

Boating Industry

FEBRUARY 2025

CELEBRATING
20 YEARS

TOP
100

Boating Industry

THE 2024 TOP 100 DEALER OF THE YEAR

NAUTICAL VENTURES GROUP

*of Fort
Lauderdale,
Florida*

40
UNDER

WOMEN
making WAVES



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP:

Jeff Husby

**GM/Owner, Regal & Nautique of Orlando;
President/CEO, WaterSports Central**

For this special Top 100 edition of *Boating Industry* magazine, Jeff Husby is an obvious choice for our Profiles in Leadership spotlight. Having earned the coveted Dealer of the Year and #1 national retail ranking in 2022 and 2023, Husby and his company – Regal & Nautique of Orlando – now joins a small group of industry elite inducted into the prestigious *Boating Industry* Hall of Fame.



**By Wanda
Kenton Smith**

In addition, he and his team have earned scores of additional industry accolades including MRAA dealer certification and being named 5x MRAA Great Dealerships to Work For; 5X PCM Dealer of the Year; Nautique and Regal President's Awards; top NMMA CSI award winner in all brands for both sales and service; retail winner of Sea Tow Foundation national boating safety award; among countless other distinctions.

Husby, who has worked 33 years exclusively in the marine retail industry, currently splits his time managing and overseeing operations for three separate entities: Regal & Nautique of Orlando with two locations including a new, state-of-the-art facility downtown Orlando and recently launched Clermont venue; WaterSports Central with six retail locations in Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee; and 2024 start-up, Wake United, an online and brick and mortar watersports pro shop with nine sales locations.

Boating Industry caught up with Husby to talk about his relentless passion for the boating business; the people and strategies that contributed to his success; and his insights on industry challenges ahead.

🔗 Jeff Husby's marine industry career is driven by a relentless passion for the boating lifestyle which he's enjoyed and embodied since the age of five.

Boating Industry (BI): What's your boating background?

Jeff Husby (JH): I grew up in Wisconsin and enjoyed family boating since I was five... during the season, my parents and I went to my grandparents' house on the lake nearly every weekend to fish and boat... such great memories!

As I grew older, my aunt and my dad took interest in my passion for waterskiing and towboats. Dad and I bought our first towboat when I was 14; it was the first of many more towboats and years of memories with family and friends on the waters of Wisconsin.

BI: How were you introduced to the boating industry?

JH: Our local boat dealer in Eau Claire, WI was Nelson's Sports Center, and my high school girlfriend's dad owned the dealership. It was so cool to hang out there and look at all the boats. I often asked if I could clean the boats at boat shows, just to be a part of the crew.

BI: How and why did you launch your career in the boating industry?

JH: One word – PASSION. I knew I would move to Florida after graduating from college in Wisconsin. I was driven to be a part of the towboat business and to live in a warm climate.

In 1992, I packed up everything I owned and made the move to Orlando. I applied at Correct Craft in hopes of fulfilling my dream, but they weren't hiring, so I took a job as a sales associate at Boaters World which was owned by Ritz Camera. Six months later and after breaking multiple company-wide sales records, I asked for a raise. The district manager told me they capped out all sales associates at \$6 per hour, so I went looking for another job. I found a parts manager position at Longwood Marine which lasted about a year. Then, I found an ad in the paper seeking a retail salesperson which ended up being Southeast Correct Craft. I started in February 1993 ... and never looked back!

BI: Who were your early champions?

JH: I met Walt Meloon the first time by accident at IMTEC in 1992 and then reconnected during my second interview at Southeast Correct Craft when I was hired. Walt was an industry icon, and I was very intimidated when meeting him again, but I knew he was knowledgeable and part of the founding family of Correct Craft. Once Walt recognized my sales abilities, he made sure I was involved in all aspects of dealership training. SECC grew from selling a dozen retail units in 1993 to 100+ new retail units in 1996, becoming the unofficial #1 Nautique Dealer in the world. Walt gave me the necessary tools to grow and taught me how to "do the right thing," no matter the cost. Honesty, integrity, and solid values from the Meloon family

aligned with my own family values. I was fortunate to work 15 years in an environment built on solid trust.

After starting my own dealership, perhaps the most influential person in my career was David Parker of Parker Business Planning. I joined his 20 Group in 2011, and he helped me shape the foundation and infrastructure of the dealership. I continue to consult with him on a yearly basis to establish budgets and discuss personnel, products, and overall strategy. He's a very good friend and mentor.

BI: What led to the launch of your own dealership?

JH: After 15 great years at SECC, I realized we had no room to grow. Our business was capped out in space, people, and number of units we could sell in the current property. I had a vision for the Nautique brand, but our ownership was unwilling to invest in a larger property to grow the business. I left in May of 2008 and within a few months, Bill Yeargin called and offered me the Nautique brand, which was a natural fit. After lots of planning and diligence, we opened the dealership in September 2008.

