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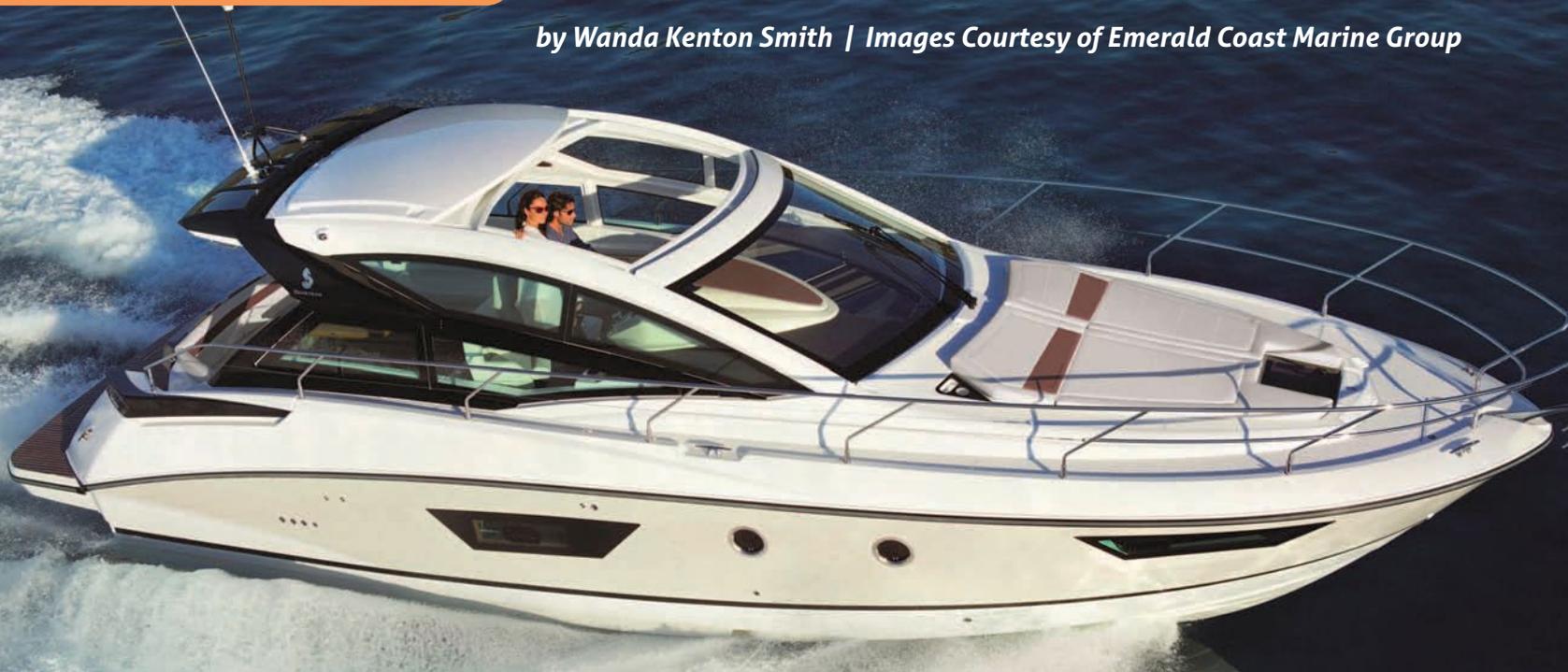
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**WING FOILING HITS  
THE GULF COAST!**

by Wanda Kenton Smith | Images Courtesy of Emerald Coast Marine Group



## 2020: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BUSINESS OF BOATING

**For all businesses, 2020 has been anything but normal.**

For those in the Northwest Gulf Coast - and those in the business of boating – 2020 has been an especially wild ride in many respects, and one destined for the history books.

From the stressors and surprising demands of COVID-19, to the sucker-punch of hurricanes and inclement weather impacting coastal communities, local businesses have been dealt some challenging blows... and for some, new opportunities.

Coastal Lifestyle Magazine spoke with Emerald Coast Marine Group President Shawn Talpey to discuss the impact 2020 has had on his retail boating business, coupled with his perspective and insight regarding important lessons learned.

### **AN UNEXPECTED SPIKE IN BOAT ACTIVITY & SALES**

When the Pandemic first made its tsunami-sized landing throughout North America, everyone was thrown into a tumultuous tailspin. No one quite knew how to navigate through these uncharted waters, nor what the bottom-line impact would be on our individual and family lives, or upon our respective businesses.

The national boating industry was immediately throttled to high alert, recalling all too well the crippling mayday of the Great Recession which shuttered nearly 40 percent of all boat retailers across the nation.

“Truthfully, we had no clue how COVID-19 would impact our business initially, but our leadership team made the collective decision to create protocols for the new social distancing norm, so we could keep our businesses open,” said Talpey.

Besides recalculating boat launch timing and enacting onsite social distancing measures, Talpey took the risk and gamble to continually invest in his team, choosing to scale down onsite staff and rotating shifts instead of the knee-jerk reaction of workforce reduction. Where job functions permitted, Talpey approved remote workforce operations.

“We took a more measured approach to our business, giving sufficient time to monitor developments before making any reactionary moves,” he said. “I’m sure glad we did ... in a few short weeks, our business exploded and like many other retailers in the boating industry, our company experienced historical milestones in terms of sales and service demands which included hiring for multiple new positions.”

