



# Clark 530 Centre Console

Alf Stessl is a name well known to Australian fishermen and boatowners, and the brand name Clark goes back some 40 odd years. Throw in the name Haines Marine Industries and you end up with a mix of ingredients that if nothing else, promises to be worth a very close look. Last month, editor Peter Webster did just that, following through on a spate of not dissimilar models from Trailcraft and Stacer.

**A** short history of this model is interesting and important in the scheme of things.

A couple of years ago Alf Stessl bought the rights to the Clark range of boats from Mayfairs Industries. Mayfairs had owned Clark for many years with varying degrees of success, along with Tinka/Redco trailers. They were even the Queensland distributor for Suzuki outboards at one stage.

Clark has always had a commercial edge, and for many years, several of the Clark models were highly regarded in the commercial fishing world as dories, reef line boats, off the

beach mullet boats, and so on.

At the time, Alf was looking to develop a more commercially oriented line to put alongside his Edge Trackers, Trak Rails, Mako's, etc, so the concept had a lot of potential. Mayfairs were pulling out of the marine business, Alf Stessl wanted a commercial boat line, so the deal was done.

But things didn't go too well for Alf in the subsequent 12-18 months, and the whole Stessle business for a while, fell into a big, messy heap.

As everyone now knows, it's taken him that long again to climb back up to the surface and get

weaving again.

As part of that process, and inspired by the Haines Marine Industries Group taking over the Australasian distribution rights for Suzuki outboards, it wasn't long before yet another deal was in the offing.

This time, Alf was looking for a solid, long-term contract to build boats to underpin his other activities and future, whilst the Haines Marine Industries Group were casting around for an aluminium boat builder to co-join their immensely successful Haines Traveler and Haines Signature brands.



This is a big, honest roomy centre console of the kind we've been making for decades. It does feature a more contemporary transom, but it should have a transom door to be right 'on the money'.





**Top Left:** Big hinged hatches open up to reveal very useful underfloor storage. There's enough space in here for the tent, and the poles, the fly - let alone the life jackets! **Top Right:** The Suzi kicks up to reveal a very moderately veed hull, that is easily pushed along very economically in the mid 20's. **Lower Right:** This is a good set-up - and the shelf ledge is off the floor, too.

Yep, once again Alf was in the right place at the right time, and after a couple of months of hard negotiation, Alf emerged with a contract to build the entire Clark range exclusively for Haines Suzuki Marine Pty Ltd, a wholly owned division of the Haines Group.

### Suzuki Branding

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out why the Haines family were concerned about securing an aluminium boat builder who would market the Suzuki range of outboards as an integrated BMT (boat/motor/trailer) package.

Over the last couple of years, there has been a growing trend in the boating industry for engine/boat manufacturer alignments, with the very widely publicised Mariner/Stacer packaging being probably the best known of the independents' packaging exclusively with a single brand outboard.

Savage Aluminium Boats, of course have been packaged with Mercury outboards for several years, but that's a little different in the sense that Mercury Marine owns Savage Aluminium boats. Obviously, Mercury's motivation for buying the Savage brand was to secure transoms for their Mercury and Mariner outboards, so it is hardly surprising that they are mostly

packaged now with one of the two Mercury brands.

For readers wondering about how all this works, it's worth recalling here that the practice of engine manufacturers buying "transoms" (as they put it) or more correctly, buying boat builders, is a phenomenon that's happened around the world for many years.

Indeed, Mercury Marine probably started the trend decades ago when they purchased (initially) Bayliner, before buying SeaRay, Boston Whaler, and so on, to become today (I suspect) easily the biggest "boat builder" in the world with a string of internationally renowned brand names which are wholly owned subsidiaries of the parent company, the Brunswick Corporation.

Not surprisingly then, Mercury have always had an abiding interest in developing the technique in Australia too, hence their purchase of the Savage range of aluminium and fibreglass boats several years ago; their long term development of the Bermuda range of boats (another wholly owned Mercury brand) and the more recent Savage Tropical series.

So with Yamaha owning Southwind, Mercury owning Savage, it's probably easy to understand why Haines Marine, as distributors of Suzuki outboards, were very keen to set up several alignments of their

own – and Clark is obviously the first.

Nevertheless, there is another important distinction here that should be noted. Where Mercury purchased Savage's entire boat building business outright, Haines Marine have stayed at arm's distance from Alf Stessl's operation with a simpler, more independent contract of supply between both parties.

So what we have here, is a centre console produced by Alf Stessl Boats under contract for Haines Suzuki Marine. The craft is subsequently packaged with (mainly) Suzuki outboards, as the principle outboard in the package from a brand – Clark - that has been in and out of the marketplace for nearly four decades.

