

Joe Lewis

General Manager, Mount Dora Boating Center & Marina

While Joe Lewis may own and operate a small, single-location dealership and waterfront marina in picturesque Mount Dora, FL 25 miles northwest of Orlando, his footprint and influence is felt far and wide throughout the North American marine industry.



By Wanda
Kenton Smith

Lewis has devoted the past 35 years not only building a profitable retail operation which has earned prior *Boating Industry* Top 100 ranking from 2005 – 2011, along with mastering dealer certification status in the inaugural pilot program and eventually being named a 2021 MICD “Great Dealerships to Work For,” but has also carved out time to actively support a variety of industry initiatives.

His leadership roles over the past three decades range the full gamut, from serving four stints as president of the Marine Industry Association of Central Florida, to currently serving as vice chair and executive committee member of the MRAA; and vice chair, audit committee chair and executive committee member of the RBFF’s Take Me Fishing campaign. He is president of the boating safety non-profit Drive Dry board of directors and is the alternate representative of the Sportfish Boating & Fishing Advisory Council.

Previously, he served as president of the Marine Industry Association of Florida; director and chairman of the NMMA’s Grow Boating/Discover Boating campaign; regional director and chair of the MRAA; and marine industry representative appointed to the State of Florida’s Governor’s Boating Advisory Council.

Lewis has also contributed to his local community. He’s currently chairman of the Mount Dora Area Chamber of Commerce, having previously held board and treasurer roles. Lake County presented him with its Community Service Award and along with the Mount Dora Chamber of Commerce, has named his dealership “Business of the Year” in 2010 and 2015, respectively. The Leesburg Daily Commercial newspaper also bestowed top business honors in 2016.

On the marine front, Lewis has earned a variety of prestigious leadership awards from the Marine Industry Association of Florida and Marine Industry Association of South Florida; the MRAA; the NMMA; Boat PAC; and the Sea Tow Foundation.

Boating Industry spoke with Lewis about his boating career and industry contributions, top issues facing the industry, family ownership challenges and tips for navigating a rewarding industry career.



Ahoy Captian Jack Sparrow! Halloween fun with wife and grandson Conner.

Boating Industry (BI): What’s your boating story?

Joe Lewis (JL): In my late twenties, I was living in Pennsylvania and was an active snowmobiler, participating in a lot of winter sports activities, but was bored in the summer. I worked in the outdoor power equipment business and had met Noel Osborne of Osborne Marine, and he suggested I consider boating. I bought my first boat, a new 1982 Wellcraft 23’ Nova, and spent every weekend boating. I suffered from two-foot-itis, moving up to a 26 Nova III and then to a 34’ Scarab. My addiction was so bad that I thought owning a marina was the ticket. I was searching initially for a marina up north or



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possibly in the Carolinas but saw an ad in the Wall Street Journal for Mount Dora Marina. I loved the Orlando area, so I checked out the facility and closed on the marina 30 days later.

BI: Was this the official launch of your industry career?

JL: I purchased the marina in May 1989, with plans to be an absentee owner and hire a GM to run the business. The goal was to make Florida home, hang out and go boating on weekends, and fly back on Mondays to Pennsylvania to manage my business interests there. However, the boat business had some difficult years, and my weekends were spent working in the marina. After two years and having just met my soon-to-be wife, the transition to a full-time boating career was sealed in May 1991.

BI: What were those early difficulties?

JL: The late 80's and early 90's were challenging years for business in general, but in the marine sector, a couple of recessions and the passage of the luxury tax took their toll. We faced declining storage revenue and slowing boat sales. We took the challenges one day at a time and dumped in money to supplement cash flow shortages to get through those days.

BI: Fast forward 30+ years... what is the scope of operations today?

JL: With a staff of ten, we provide service to 234 storage customers along with dozens of people who purchase new Starcraft, Four Winns or pre-owned boats each year. We're a full-service facility offering sales, storage, service, transport, canvas repair, fiberglass/gelcoat repair and restoration. We launched a rental division pre-Covid, and our boat share business in 2022.



