



CLUB MARINE

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TERMS AND CONDITIONS APPLY



Fast and furious

That's the world of international-level offshore powerboat racing, where lives are laid on the line and boats can be destroyed in a millisecond. We accepted an invitation to tour the headquarters of the Maritimo Offshore Racing Team.

By Chris Beattie

The world can be a strange and alien place when you're strapped into a boat hurtling across the water at more than 200mph (320km/h). The tiny bit of your surroundings that you can actually see through the small windscreen passes by way too fast to get any real perspective or focus.

Plus, the boat is airborne much of the time, and when it's not it can be a little like driving on a corrugated bush track – with two-metre corrugations. Also, you're harnessed tightly into a small safety cell, which would make a great torture chamber for claustrophobics, and faced with the constant threat that everything might turn scarily upside down in a millisecond. And any sense of what's going on around you is distorted by the incredible audible violence produced by two enormous V8 engines churning out up to 3600hp (2685kW) only centimetres from your head.

And that's not even taking into consideration the fact that all this is happening while you're surrounded by a fleet of equally outrageously over-powered boats all intent on making your life as difficult as possible while they try to beat you to the finish line.

Welcome to the world of offshore powerboat racing, or at least the elite end of it where long, sleek boats thunder across the water in some of the world's more exotic destinations.

I was fortunate to gain an all-too brief insight into high-end powerboat racing when the Maritimo Offshore Racing Team invited me to strap into the cockpit of one of its race boats in Melbourne five years ago. While it wasn't in the heat of battle, it was still an exhilarating and sobering experience. I barely pried open the performance envelope of the boat, but I at least gained some sense of what the race drivers endure in the quest for conquest.

Left and below: Two of the 320km/h thoroughbreds from the Maritimo racing stable.

Inset: Driver Ross Willaton (left) and race team manager, Kurt Davies.





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Above: Willaton and co-driver Travis Thompson with their 2016 Supercat Extreme championship trophies.

Below: It takes a major effort to field one, let alone two boats in the premier Class One offshore powerboat category.

That was a few years ago now, so I was pleased to accept an invitation recently to delve into the inner workings of the team at its workshop, right next to Maritimo corporate HQ in the boat-building precinct of Coomera, on the Gold Coast.

Accompanying me on a guided tour of the spacious facility were race team manager Kurt Davies and one of Maritimo's most accomplished drivers, Ross 'Rossco' Willaton, who is also, along with co-driver Travis Thompson, the reigning Australian Superboat champion.

I later caught up with team owner and Maritimo founder, Bill Barry-Cotter and his son, Tom, who is spearheading the team's international XCAT racing campaign for 2017.

HORSEPOWER HEAVEN

We were surrounded on all sides by the accumulated components and hardware needed to field a team of up to five boats at any one time in a variety of race series. Packed around two of the team's sleek 40ft (12m) race boats were rows of engines, including exotic V12 racing Lamborghinis and brutally powerful 9.5lt Big Block V8s, while others were in various stages of assembly in a dedicated assembly room.

Included in the facility is a dyno room, where new engines are run and measured to ensure they can reliably generate the enormous horsepower required to run at the head of the field in offshore powerboat racing.

Four of the team's thoroughbred race boats are twin V8-engined monsters of varying specification, while the other is a more spritely twin Mercury 400R Verado-powered XCAT,



the team is easily the largest powerboat-racing operation in the southern hemisphere



Right: All engines are run on the team's dyno before being installed in the boats.

Bottom: Everything about offshore powerboat racing is larger than life.

which competes in the world series of the same name. The Lambo engines are relics from an earlier campaign and are more valued for their ornamental qualities these days.

Founded and funded by Maritimo supremo Bill Barry-Cotter – himself an avid and accomplished racer since the late '80s before he handed in his race suit a few years ago – the team is easily the largest powerboat-racing operation in the southern hemisphere and, indeed, gives little away in terms of expertise, facilities, resources and talent to the peak race teams based in Europe, the Middle East and USA.