### Design

The Clark Abalone Centre Console is a 5.3m pressed aluminium fishing boat designated the AF530.

The basic statistics include a length of 5.3m, a beam of 2.35m, a recommended maximum horsepower of 115hp allowing 194kg on the transom and a depth amidships of 1.35m. The bottom thickness is 3mm with 2mm topsides, although 3mm plate sides are available as an optional extra. It's rated for a maximum load of 600kg and an estimated hull weight of 400kg (approx).

In a big picture sense, the AF530 is a pretty good example of a modern pressed tinnie centre console.

It sticks very closely to the established middle ground. There's very little in it that's innovative or particularly different, let alone new.

In some ways it flies in the face of what Alf Stessel is all about, because he's obviously constrained himself with this boat. That would not be easy for a man, dare I say, infamous for his innovation and constant product development.

In this case, Alf has been positively restrained, almost to his peril. In some areas, the Clark is now falling behind some of the new standards we've become used to in boats of this kind.

As regular readers know, in the recent issues of F&B we've had the opportunity of testing some very fine craft, ranging from the Quintrex 650, before that the 455 Quinnie Top Ender, and the Stacer 465 Coral Fisher. In last month's magazine, we wrote in detail about the very striking Trailcraft 4.7 which is nearly as big as this in every sense of the word – and with many features not seen here.

I'm aware that it is 'taboo' in some trade circles to talk about other manufacturers' products in a boat test, but the facts are that this boat sits a notch or two behind some of its competition, and it's not going to take our readers very long to work it out.

So I'd prefer to deal with it upfront and look at the package we have here in comparison to other products that are on the market – thus we can all draw a better perspective of where it sits, what it's worth, what you can expect from it – and contemplate its weaknesses and strengths.

That said, the best part of the boat is the transom – it doesn't have the walk-through that's now becoming a de-facto standard on boats of this kind throughout Australia, but it does have a very good live bait tank, and the transom and outboard well/ledge itself is quite well set up and useful.

I'm aware a lot of readers are very unhappy about these extended 'swallow tail' or 'porto-fino' transoms, because it does make fitting a berley bucket very difficult – and ends up with a berley bucket way out of reach of the crew of the boat unless they get a hernia leaning over the transom to pump the contents into the bucket.

Other features of the transom are more inside – there's a very good shelf across the beam of the boat, providing excellent storage for the battery, the base of the live bait tank and providing a very useful spot for everything ranging from gaffs to

dongers, sinkers etc.

Importantly, the shelf is off the floor too, so the angler can stand right up against the transom and fish secured by his toes under the shelf with his upper thighs against the transom – very comfortable and very practical.

The floor of the Clark AF530 is treated plywood covered in outdoor carpet, typical of just about all of the competitive craft in this class.

It's not a self-draining deck and as we understand it, it is not fitted with bilge pumps as standard equipment. Nor has any real attempt been made to meet the current trend towards either the development of buoyant air chambers (such as Trailcraft or JBS Boats) let alone positive buoyancy along the topsides (etc) as per Quintrex.

Clark are clearly following the line taken by competitive brands such as Ally Craft, Horizon, and Stacer. These manufacturers have decided that until such time as the



much discussed new Small Boat Standard is released in Australia (with some sort of consensus between the boat builders) let alone enacted as legislation, then it's an unwarranted expense for the consumer to tackle something of that nature which may or may not be required!

Frankly, I'm sympathetic to the view, and whilst I respect the Trailcraft and Quintrex policy decisions to step forward now and deal with the issues, one has to haul back and say, "Yes, but hold on, there is not even a consensus on just what the Standard is going to be in the future."

And wait until such time as that consensus emerges from the years of discussion between industry and the powers that be.

Given that discussions of this nature have been ongoing for at least 30 years to the writer's knowledge, and we've yet to see anybody achieve any sort of consensus

about anything to do with boat building, it's not really worth holding your breath waiting for the situation to change, is it?

Nevertheless, the situation does warrant comment if only to make sure boat buyers understand what is going on. Many Quintrex models are now built with flotation to EU (European Union) or ABYC Standards to make them genuinely unsinkable, whilst the likes of Trailcraft and JBS have created their own standards of chamber buoyancy making sure their boats are unsinkable too.

The outcome for all these builders is ultimately similar. All are trying to make their boats unsinkable for you and I – and our families. As a result though, they are all more expensive to buy than boats from the boat builders who have specifically decided NOT to do anything about flotation, or buoyant air chambers, etc, just yet.