The biggest challenge the dealership faced included the brisk sale of new and pre-owned inventory coupled with the shortage of replacement product through its multiple manufacturer lines.

While restaurants, bars and scores of other retail operations suffered from COVID-19 mandates and restrictions, the boating industry rebounded with a sales frenzy of epic proportions.

“Once families realized that they could still enjoy spending time together on the water, boating became a real antidote to the Coronavirus,” said Talpey. “Not only did our dealerships and many others see a significant spike in boating activity among our existing clientele, but the boating industry overall documented the highest percentage increase of boat sales to newcomers in decades during the pandemic of 2020.”

One of the challenges the boating industry has faced with this impressive influx is the ability to offer new boater training and orientation. While some retailers offer 1:1 training with licensed Coast Guard captains or other onsite experts, others have relied on Coast Guard or Power Squadron auxiliaries to service customers.

“Our dealership has long partnered with the Power Squadron to provide monthly onsite training for our customers, but we’ve only been able to offer that in very small and controlled group settings during COVID-19,” said Talpey. “To support our new boat customers, our sales staff has worked overtime to

make sure they understand how to operate their boat and are comfortable and confident at the helm.”

Emerald Coast Marine has also published a series of links to online training videos produced by multiple safe boating organizations on its Learning Center blog:

<https://www.emeraldcoastmarine.com/boatertraining/>

***“Once families realized that they could still enjoy spending time together on the water, boating became a real antidote to the Coronavirus,” said Talpey.***

“One thing our organization has really missed these past months are regular gatherings with our customers for not only safe boating instructions, but for monthly cookouts and fireworks, rendezvous, women’s-only events at the marina, boat shows and celebration events including the launch of our new two-story indoor showroom,” said Talpey. “While a few others in our industry chose to host large group gatherings, we intentionally opted to err on the side of safety to protect our





customers and staff. However, we are all very much looking forward to re-engaging as soon as it's safe to do so."

### POST-HURRICANE REFLECTIONS

With its three retail locations in Niceville, Destin and Orange Beach, Emerald Coast Marine faced the trauma and tempest wrought by weather. However, the dealership escaped the catastrophic blows suffered by some along the affected Northwest Gulf Coast.

"We had some dock flooding and limited boat damage, but nothing of the scope of some of our fellow industry colleagues," said Talpey. "We reached out to marina owners and retailers to offer assistance where possible, including providing employment opportunities for displaced workers; we are still actively hiring. We also ran a public service campaign with iHeart radio to support boaters who needed access to wet slips,

dry slips, lay-up storage for their vessels or assistance in boat transport."

According to ECMG Vice President Keri Doscher, insurance mediation was an area of great demand.

"We received a flood of calls from customers and the boating public at large who needed expert advice in dealing with insurance and valuation assistance," she said. "We were pleased to be able to step in as a liaison to facilitate insurance issues on behalf of boaters."

Biggest lesson learned?

"We've all been reminded to take every storm seriously and to have a plan ready to roll for every emergency situation," said Talpey. "We highly recommend boaters have a plan in place and a safe harbor designated for their vessel in the case of encroaching hurricane or serious storm conditions."



# WIN



# Win!

## BUYER'S PROGRAM

# THE BEST *Time to Buy* IS NOW!

If You're Considering a New Boat Purchase, Take Full Advantage of Our WIN-Win Buyer's Program.

By Leveraging All Available Manufacturer and Retailer Discounts, Emerald Coast Marine Offers You the SMART WAY to SAVE BIG!

The WIN Win Buyer's Program Offers:

- **BEST PRICING** through volume discounts, manufacturer rebates and incentives!
- **SIGNIFICANT SAVINGS** on inventory interest carrying costs!
- **TOP TRADE-IN** values and tax savings!
- **CUSTOM ORDER CONVENIENCE** ...Pay only for what you want ... not a penny more!
- **INTERIM PLATINUM BOAT CLUB MEMBERSHIP** Featuring **FREE** Initiation fees! Don't miss a minute of boating!



Call today to speak with a Marine Consultant about the WIN Win Buyer's Program and let us show you the savings!  
Program period: October 1, 2020 - February 1, 2021



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Emerald Coast Marine has responded to recent circumstances by launching a smart buyer's program designed to help boaters replace their boats while maximizing seasonal savings.

"Our new Win-Win Buyers Program is designed to provide outstanding savings opportunities for everyone, but we anticipate this will be especially beneficial to boaters impacted by the storm who lost their vessel and are considering replacement options," said Talpey. "We've worked with our manufacturers to leverage outstanding off-season discounts through the end of January to allow customers to order the exact boat of their dreams, built to their specifications. Customers pay only for what they want and not a dime extra. While their boat is in production, we've extended an interim boat club membership and have waived orientation fees, allowing our customers the opportunity to continue enjoying the salt life without missing a beat."

## LOOKING AHEAD

As 2020 closes, it's a chance to reflect on best practices and lessons learned over this remarkable year.

"With the new year hopefully comes new opportunities for coastal businesses to rebuild and to reconnect in meaningful ways with our customers," concluded Talpey.

"If there is one great reminder and revelation from 2020, it's just how much we need to give thanks and value all those people who have supported our business in both the good and the hard times, including our customers and our employees."

