team's name to FASTBOATS.com. The two teams had numerous battles on the SBI circuit. Sweers and Goldman were national champions in P1 class and finished second in national points in Super Cat Lite in 2002 and 2003.

Bankbeaters ran Number Six drives, while FASTBOATS.com had Bravos. In rough water, the boat with the beefier drives had the edge, but in calm water, FASTBOATS.com had a slight speed edge.

That was until the teams arrived in New York for the national championship race in 2001. The two Motion cats were in a close points battle with the 36' Spectre, Zipp Express.

"It was anybody's championship," recalled Sweers. "Were on the Hudson River, it was a calm race and we're heading for the first pin, trimmed out running neck and neck with Zipp. I'm looking over at them and. Bankbeaters comes by us like we have an anchor tied around us."

After the race, Sweers and Goldman followed the proper procedure and filed a protest. Sweers said the SBI president John Carbonell refused his check, so he sent a team member to ATM machines to make withdrawals until he had \$1,500 cash.

"We protested it because we knew

Sweers and the Fastboats.com Hockey team.



he had different ECUs in the boat," said Sweers.

Instead of having tech inspectors check out the motors, SBI disqualified the entire class, citing Sweers and Goldman for leaving the launch ramp and heading to the wet pits without lifejackets.

Without delving further into all the details, suffice to say that the infighting that has plagued the sport for the last two decades wore on Sweers and Goldman.

"It was just a lot of politics and the way I look at it, no matter what you do in life, you have to be fair," said Sweers, still feeling slighted all this time later. "We put a lot of guys into raceboats and promoted racing and that just soured things for us."

Instead, he's having a lot more fun building cool boats for his customers, including Bill Pyburn's canopied 47' Nor-Tech, Ballistic, and the Nor-Tech 50' Roadster, Canada Thrust, presently under construction for a fellow Canadian Rob Webber. It will be pushed by twin 2,000-hp turbine engines. Look for it at Fort Lauderdale show. And if this boat is like everything else that Sweers has been involved in, check it out closely because you're sure to find something that's ahead of its time. ❖

FASTBOATS.COM recently created a scholarship in honor of the late Harry Judge. "The Youth Automotive Training Center was a perfect choice for the Harry Judge / FAST-BOATS.COM Scholarship Fund. Harry worked in the automotive / trucking business for 20 years before entering the marine industry. He was a good friend and mentor to me throughout my career." Harry was VP of Sales of Cigarette Racing when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. "Harry and I were very close...his death was a great loss. Needless to say, we're very excited to keep his memory alive by establishing this fund"