“Bill is still intimately involved in everything we do,” explains Kurt Davies. “He’s always in here looking at what we’re doing and offering ideas and suggestions on how something could be done a little better or more efficiently.”

US CAMPAIGN

At the time of my visit, Davies, Willaton and Thompson were all hard at work refining their campaign targeting the prestigious US Super Boat World Championships, run in Key West, Florida in early November last year. As we reported in our last edition, the team was thwarted in its efforts

for a repeat win (it won the title in 2012 with Willaton and Peter McGrath at the helm) when it was let down by a faulty hydraulic fitting while running in the lead pack in the title decider.

Davies was philosophical about the outcome. “Let down by the ubiquitous \$10 part,” is how he described it.

The plan is to head back to Key West in 2017 with a two-boat assault, including the current Superboat Unlimited boat and a new boat built to the US Supercat class regulations, that are designed to even-out the racing, reduce costs and improve reliability.

Apart from the XCAT and Key West programs, the team also contests the Australian Offshore Power Boat Championship and, in the past, has also competed in the elite premier-level Class 1 world championships, run mostly throughout Europe and the Middle East.

In total, the team is set up to campaign up to five boats, with additional drivers in the line-up including Willaton’s son Andrew, Steve Jellick and accomplished multi-championship-winning driver Andrew Searle.

In offshore powerboating, there is pretty much two of everything, including the 40ft-plus twin-sponson catamaran hulls, twin engines and two crew members – the driver, who steers the boat and the throttle, and trim guy who ensures the boat is set up for optimum performance, whether going into a turn or running at full-throttle down the straight. And there are also two ‘escape’ hatches – one in the roof and the other in the floor in case the boat and the horizon become ‘misaligned’ ...

EVER-CHANGING

Willaton says one of the main challenges in offshore racing is driving to the ever-changing conditions.

“No corner is the same each time you come into it,” he explains. “It’s not like car racing, where you can hit the same braking marker lap after lap. With the boats you feel the track through your bum and react accordingly, and so you’re actually changing the boat’s set-up continuously as you’re racing around the course. It’s a very intense process mentally to keep on top of it.”

Tom Barry-Cotter says the relationship between the throttle guy and the steerer is as important as the set-up of the boat.



Maintenance is a full-time business, with a total of five boats to prepare for various local and international series.

Bottom: Just some of the engines the team has in its arsenal.



“The two of you have to gell and know exactly how each other is going to react in a situation. If you don’t have that feel for each other, it doesn’t matter how good your boat or engines are, you will struggle to be competitive.”





Just getting the boats to the race meetings requires industrial-strength transportation.

“Once you’re out on the course and racing, you don’t talk to each other much at all,” says Willaton. “You rely on knowing how the other guy is going to react and you both drive accordingly. It’s a bit like a pilot and a co-pilot flying a plane.

“It’s a delicate balance at times, particularly when you’re approaching and going through turns. If you get it wrong at the speeds we’re doing, the boat can ‘bite’ into the water and that’s never good,” says Willaton, who’s experienced more than his fair share of heart-in-the-mouth moments over the years.

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Willaton says that while the sport struggles to get the crowds and recognition it deserves in Australia, it’s a premier drawcard in the US and Europe.

“It’s really amazing how big it is, especially in Europe,” he says. “They’ve had up to 800,000 people on the foreshore in Turkey, and in Scandinavia and Norway they can get up to 150,000 people to watch the Class 1 races.”

FULL-TIME EFFORT

Maintenance and development are full-time activities for Davies, who occasionally enlists the help of Maritimo’s master fabricator and hull expert, Steve Cox, who is responsible for building and modifying the boats.

Most days, Davies is involved in fine-tuning the engine packages for the various classes. The Big Block Chevy-based engines are basically designed in-house by Davies, with much of the major

components sourced externally, but massaged to suit the needs of the punishing offshore racing environment. Reliability is a major factor, so parts are chosen as much for their durability as for their power-producing abilities.

