

Mark Evans Interview

Introducing the new line of McConaghy catamarans

By Gregor Tarjan

What McLaren cars are for self-proclaimed petrol heads, McConaghy Boats are synonymous for high tech, winning racing yachts. When this storied 50-year composite builder announced their entry into the multihull market, fanatic that I am - I had to know more. I jumped on an Emirates flight and after a pit stop in Dubai and half an eternity later found myself face to face with composite pundit and McConaghy's CEO Mark Evans.



What got you into boat building and what do you love most about your job?

I was lucky to be brought up on waterfront in Sydney where the sailing scene has always been characterized by friendly competition and grass roots innovation. As a young dinghy sailor, I think it really rubbed off on me. I enjoyed competing, designing and modifying the boats I sailed on. Soon people started coming to me to upgrade their boats and a business was born.

What I love most about my job... it has to be creating something I'm proud of. That's not just the boats but the teams and our whole company too. We love a challenge at McConaghy and never shy away from projects that at first seem beyond our capability. In fact, we're drawn to them. That way we develop and deepen our knowledge base continually. I think this mentality and working with people who share it is another thing I truly love about my job.



What 3 accomplishments in your boat building career are you particularly proud of?

I think moving to China 13 years ago with a 1-year old daughter, building a world class production facility from scratch and over the years since making more carbon fiber racing boats than anyone else in the world would probably be my three.

In terms of projects, building “Adastra” is definitely up there. She was the very first 140’ all composite super-slender trimaran ever to be built and has to be one of the most technologically advanced and geometrically challenging hull forms seen on the water in recent years. “Wild Oats” – one of our many 100’ all carbon supermaxis too for similar reasons, coupled with her phenomenal racing success.

What were the main design objectives for the new McConaghy line of catamarans?

It was a multifaceted brief. In simple terms this range of cats (the MC50, MC60, MC77 and MC90) needed to be three things at once. Firstly, they needed to be extremely luxurious with a very high finish, secondly, they needed to be exhilarating yet easy to sail shorthanded, thirdly we wanted to redefine the traditional concepts of interior vs. exterior space on a multihull.

Starting with the luxury aspect - I mentioned we like to rise to a challenge. Having excelled at race boat construction, I wanted to turn our sights to new horizons and expand the factory's core competencies. This resulted in us adding on a 30,000 sqft workshop so we could make interiors that truly reflect our client's preferences, exuding luxury all-the-while minimizing

weight so these catamarans could still perform like a true McConaghy under sail. Foam cored lightweight wood laminates and savvy construction techniques (that I can't reveal yet I'm afraid) are at the center of this.

Secondly, we would never let a boat leave our facility without being fun - and fast - to sail. Many people don't realize that fast is also safe. Boats of this kind are often sailed shorthanded, so we needed an intelligently designed deck layout and naturally a carbon composite hull.

Thirdly, "Al-Fresco" living. We've seen on a lot of other designs where the saloon and cockpit are divided by unsightly structural bulkheads creating a cramped and imperfect style of onboard living. On these boats everyone is forced into a small saloon when it's raining or outside in less space than desired when the weather permits. We wanted one large open space with elegant (and disappearing) partitions that gave the owner the choice whether they wanted to be indoors or outdoors in the enormous saloon. We did this by developing a highly engineered all tempered glass, bi-fold door system and enormous retractable glass saloon side-windows. Both of which we are extremely proud of from a construction standpoint. I think this is also a first in the multihull industry.



Why was Jason Ker chosen to design the line of McConaghy luxury performance cats?

Jason captured the design brief perfectly. He has the prerequisite performance pedigree and was able to achieve the standards we were looking for. Having worked with him on numerous projects in the past we were glad to do so again and are pleased with the work he was appointed to do.

Why was the UK based, high-end interior design house Design Unlimited brought into the project?

Having developed a high capacity interior workshop, we wanted to make sure we got the most out of it. So, we sought guidance on what stunning, luxurious interiors would look like in terms of materials and finish from a leading company in the superyacht interior field.

We had worked closely with Design Unlimited on a custom 150-foot boat for a repeat customer with excellent results and wanted to continue the motion. The result has been a fantastic collaboration that our clients love. They get a high degree of customization from a leading design house (many of our clients chose to visit D.U. in the UK to really nail down their schemes) and we benefit from being continually challenged to create stunning interiors.



What is your biggest worry or concern when you start a building project and how do you protect yourself from its consequences?

Biggest concern must be timing. Like any production boat builder will tell you there are many pieces in the jigsaw and none of our boats could be described as simple. It's important that we can deliver a boat on time. Now that MC50 hull#1 is out the door and given our current pipeline, we are focusing more on scheduling and establishing construction processes that enable us to build smarter, faster and still remain price competitive. We constantly strive to improve internal communication and teamwork, understanding on an intuitive level the demands of the client, weighing up man hours with realistic objectives and above all precise scheduling.

McConaghy is at the top of its game as a race boat builder and world renown. Which aspects of this knowhow benefit clients who would buy a MC catamaran?

