

Nautor Swan 50th Anniversary book article

'I wouldn't trade those years for any other job'

By Jennifer Stewart

'I started my job at Nautor in March 1981 and left 24 years later. I was administrative assistant to Paul Buttrose, who was the new Nautor agent (a very well-known Australian sailor), and we were a great team for 13 years. I began to assist with the sales orders/ warranty/ parts, I then moved to brokerage sales, new boat sales, and finally became an agent. I was not a sailor: living in Newport, I was just trying to find a job here.

At that time I knew absolutely nothing of yachts and of Swan, and in fact, came home to tell my then fiancé about my new job, and all I could remember was that it was a boat company, some kind of bird, like Duck boats or something. He, having been working and racing on yachts for many years, just looked at me like I was nuts, and asked me if I meant Swan. So began my education.

The boatyard seemed an amazing place, to me, in the middle of nowhere. It was so cold, and I had never been some place where the cars had to plug in to keep the oil warm so they would start, never mind the harbour full of ice. I was impressed by the country flags flying at the entrance, and there was so much pride in their work. The first time I walked in to the main production hall, I just stopped and stared, so many boats in production, the test pool, the machine shop, the fibreglass hall, and the Swan 65 wheel in the food hall! Tom, Laila, Ingmar, Lars, all the ladies, so many friends were made.

Nautor was an easy-selling brand, there were numerous models and price ranges to choose from, and at the time, the US market was made up of over 60% repeat customers. They would start off with a Swan 371 and keep moving up. I think it is probably one of the rare brands in the world where no one feels it that necessary to do a sea trial, because the client knew what they were buying and knew what it could do! Unlike other builders at the time, each boat came out of Nautor ready to go around the world and in those days, people did. We had two Swan 46 we sold to go around the world with family and friends.

When I started, there was no EU, we had different currencies, different taxes, different ways of doing business. The US market always wanted more customisation, and pushed for more modern layouts. The best-seller Swan in the 1980's was the Swan 46, in the 1990s it was a 44MkII, in the 2000s it was the Swan 56. We did our best to do what we said we would, help in any way we could whether or not it was really a Nautor problem, finding crew, helping with deliveries, sending part worldwide, arranging boatyards, whatever.

It used to be that when an owner was on their boat, they were literally out of touch. Then it became mandatory to be able to communicate, and everything changed. The ability to use a larger boat without crew also became important, and roll booms/ hydraulic furlers/ bow thrusters, etc. made that possible. The early boats were, for lack of a better term, more like camping with the cabin layouts, no hot water, and no self-tailing anything.

As women became more involved in sailing with their partners, the new buyers began demanding much more in the way of comfort, double beds, generators, air conditioning, and bigger cockpits. New boat construction techniques and modern equipment have completely changed boat building. Going from solid hand laid up fibreglass to composites to carbon, all new construction methods, etc. Think about how computer technology has changed everything: we used to have to wait for drawings in the mail, now they are all digital.

However, what has not changed in the quality of the workforce at Nautor, you still cannot beat their craftsmanship. I wouldn't trade those years for any other job, yes, it was fun. We were fulfilling the dreams of our customers, the majority of whom also became our friends, sailing and socialising together still. The Finns may be quiet, but they are certainly not dull! I think Ferragamo added style, flare, more modern building techniques, more emphasis on performance sailing. Best memories? Still hanging right at my desk is my "Sales Office of the Year" award given to me in 1998, along with my coffee mug that was given to us all at one agents' meeting years ago, I still use it every day in the office.'