The team uses two basic configurations depending on the class it’s contesting. The naturally-aspirated engine is a carbureted unit boasting a Godzilla-like 581 cu in (9.5lt) displacement, while the supercharged powerplants measure in at a ‘mere’ 557 cu in (9.1lt). The supercharged engines produce up to a whopping 1800hp, while the non-blown engines produce a far more ‘sedate’ 790hp, says Davies.

He says the carbureted engines are more forgiving on parts and are an effort by series organisers to try and contain costs, while for the major international series the forced induction engines are needed to keep pace with the front-runners, but require much more maintenance to be competitive.

While the team has yet to lock in its commitments for 2017, Davies is preparing the XCAT boat for a full season in the international series, while locally the team will field at least three boats to contest the six-round title chase to be run at coastal centres on the east coast, from Newcastle up to Mackay.

COST OF COMPETITION

As for the touchy subject of the costs required to maintain and campaign what amounts to a fleet of cutting-edge boats that compete in various series around the globe, Bill Barry-Cotter is pragmatic about the racing’s impact on Maritimo’s bottom line.

“You know, it’s not as expensive as some people think,” he says. “I used to race a three-quarter ton sailboat and we actually won our division in the Sydney Hobart one year. It was just a little 33-footer, but the costs of the sails alone

With the boats you feel the track through your bum and react accordingly



Emb Photographics

were more than we'd spend on the engines on the raceboats today.

"For example, in one of our raceboats we've had the same basic engines since 2011, without major overhauls of any kind. And when we did strip them down, we found nothing was wrong with them. The biggest expense, really, is building the boats to begin with."

Barry-Cotter says there are also practical spin-offs from the race program that have found their way into Maritimo's luxury cruisers.

"We've certainly learned a lot from our racing and put a lot back into the production boats. A lot of the hull stiffening ideas we've incorporated in our production boats have come from racing, plus we've been able to lighten our production boats significantly based on how we build our raceboats. A lot of it is also in the materials and processes we now use to build the hulls.

"The result is that we have stronger production boats that use less fuel and go faster than other boats of a similar size," he says.

"Our power-steering systems came out of our raceboats, too, as did our five-blade propellers. Everyone else is still using three- and four-blade props, but the five-blade designs we're using now came out of our raceboats – they're really very efficient and have had a big impact on performance and economy."

With a reputation for being fiercely competitive in both racing and business, Barry-Cotter says he is still just as motivated as he was when he first started powerboat racing back in the late 1980s.

"I'd actually like to get back out there (and race), but Lesley (his wife) won't let me!" he says, a touch ruefully.

"But, really, it's all about chasing the technology for me now and trying out ideas and seeing if they work. Kurt runs things, but every now and then I throw in some ideas and Tom (Barry-Cotter) comes into it when we need to test things out on the water."

And speaking of Tom, Bill says having to watch while family is out on the water racing at break-neck speeds is something that has taken some getting used to.

"It's definitely different now because I've got family out there in the boat, so I tend to worry a bit more than I used to. It's more stressful for me, I think, having Tom out there in the driver's seat."

The Maritimo Offshore Racing Team is set for another hectic multi-series year in 2017 and if commitment, dedication and talent have anything to do with it, Bill Barry-Cotter and his team aim to add a few more trophies to their already packed collection of awards.

For more information, go to: superboat.com.au.

Team highlights

As Australia's most accomplished offshore powerboat team, Maritimo Offshore Racing has accumulated many race wins and other highlights, both locally and on the international stage, including:

Bill Barry-Cotter has won seven Australian Class One championships. He was also the first Australian to win a modern International Class One race (with co-driver Peter McGrath at the Fujairah (UAE) Grand Prix in 2002), plus a third place in the world championship in the same year.

