



Veterans among us



Seating veteran Rod Ferguson at his Stapylton factory

Among the bus industry's more colourful characters are industry stalwarts, and now officially 50-year veterans, Rod Ferguson and Athol McKinnon. **David Goeldner** pays tribute

By the time you reach 50 years' service in one industry, retirement might come top of mind. But that's not so for industry veterans Rod Ferguson and Athol McKinnon, both having just reached their respective half centuries, and neither planning to settle back anytime soon.

In fact Ferguson, who notches 50 years in the transport seating business this month, says 2012 had been one of his best years in business for the past decade.

He plans to keep expanding, diversifying and 'invent' all under the roof of his company Transport Seating Technology.

Both he and his compatriot Athol McKinnon, the latter reaching his '50' last November, are at the top of 'the game' just now, and for the supply lines duo there's no reason to quit just as business is starting to trend up, with long-term plans being realised.

McKinnon has spent the past year taking

his bus supply company Bus and Coach Sales Australia to a higher level with business partner Rodd Hood.

The Bonluck brand distributed through McKinnon and Hood appears to be firing on all cylinders, and while the market gets bumpy, McKinnon says he is thoroughly enjoying the position he finds himself leading into 2013.

BUSES IN THE BLOOD

Athol McKinnon was pretty much born into buses, hailing from a bus operating family on the Gold Coast hinterland in southern Queensland.

Although as a young teenager he would help out his parent's Numinbah Valley to Southport bus service — mostly cleaning the buses — McKinnon officially started in the industry on November 22, 1962 with a motor body building apprenticeship at age 15 with Alan Denning where he stayed until 1975.

At various times, McKinnon has been a bus builder, sales manager and company director, always in a bus building enterprise, and more often than not around people he has held a long professional association.

"I pretty much grew up with the coach building industry in Australia," he says.

He cites among his notable career highlights as overseeing the build of 136 Denning buses to replace Brisbane's trams, which were phased out in the late 1960s, and soon after commissioning a plant in Adelaide to build another 196 buses — and all this before he turned 25.

But his big moment was building the first Denning Monocoach from the wheels up, back in 1967. And unlike many buses today, it was an 'integral' body and chassis vehicle built by the same manufacturer.

The Monocoach was a big success for Denning, and an opportunity for McKinnon to hone his selling skills, as he not just helped build the bus, but spruiked its virtues to operators across Australia.

During his 13 years with Denning, of which eight were in sales, McKinnon sold about 500 buses.

"It was an exciting time," he says.

After 1975, the excitement continued, launching into a joint bus building business as Denning McKinnon and Co, and later as a silent partner in Motor Coach Australia with Kevin Johnson and Vince Crowe. Around that time he was involved with the design of the prestige Tourmaster coach, building a prototype that would quickly manifest across Australia's bus touring landscape.

McKinnon hit a rough spot in the mid-1980s having lost his first wife to cancer, and to take his mind away he launched his efforts into importing the double-decker German Kassbohrer-Setra. Austral imported 22 Kassbohrer-Setras into Australia, thanks in part to McKinnon's efforts.

By 1993, McKinnon needed a 'sea change' and headed back to the Gold Coast, driving coaches for Surfers Paradise Coaches, and investing in his own coach business Coastliner Tours at Tweed Heads.

But it was in bus supply where McKinnon needed to be, returning to business at Australian Autobus, run by Kevin Johnson with McKinnon as marketing manager where he stayed for a nine-year stint.

The advent of importing buses built in China saw McKinnon leave Autobus to team up with current business partner Rodd Hood in 2006 to form Bus and



Clockwise: Athol McKinnon at BCSA's head office Yatala, Queensland; Estelle and Athol McKinnon at BIC's 2003 Queenstown conference; Athol McKinnon gets behind the wheel of a double decker on a 1986 trip to Germany

Coach Sales Australia, initially distributing BCI buses.

He lived in China through most of 2006, and regrets not having been to China earlier.

After BCSA parted company with BCI late in 2011, McKinnon moved into an Australian distribution agreement with Bonluck.

Rolling forward to 2013, McKinnon turns 66 in February with no retirement plans pending.

"I am now my own boss. I start and finish when I want to, and I like to think that this company will survive, and in 2013 we will be looking at more success."

A LIFE IN SEATING

Rod Ferguson is also at the pinnacle of his career.

"There is a sense of pride and joy when I look at where Transport Seating is today," he says.

With sales in excess of 11,000 units across the Transport Seating's bus

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— ATHOL MCKINNON



Rod and Patricia Ferguson at a recent BusVic Maintenance conference in Melbourne

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— ROD FERGUSON

and marine seating business in 2012, Ferguson says the challenge is to use this momentum launching into 2013 — and beyond.