Primarily weight reduction and structural integrity (or stiffness). Composite engineering has yielded awesome spatial features and dimensions too and these are on full display in the range of McConaghy multihulls. Of note is the massive, full carbon frame that supports the coachroof and houses the fully retractable bi-fold safety glass doors. This light yet incredibly strong supporting member allows the owner to enjoy an unencumbered saloon and aft deck experience without doors or partitions that make other boats seem cramped and uncomfortable.

We utilize specialist composite engineering capabilities to their maximum potential in our race boats. This has given us a unique perspective on the true value of production costs vs R&D for these luxury composite cats. I truly believe we enter this niche with McConaghy multihulls having learned more lessons and with more understanding of the value of engineering than any of our competitors.



What are the 3 biggest features that set the MC catamarans ranging from 50-90' apart from other performance cats such as the Gunboat, HH or Outremer?

I think compared with those brands, it would have to be our flybridge, the extremely generous interior volume and our hydraulic, push button fully-automated center boards.

We love the fact that our flybridge and sailing systems are completely separate from the living area. This gives the saloon an uncluttered, purposeful aesthetic that's designed to be a sociable and comfortable space for the family without any interference from sail controls, ropes and clutter.

We looked at daggerboards and found them to be unnecessarily cumbersome. I was also not a fan of the spatial sacrifices they demand of the hull interiors. So, we came up with a 12' fully retractable centerboard design that uses it's casing as tankage for fuel and water thereby lowering the center of gravity. The tanks also act as a second hull, so in a breach this system is also much safer than a daggerboard. Recently we have heard of many daggerboard boats flooding because of impacts. The low weight of the tanks increase stability and both the design and length of the centerboards should dramatically increase the boat's upwind capabilities. Centerboards are also much safer than daggerboards and encroach less on the interior. Our goal really was to produce the fastest, most luxurious – but also safest flybridge cruising catamaran in the world.



McConaghy catamarans are built in Hong Kong. If a customer would scrutinize Chinese build products - what do you tell them?

Our products are really Western products that are assembled in China. I also think Chinese products are frequently maligned because of misconceptions. McConaghy has been building boats - and some of the most innovative and advanced boats - in China - for over 13 years. This is longer than any other Western owned and managed boatbuilder by a long way. Our shareholders and senior management are almost exclusively Western, and we are extremely proud of our track record and achievements. What we've managed to do (and so many others have failed at) is to develop modern, efficient management practices and training systems into our China facility. These are key to our production capabilities.

One of our clients, Apple's Tim Cook recently commented on manufacturing in China - and what he said was particularly observant. "When most people think of China they think of cheap labor. In fact, China hasn't had really cheap labor for quite some time especially when compared to other nations around the world. What China does have is an increasingly skilled workforce and a very large population. This means you can get good people more easily, people who fit the job description perfectly, are young, hardworking and rise to a challenge. They are not necessarily cheap or low-paid however"

As a result, I'm pleased to say we are CE and ISO 9001 certified, our products are all Class approved and our quality policy states that we are committed to exceeding, not just maintaining, international standards.

Over the last 50 years McConaghy has built ultra-high-tech composites for the industry, boats ranging from small high-performance race-dinghies to supermaxis, giant multihulls and even carbon race cars. What do all these very different projects have in common and what makes your company so successful in satisfying such varying market sectors?

Everything we do and every boat we build is technologically advanced and highly customized. This is only possible with a skilled and capable management team who possess a broad knowledge of composites. The same applies to our workforce, especially those performing more niche functions. We employ both specialists and generalists who work together impeccably to bring the knowledge and lessons learned from each other to every product, whatever it may be. Our training and professional development systems encourage lateral thought - and the ability to apply learning to sometimes widely divergent composite projects.

Where would you like the McConaghy brand to be in 10 years?

Now our brand is associated with technology, innovation and performance in building custom or limited production run composite race boats. Over the next 10 years I'd like to see our market share increase, and this means bring the tech capability we are known for to a wider audience (there are only so many people with the interest and resources to build our race boats)

We are committed to the multihull segment and are focusing a lot of resources here at the moment. I expect in 10 years' time that the McConaghy Multihulls brand will have developed hugely. I hope it will become synonymous with the same level of quality and success that McConaghy current has associated with our race boat division.



If you could have one boat - which one would it be?

I have a young family and am an avid sailor, so a McConaghy multihull would suit me to a tee. I think it would have to be an MC60.

The proportions of the MC50 are jaw-dropping and the head of a large European yacht brokerage recently told me that we're getting an interior volume equivalent of a 62' catamaran in our MC50. Now we are getting very advanced in the construction of the first MC60 and I am beginning to realize that this design is creating exponential efficiencies of scale. I'm confident that the 60 will feel like a 77 cat when she is finished.

So yes, an MC60 because my wife and kids will love it, because it represents incredible value for money and because the boat speed will be safe and effortless. But I am afraid, this is a pipedream as I am so dedicated in building the world's best yachts - and now multihulls.

Gregor Tarjan is the importer of McConaghy Multihulls in the US. He is also founder of Aeroyacht, an New York based, international multihull brokerage who are dealers for Sunreef and Bavaria-Nautitech catamarans.

His book "Catamarans, the Complete Guide for Cruising Sailors" is in its 3rd printing and has been hailed as the modern reference book on catamarans.