In 2003, the team racked up a second place in the European championships, a third in the Middle East titles and another third placing in the world rankings.

More recently, Tom Barry-Cotter became the youngest-ever Class One racer at the age of 19 and has, to date, won four Australian championships.

Internationally, Tom, in partnership with Norwegian Virik Nielson, has consistently finished in the top five and in 2009 placed third in the European championships.

In partnership with Rossco Willaton, he also placed second in the inaugural Gold Coast XCAT Grand Prix in 2015, going on the following year to a pole-position effort at Fujairah and placing second in the Lugano Grand Prix in Switzerland.

In 2012, Willaton and Tom Barry-Cotter also became the first-ever offshore powerboat racers to win the




Sydney Bridge to Bridge powerboat race, a feat the team repeated the following year with drivers Willaton and Darren Nicholson.

2013 saw the team notch up another Australian championship with its Supercat 1000 boat.

In total, Willaton has won seven Australian titles and is reigning champion with co-driver Travis Thompson.

The team competed in the US for the first time in the 2011 Superboat World Championships in Key West, with Willaton and Bill Barry-Cotter's step-son, Luke Durman, driving to an outstanding second place. And in partnership with Peter McGrath, Willaton went one better the following year, taking out the championship.

For 2017, the team will be mounting a two-boat campaign in Key West, hoping to secure both the Superboat and Superboat Unlimited world titles. 

Powerboat paradise

For powerboat fans, Key West in Florida is the ultimate destination.

you can have your fill of some of the most exotic cars, bikes and silicone-enhanced glamour on the planet

Party Central. That's the best way I can think of to describe Key West, Florida, the home of the Superboat World Power Boat Championships. Key West has been on my bucket list for a long time ... in particular attending the world champs.

I have been teased for years with stories of not only the racing, but also the after-parties and the famous Duval Street with its many restaurants and bars, such as Sloppy Joe's, The Irish Bar and Rick's Americana. So when I heard that the Kiwis and Aussies were going to be racing in the 2016 world championship, I knew I had to go.

While I was there to give the Kiwis some moral support, it was my son Travis, driving the Maritimo boat in the Superboat Extreme class, that was the primary catalyst for making the trip.

The event is held over a week and covers three days of racing, with the various classes based on engine and boat size. Top of the list is Superboat Unlimited, which Maritimo had entered, with Travis at the helm and Ross Willaton on the throttles. The competition was the best of the best, with nine competitive boats, all running twin-turbocharged or supercharged V8s up to 2000hp.



While the Maritimo Offshore team showed great pace in all three races and recorded the second-fastest top speed of 148mph (238km/h) and a lap average of 113.26 mph (182km/h), reliability gremlins saw them only finish one race.

For the Kiwi crew of Wayne Valder and Chris Hanley, running a leased MTI (renamed *Profloors*), in the Superboat class, it was also a troublesome event. Although starting with two reasonable results to finish mid-pack, the last heat proved a disaster when *Profloors* flipped on the first corner, ending its campaign.

Despite all this, both teams have committed to being back on the startline for the 2017 event this coming November.

Walking around the pits at Key West is heaven for any true offshore petrolhead. The best boats, drivers, engine builders and riggers are all there. There's an open and friendly atmosphere, where you can talk to legends of the sport without restriction. Plus, you can have your fill of some of the most exotic cars, bikes and silicone-enhanced glamour on the planet.

And if the pits get you fizzing during the day, then Duval Street at night will set you on fire. The music is continuous, varied and fantastic. It's like one big party that goes all night, every night. I found the whole thing a bit surreal – but loved every minute of it.

To top it off, I was lucky enough to be on the deck of *Profloors* for the street parade. Reminiscent of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, we were given a bag of beads to toss out to the crowd, to the delight of all.

So if you have time in November and like the sound of deafening V8s in 50ft boats, racing less than 100m past you at around 150mph, then get yourself to Key West ... you will not be disappointed. 