BI: What was your top challenge as a new retail owner?

JH: When I started in 2008, the country was facing economic collapse. In July 2008, we were pre-approved for a \$5M floorplan by TransAmerica, but when we opened, Transamerica was out of business. We turned to our local bank, whom we knew very well. They laughed and said, "You guys are crazy going in the boat business ... we are not loaning you any money." We pooled



Creating a positive work culture is paramount for Husby and has led to RNO being named among MRAA's Top Dealership to Work For in North America for five years, among many additional industry accolades. Team RNO photo in front of the new state-of-the-art downtown Orlando sales and service facility.

together some cash and bought and sold a few boats, repeating that process until we had a track record. After about nine months, our local bank gave us a small line of credit ... and the rest is history. It took lots of hard work to keep the inventory turning and prove the doubters wrong. We took a massive risk, at a risky time.

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// PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

BI: Fast forward... talk about the transition from being a sole retailer to owning and managing WaterSports Central.

JH: I became friends with another dealer in our Parker 20 Group and he was enamored by my passion to lead. An opportunity became available in August 2020 at the end of COVID, and we began discussions of how I might lead WaterSports Central. In the beginning, I was unsure it would work, but we hammered out the details. The timing was right as my son was away at college and I had the desire to spread my wings and expand.

BI: What's your major area of focus today?

JH: Tough question because our industry changes daily and you need to adapt quickly to be successful. However, my main focus is customer service and ensuring all employees provide 100 percent to our customers every day, in all aspects of business, and to treat them with respect. In addition, the culture of our team is very important. Leading by example and ensuring a strong company culture provides the foundation for success. Sounds easy, but it's a constant moving target.

BI: How do you balance your time and handle multiple demands?

JH: I split time between Orlando and the business in GA, SC and TN. I eat, breathe and sleep thinking about ways to improve the business. I'm so passionate about what I do... it's my life. All employees know I am a text or phone call away at any time.

BI: What's the major challenge of owning multiple dealerships?

JH: Hiring and training the right people in the right places at the right times. When you have solid employees, you must nurture and train them. I train managers in what I expect and then provide the right tools to be successful and then get out of the way.

Also, each market is different in the way they hire, the marketing process, and overall business acumen. One shoe does not fit all.

BI: What do you enjoy most about your career?

JH: I love the relationships and friends I've met along the way, many of whom share similar stories to mine. It's great to watch them win and to be there to support one another.

BI: What's your strategy for professional development and continuing success?

JH: My passion remains strong and fuels me to continually improve. I'm actively engaged in the Parker 20 Group as well as industry organizations and collaborations such as MRAA, WSIA and MIACF.

BI: What's the key to carving out an enduring industry career?

JH: Passion, passion, passion! The drive to win and desire to listen and learn. Ability to adapt to change quickly. Having a great partner to support you and your passion.

BI: What do you consider the most critical short and long-term industry challenges?

JH: Short term, the biggest and most obvious is the shortage of technicians. No easy solution to fix this problem... supply is low, demand is high, and this drives up the hourly wage for this position. While this may attract more youth for a tech career, it will cause other issues for dealerships with hourly shop rates.



➔ Jeff and his long-term partner Johana Calvert enjoy traveling and exploring new places including a recent trip to Italy where they chartered a private boat and cruised to the Tunnel of Love at the Isle of Capri. Calvert is dockside service coordinator at RNO.

The way dealers currently operate the Service Department will be forced to change to accommodate higher wages, which in turn affects the entire dealership operation and thought process.

Both a short and long-term issue involves affordability and entry-level buyers. The cost of producing entry level boats skyrocketed after COVID and coupled with inflation, boats are becoming unaffordable for the middle class. To grow the industry, we must be creative and figure out ways to attract consumers and get them to spend discretionary dollars in our industry. Without some initiative to re-engage this buyer, our industry could shrink and become more oriented to upper-class Americans.

I also have concern about consolidation. The concept of a few conglomerates controlling all the options is not a healthy recipe for growth. Competition is always good!

BI: Looking forward, what traits are most important for boating industry leaders?

JH: The first question I ask any future employee is about their passion in life. I try to hire and surround myself with passionate people. Boating is a lifestyle and more than just a job, so passion is the number one trait.

Reputation is also key. Consumers and employees are attracted to leaders with a great reputation in the industry or community... they want to do business with a reputable business. I've encountered a few leaders with a bad reputation, and I've given them a chance, but when their values don't align, it's time to cut bait.

Finally, effective leaders have great communication skills. I'm a big believer in time-stamped, documented forms of communication, be it text messages, emails, pictures, etc. Strong communications, backed by documentation, helps me hold people accountable, as verbal is quickly forgotten or may be misinterpreted.

BI: Finally, is there a mantra you live by?

JH: You only live once be badass. ●