

Last of the small boatbuilders

Amanda Davey

ONCE alive with a burgeoning boatbuilding industry, Sydney can now lay claim to a mere handful of these established enterprises as a result of a mass exodus offshore and up north to the Central Coast and Queensland.

While some of the bigger players have opted to stay put, like the world-renowned McConaghy Boats in Mona Vale, the majority have taken their moulds elsewhere to reduce manufacturing costs and stay viable in a highly competitive global market.

However, servicing the young local contingent since 1980 is Mona Vale's Dinghy Sports, a tenacious little concern that, according to its founder Mark Phillips, is here for the long haul.

"There wouldn't be a kid in Sydney who has learned to sail and who doesn't know about my business.

"Sailing was my hobby and my passion, but now it determines my livelihood," the 53-year-old boatbuilder said.

"I work a 60-hour week in this place but I have no plans to shut up shop or take my moulds to China like everybody else."

Nicknamed "Freddy" by all those who know him, Mr Phillips has weathered several storms over the decades but has managed to stay afloat due to a comfortable monopoly on the racing dinghy market.

He once employed a team of apprentices and produced between 70 and 100 boats a year, but today he says his output is just over a quarter of that.

Now a sole operator, Mr Phillips said it



Mona Vale's Mark "Freddy" Phillips has been a boatbuilder for 30 years and he now specialises in making dinghies for young sailors.

Picture: SIMON DEAN RJC83365

was a case of adapting his business to meet changing market conditions or going under.

"I used to employ trainee boatbuilders, but now I work alone due to the costs associated with employing staff, as well as a general lack of apprentices on the northern beaches."

As the primary manufacturer of a whole host of racing dinghies, Mr Phillips is secure in the knowledge that his only competition is now working alongside him in the Dinghy Sports factory as a separate entity, but necessarily under the same roof.

"I've combined forces with Mark Thorpe

Boatbuilding because of the nature of this industry," Mr Phillips said.

"Mark focuses on Flying 11s and Northbridge Seniors while I build Manly Juniors, Flying Ants and Sabots along with my own designs, the Pittwater Junior, Banacek and the Envy 4.3."

While producing boats for children has its drawbacks - in particular, the fact that parents generally favour the second-hand market unless their child wants to compete at a national level - he says he gets a great deal of joy from "the pride the kids have in their boats".

"On Saturday mornings I invite the kids to come to the factory to see their boat being built.

"I want them to smell the fibreglass and see how boats are made.

"But kids are definitely getting bigger, and that is having a bad effect on some of the classes.

"You have 12-year-olds that are massive and who have literally out-grown their boat, but are not technically ready to move up to the next class."

But it's not the children who present problems for this die-hard boatbuilder.

Mr Phillips said that each class of boat came with its own class association, comprising groups of "well-meaning mums and dads who have the power to modify designs".

"This industry is controlled by these class associations and they have nearly destroyed me a couple of times, but at the end of the day these are the people who organise all the events and without them there would be no kids' sailing.

"But sailing as a sport has levelled off and a lot of clubs are struggling.

"For instance, 20 years ago the Manly Junior national titles had 90 boats competing and that number hasn't increased since," he said.

"I can't understand why.

"It's such a great sport and, like golf and tennis, it can be for life.

"I've been in this game for 30 years and I know everybody and everybody knows me.

"I'm not going anywhere."