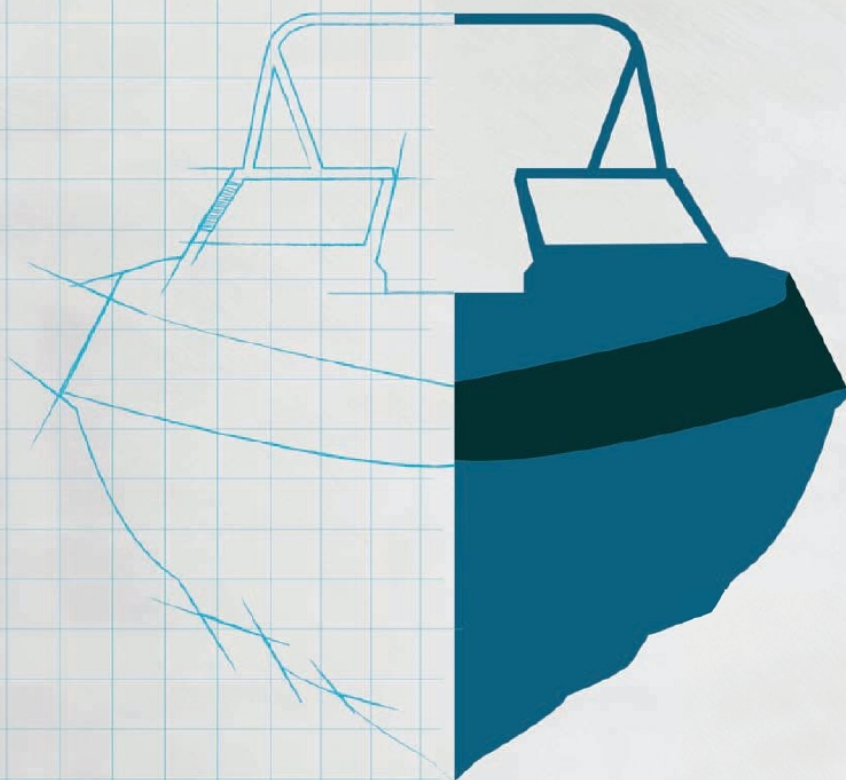


# THE GREAT BOATING BOOM



Historic COVID-era sales and continued demand  
set a course for long-term boating growth.

*By Wanda Kenton Smith*



Keri Doscher and Shawn Talpey  
of Emerald Coast Marine

While many industries suffered staggering blows from the impact of COVID-19 nationwide, sales in the recreational boating industry conversely spiked by 35% in 2020, with virtually every sector posting historic growth benchmarks. While previous years showed gains in specific areas of the market, 2020 revealed a riveting windfall across the board—from johnboats to Jet-Skis, kayaks to paddleboards, sporty runabouts to performance towboats, center consoles to sportfishers, sailboats to yachts.

According to a story published in June by *Soundings Trade Only*, data tracked by Statistical Surveys revealed that “the boat-buying trend that skyrocketed in late spring and early summer last year has not waned in the slightest and is seemingly picking up steam.”

Why the dramatic uptick in recreational boat sales? “Recreational boating proved to be the great antidote to the coronavirus,” says Shawn Talpey, president of Emerald Coast Marine, with locations in Niceville, FL, and Orange Beach, AL. “Americans longed to enjoy freedom and to escape to the great outdoors. Boating was a truly safe gateway to adventure and allowed families to relax, breathe in fresh air, bond, and enjoy life together.”

Hence, the pandemic brought a refreshing wake of new buyers into the North American boating community. According to Info-Link, some 415,000 first-time boat owners purchased and



registered new and used boats in 2020 throughout the U.S., including many right here on the NW Gulf Coast. “At Emerald Coast Marine, we welcomed scores of first-time boaters to the water, as well as servicing the boating faithful,” says Talpey. “Every boat retailer I know experienced a fantastic year in terms of retail sales activity; the demand for both product and services was simply unprecedented.”

Talpey says they also recognized a paradigm shift as more and more boaters chose to custom order product versus wait for inventory. “This allowed them to ultimately save money and to purchase exactly what they wanted, with reasonable expectations regarding delivery,” he says.

Another emerging boating trend continuing to gain national and local momentum is boat club membership. “When people couldn’t find boats to buy, many joined a boat club to access the water,” says Talpey, whose own Emerald Coast Boat Club posted significant growth in 2020. “Boat clubs are a great alternative to boat ownership and allow newcomers and experienced boaters alike to experience a variety of boat types and brands at a fraction of the purchase price,” he says. “Many prefer the cost savings and convenience associated with club membership, while others will eventually convert to new boat purchases once inventory stabilizes.” To that end, Talpey says they have established a boat club purchase option to facilitate future sales.

While such news has been stellar for boating businesses overall, there are a few lingering challenges rippling throughout both the B2B and B2C segments. Supply chain issues remain the primary concern, with retail dealers still at the mercy of manufacturers regarding product delivery. “Most boat and engine manufacturers are continuing to deal with difficult supply chain delays that impact production and delivery timelines,” says Talpey. “We’ve seen everything from windshields and radios to upholstery foam contribute to production delays.”

In addition, original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) were beset by COVID workforce reduction, and many are just now beginning to nudge the throttle forward. “Workforce and supply chain issues dealt a tough blow to manufacturers, which makes it difficult to predict new boat production, shipment, and arrival dates to dealerships,” says Talpey. “We’re all having to be patient as we work through these industry-wide concerns.”

With new boat inventory at a premium, there is a pent-up demand for used boat inventory. “Any boat owner not using his or her boat should seriously consider selling now,” says

Talpey. “Customers are on the hunt, ready to buy, and willing to pay top dollar. We’ve experienced robust activity in both our consignment and pre-owned purchase programs.”

Another COVID-era challenge has been boat servicing. “Based on increased sales activity, our service department launched a national search to aggressively hire for many key positions,” says Talpey. “Our team is working around the clock to keep pace with customer demand.” Like new-boat buyers, customers wanting to service their boats are encountering supply chain issues, with many long-term boaters surprised by some of the lead times required to get parts.

Out on the docks, marinas are juggling brisk launch activity coupled with storage demands. “With the increase in boat sales, traffic is up, and so is the wait list for wet and dry slip storage,” says Talpey. “We reconfigured our storage facilities to maximize capacity.”

While the pandemic has obviously dealt a mixed bag of upsides and challenges to the boating industry, the collective impact and long-term forecast is positive. “We’ve seen a very exciting surge and growth in boating and a major influx of new boat buyers,” says Talpey. “Younger families and diverse audiences have come aboard, and more women are taking the helm. This is wonderful news overall for boating and for our region.”

Based on recent industry projections, the current issues are expected to level out by the end of 2021, hopefully pointing to positive inventory adjustments in early 2022. “We’re all looking forward to that,” says Talpey. “And to smooth sailing in the near future.”





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