Joe Lewis says his industry leadership roles have been greatly satisfying, especially his long-standing engagement with the MRAA.



Every Christmas for the past 27 years, Joe and his team at Mount Dora Marina have magically transformed their marina into a Christmas wonderland that attracts thousands. In recent years, they've partnered with Toys for Tots and Lake Cares Food Pantry to generate needed donations as part of their holiday festivities.

BI: Yours is a family-owned business, correct? Who's involved and what's been the timeline, transition and challenges?

JL: My son Joey and daughter Julia have been working at the dealership for 14 and 11 years, respectively. Joey is service director, while Julia is sales and marketing director. The biggest challenge is maintaining focus, not playing favorites and making decisions based on aligned focus and goals.

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// PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

Family that works and plays together, stays together! Joe and wife Susan with Joey and Julia.



BI: Some might wonder why you've invested so much time and energy on industry causes and initiatives. Why is this important to you, and what have you learned from the experience?

JL: Giving back, sharing what you've learned is something we all owe to this industry so those that follow will be able to benefit from our success as well as learn from unsuccessful experiences. I've learned giving back usually results in receiving so much more.

In addition, being actively engaged has allowed me to learn a great deal... such as the market research conducted by Grow Boating, RBFF and MRAA including studies like the First Time Boat Buyer and the just released Psychology of Churn. Research aside, I've learned as much from fellow dealers from all around the country at gatherings like Dealer Week where I'm able to compare notes with some of the best in the business and learn from their successes.

BI: Your advice for those interested in engaging in industry initiatives, but don't know where to start?

JL: For me, it was an evolution. I initially attended my regional trade association meetings, and then was introduced to the state affiliation. I learned about important national issues from being involved on the state level. I then became involved with the MRAA

and was asked to serve on their board. Opportunities continued to unfold. In my situation, I found my passion through this process. Take the first step perhaps locally or within your area of industry focus, and don't be afraid to say yes when you're asked to serve.

BI: What are you most proud of in terms of your industry service?

JL: I've enjoyed working on both the "Discover Boating" and "Take Me Fishing" marketing campaigns but being part of MRAA's journey over the past 16 years has been my greatest pleasure and most gratifying. Watching the organization grow and know what is yet to come is exciting!

BI: What do you believe are the biggest short- and long-term challenges facing the industry?

JL: Short term, we need to focus on value and how boating enhances people's lives. We know people are happier and healthier near, on, in, under or around the water. We need to improve the boat ownership experience and do everything to ensure that experience is as hassle-free and enjoyable as humanly possible. Boating is not an inexpensive activity and it's unlikely to cost less in the future...it falls to us to make sure the ownership experience is worth it.

Long term, dealers need to be more involved in the pre-owned business as there are roughly three times more pre-owned boats sold annually compared to new. Of that huge market, dealers see less than 25% of that business; capturing another 10% to 15% is significant business. Not only are we missing this opportunity, we're also unable to influence the buying or ownership experience of these pre-owned boat buyers. On those occasions where pre-owned buyers seek out a dealership, it's usually to help them sort out an unfortunate situation. That's not good for anyone and leads to people leaving boating over a bad experience.

BI: Last great business book/author, webinar or seminar/presenter? What did you learn?

JL: "Traction" by Gino Wickman. It's been a game changer for our business as we continue to study and strengthen the six key components of the Entrepreneurial Operating System.

BI: What do you do for fun?

JL: I enjoy shipwreck diving in the Keys, leisurely afternoons at Disney Springs for dinner and a movie with my wife Susan, building my model railroad (I'm a HO train collector), and playing Captain Jack Sparrow on Halloween! Of course, boating with family and friends is always on the agenda.

BI: Last question... as you reflect on the past 35 years in business, what have you enjoyed most?

JL: Absolutely hands down, it's the people I've met. From the folks I've been honored to serve with on many boards, to the families we've introduced to the water, and the moments boating I've experienced with my own family, it just doesn't get any better than this. ●