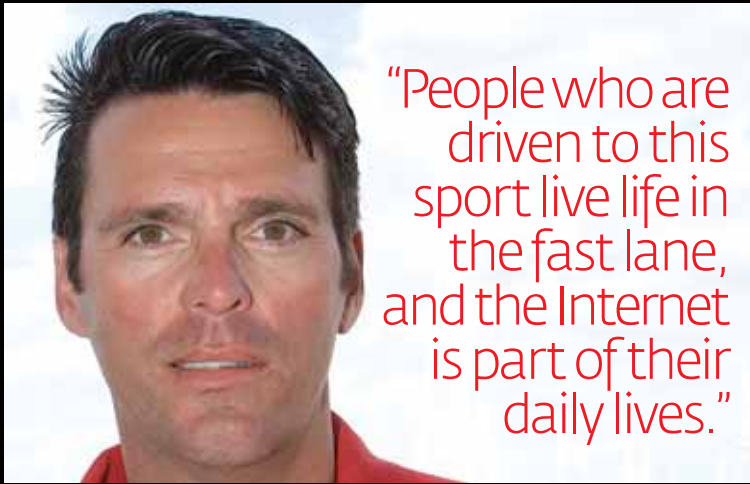


TIMEOUT WITH 3.08



"People who are driven to this sport live life in the fast lane, and the Internet is part of their daily lives."

[RANDY SWEERS]

No one in the high-performance powerboat business has done a better job marrying a brick-and-mortar operation to a Web site than Randy Sweers, the 42-year-old owner of Fastboats.com. Of course, Fastboats.com is a Web site displaying the wares of Nor-Tech, Donzi, Baja and Dragon, but it's also the name of Sweers' dealership and service center for those brands in Pompano Beach, Fla. (For the record, Fastboats.com is the "doing business as" moniker for Florida Powerboat Brokerage, owned by Sweers.)

Sweers, who grew up in Toronto and first visited Florida in 1977, moved full time to the state in the early 1990s. He helped Stu Jones establish the Florida Powerboat Club, and the two still enjoy a personal and professional relationship. Fastboats.com is a title sponsor for many of the club's poker runs.—MATT TRULIO

So how did you get introduced to the world of performance boats?

Well, I'd always been involved in motocross and car racing. When I went to Wilfred Laurier University (Sweers earned a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in business from the school), a friend's family had a company called International Marine Corp.

They were a distributor for Baja, Ranger, Ebbtide, Ocean Yachts and a few other companies, and they asked me if I would set up dealerships for them. I did that from 1984 until 1989, and I used to import boats as well and go to Florida pretty often.

After graduate school, I went down to Miami for a job interview and noticed a marina opening up called Champion Marine. They were a Cigarette, Skater, Wellcraft and Powerplay dealer. (World champion throttleman)

Richie Powers hired me

as a salesman, and he taught me how to drive a boat and throttle when he took me out on sea trials with him.

The marina also had Team USA at the time with (actor) Don Johnson driving and Richie throttling, and I got involved with that boat. It was a great learning curve with setup, propellers, drive heights and so on. I was with them for three years.

What was your first performance boat?

(Laughs) My first performance boat, if you want to call it that, was a 15-foot Boston Whaler with a 50-horsepower outboard and a speed prop.

Where did you go from Champion Marine?

To the notorious Fort Apache on 188th Street. I stayed there for 10 months—they were going through a transitional period in that era.

From there I went to Sunny Isle Marina in

north Miami to handle their brokerage, and in late 1993, I opened up my own company, Florida Powerboat Brokerage. I also helped Stu Jones—he stayed at my house—when he opened the Florida Powerboat Club. In our first poker run, I think we had six boats.

You and Stu Jones have gone in somewhat different directions since then.

Yes. Basically, Stu always liked to do the different runs and I was more on the business end of it. But Stu and I did a lot of stuff together.

I can remember when if we had 10 or 12 boats it was a big deal, and 100-mph boats were few and far between. I had a 100-mph Express Cat and it was like, "Hey, I'm the lead boat."

I'm still heavily involved with Stu and the Florida Powerboat Club, and Poker Runs America. As the poker-run circuit has expanded, we've expanded with it.

Fastboats.com owner Randy Sweers can often be found driving some of his customers' boats at poker runs across the country.



How has your business evolved in tandem with the evolution of the Internet?

With the onset of the Internet, we came up with a Web site for our dealership called Fastboats.com. And we just kind of became known as Fastboats.com. We were the guys who had boat photos on the Internet, boat specs on the Internet. Eventually, I changed the name of my business from Florida Powerboat Brokerage to Florida Powerboat Brokerage DBA—doing business as—Fastboats.com. It's a great name, and we've been able to do very well with marketing it.

In the beginning, we were one of the few businesses to bring a boat dealership online. It's not like I have a "Click and buy it here" button for a 50-foot Nor-Tech, and people are putting in their credit card numbers and ordering boats that way. But it does give the buyer a tremendous way of researching a purchase. This is the age of information.

Technology has made things much easier for the buyer. I used to spend a fortune making color copies of photos I took to send out to buyers. Now (with e-mail and digital photos) I can have photos in front of them in seconds.

We get a lot of business from our site, and we make a conscious effort of trying to keep everything up to date. My wife handles all that, and it's pretty much a full-time job.

You don't have message boards or chat rooms on your site.

We haven't tried to be anything like that because we are a sales-driven Web site with information on the boats themselves. We try to keep things fresh and come up with new ideas to improve the way people navigate around the site.

Who are your customers?

The high-performance boat business—I like to call us the "black sheep" of the boating industry. We're not building picnic boats for some ultraconservative guy in Maine. We're building something that isn't politically correct in today's society, but truly is the last great area of freedom in North America. People who are driven to this sport live life in the fast lane, and the Internet is part of their daily lives. So people have Fastboats.com on their favorites lists.

With activities like motocross and snowmobiling, it's usually just you and one other person out enjoying the activity, but with a boat, you can bring your neighbor, your brother-in-law—it's something a lot of people can enjoy together. There's nothing like a great day on the water in a go-fast boat.

And the boats have gotten so much better.

I've seen housewives swear they would never go 100 mph in boat. Then they get in a Nor-Tech catamaran and can't believe they're running 100 mph. They feel like they're sitting on a sofa. And the engines? With a 1,000-hp motor, you used to be lucky if it lasted 10 hours. Now they last 200 or 300 hours. Mercury has done a great job of coming out with different engine packages.

By most accounts, the marine industry, including the high-performance segment, has slowed down quite a bit. Are you feeling it?

Fortunately, we have not felt it as of yet. We just had our best December ever, and we have had a lot of great years. I don't have any Nor-Techs, for example, in stock to sell. A lot of that has to do with our area of the country. South Florida is quite recession-proof to a certain extent.

A lot of people come here from Europe and South America—from all over the world, really—to buy things and spend their money. If the U.S. dollar is weak, someone else's money is strong, and those guys will come and spend money on an American product. The trick is to be able to market to that part of the world, to expand your horizons into other areas.

The higher-income-level people are still going boating. They're still going to spend money. 