“The best is yet to come and I am looking forward to an exciting future,” he says.

“But whatever happens, my passion and desire to create the best in seating will never lessen.”

Ferguson turns 65 in July 2013, having started his working life on January 1, 1963 at just 14-years-old, starting as a motor trimmer.

His passion for seating firmed-up with Admac, where he perfected his trade as a seat maker. The seats Ferguson made at the time were used by noted bus builder Alan Denning.

By 1975, Ferguson had opened his first business venture, Southside Trimming, supplying seats to Skennars and Greyhound.

This business thrived but was eventually sold, the legacy of which set Ferguson on an entrepreneurial path that saw him form partnerships with some of the industry’s noted bus builders, in particular Motorcoach and Australian Autobus founder Kevin Johnson. Ferguson teamed up as a partner with Johnson’s Transit Seating in 1992, which in some respects was a forerunner to Ferguson’s current business Transport Seating.

For 2013, Ferguson is preparing to launch a new seat, a light weight model called ‘The Outback’, which should be ready for mid-year’s BusVic Maintenance conference in Melbourne.

He won’t divulge the weight, but you won’t find any welding in its base, he says. This is Ferguson’s best seat yet, he believes, joking that it has been worth waiting 50 years to develop it.

“Weight is a big issue in the bus industry, and we are all striving for the lightest seat, but I also learnt from an early stage that regardless of everything else the safety of people is paramount,” he says.

Ferguson says the industry gets both safety and a lighter weight with the Outback seat, timed for release in a modern era of more intense competition among seating suppliers.

“There is fierce competition, but there’s plenty of room in the industry if you have the right product,” Ferguson says.

“I have put a lot of time and effort into the Outback, and with the technology available today to develop new product you can do wonders.”

After five decades, Ferguson has not just maintained his interest in bus seating, but has also pursued a path into high-speed ferries.

In his spare time, Ferguson also builds and flies sport aircraft, a trait that has passed on to his son Nathan who is now an avionics engineer, while second son Jamie is a motorbike mechanic.

For now Ferguson is not thinking about business succession, and there is no plan for retirement anytime soon.

“If I left it to my wife Patricia she would see me retire, but in saying that we do travel with the business, and we were recently visiting her family in Manchester in the United Kingdom,” he says.

“And we travel to Singapore in the marine industry, so we get to travel and have a bit of a holiday at the same time.”

THE JOHNSON CONNECTION

As odd as it might seem, McKinnon and Ferguson have never worked together, even though they both hail from southern Queensland’s bus building industry, and now control businesses located within a few kilometres of each other on either side of the Pacific Motorway to Brisbane’s south.

Even though their paths cross from time to time, they do however have a long-term link in fellow bus veteran Kevin Johnson.

As it happens, Johnson and McKinnon both worked for AB Denning as

apprentices, and kept an association going through the decades. Johnson's connection with Ferguson hasn't been quite as long, but in a business sense became solid as seating business partners back in the 1990s.

Johnson, too, has maintained his professional relationship with each of our veterans, having travelled to China with McKinnon and Hood earlier in 2012, and dropping in to see Ferguson at his Stapylton factory on a weekly basis.

Ferguson relishes Johnson's regular visits to his factory, taking the opportunity to delve into his bus building knowledge bank.

"He has a lot of knowledge, and he is a very generous man," Ferguson says.

Johnson says it was through a mutual interest in building and flying sport aircraft that bound their friendship beyond mere business colleagues.

"What inspired me about Rodney was the flying boat he had hanging on a ceiling at his home," he says.

"It was a proper airplane with precision engineering — the quality of the workmanship was very good."

Johnson is also a seat maker, and

comes at the task from an engineering perspective.

"Whereas Rodney has the ability to do engineering, as well as having seat trimming skills — everything he makes is a well-made product."

But Johnson also has words of deep respect for Athol McKinnon.

"Where Athol excelled was in the appearance of a vehicle, selecting colours and trims, and giving you a sense of what it was going to look like," Johnson says.

"And Athol opened a lot of doors for me in business."

Johnson recalls that without McKinnon's help back in the mid-1990s, mainly on the sales side, the Autobus business may not have reached the size it did.

Looking forward, Johnson hasn't quite reached his 50-year milestone yet, but he is not far behind.

"I am surprised they are both saying they have 50 years in the industry, I have put myself down for 46 years," he says.

He is respectful of anyone who has reached the major milestone, and in particular heartily congratulates his two friends Athol McKinnon and Rod Ferguson. ☒



A dapper young man, 17-year-old Rod Ferguson during his Admac years

Editor's note: If you have a celebration or milestone coming up in 2013, e-mail dgoeldner@bauer-media.com.au or call 07 3101 6603. We would be happy to hear from you.

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