**Customer's Choice** In a sense, it really comes back down to fundamental consumerism – there is now a wonderful choice of boats in this class in Australia. If you're really concerned about safety, and you want a boat that is truly unsinkable, then there are several models from some of the top boat builders available off the dealer's showroom floor – but you'll pay quite a bit more for that peace of mind.

Here, no such provision exists – if the Clark springs a leak, or it's caught in a seriously heavy tropical downpour, much less in a serious offshore situation which involves taking a lot of water onboard – then you better make sure you've got a couple of big buckets onboard because apart from an optional bilge pumping system, this boat, like many others in this class, will just go down like the proverbial.

But it is a heck of a lot cheaper package than all of the others that won't. It's a very, very interesting and not to say delicate issue – and one that will not be resolved in the foreseeable future.

**Finish** Giving credit where it's due, the Clark AF530 is right on the money in this department. The paint work is pleasingly lustrous, the craft fitted with an excellent set of bow rails, stern rails and is one of the rare boats we've tested of late with a centre console that is half a chance in terms of its design and optional fold down windscreen – and it does have a windscreen plus two good strong hand rails for the helmsman and/or crew. Full marks.

Again, as we criticised the Trailcraft last month, it would be nice to put 30 or 40 bucks worth of clears over the lower shelves opposite the helmsman's knees,

because it's vitally important (even in the most gung-ho fishing situation) to keep the crew's personal gear, the sangers, the instruction manuals for the GPS and so on somewhere DRY.

In an open boat like this, it only takes one or two trips to ruin all the manuals, and everything in the shelves ends up slowly turning green.

But the console itself is quite well designed and the helm and throttles well set up and positioned.

The seat box itself was just a big tin box that could be used for a variety of functions, and/or with a bit of hard work converted into a decent icechest or kill tank. A couple of plastic rod holders were scattered around the transom area in no particular pattern, but there was no provision for storage of rods or nets, gaffs etc.

Options on the list included plumbing the live bait tank, navigation lights, and an offshore auxiliary outboard bracket on the transom.

**Performance** With the silky smooth Suzuki 90hp on the transom, the AF530 Clark was very pleasant cruising along on a warm summer's morning. The motor is an absolute delight, there's no doubt about that, and from previous fuel consumption trials we've conducted on similar craft we know that the 90 Suzuki will cruise at around xx Lph at 4200 rpm, which translates in the Abalone to 22.5 knots. This projects a notional cruising range of xx nautical miles with the standard xx litre fuel tank. Winding the Suzuki up to full noise pulled 32.9 knots on average, with the prop perfectly pitched to pull 6000rpm exactly, with three of us onboard. You couldn't fault the motor or transom set up, it really is superb.

And for some of our older readers who are still clinging to 2-stroke technology, if you haven't gone out trolling with one of

these new 4-stroke outboards, do yourself a favour and have a run in one of these. It's not hard to arrange a test run these days.

Fair dinkum, you haven't lived until you've gone mackerel fishing with one of these 90-115 Suzukis ticking over in the background so quietly, you can hear the mackerel breaking the surface when they're schooling, let alone slashing and striking on the baits or lures.

Kid you not, it's a whole new technique of fishing – wherein the angler can now actually hear the fish in action, thanks to the quietness and smoothness of these exceptional engines. And of course, all this is happening without the clouds of blue smoke, or the plugs oiling up or the engine shaking its head off as it rattles away on transom.

Having lived with these 4-stroke outboards now for quite a few years, going back to a 2-stroke is inconceivable.

**Handling And Ride** This is a very basic pressed tinnie and it performs exactly as you would expect – if you drive it too quickly it will bang and crash through the water but if you back off, take it slowly and steadily, it'll deliver everything you'd expect from 5 metres of pressed ally tinnie.

It's quite stable, pretty dry and about par with at least half a dozen other hulls on the market.

They've all got the same pressed, very moderate (not to say flat) bottoms at the transom, with the same ribbing and construction system, and the same pressings in the bottom sheets.

All have fairly fussy hydrodynamics off the transom, and many are hard to get clean pictures through from the transducer. However, if you do persevere long enough, and pick the widest gap between the pressings carefully, it is possible to get the transducer running in water that's clean enough to get a picture at 20 knots.

**Trailer** With a hull that weighs around 400kg, a 194kg outboard and sensibly mid sized trailer, this rig will go over the 750kg unbraked size range for a boat trailer. Boats like this are invariably loaded up with the camping gear, the ice chest, the bait etc, and I suspect its working weight will end up more like 800-900kg than 600-700kg.

However, it's a pretty light rig by some standards, and will be easily towed by any of the 2 litre and beyond 4WD's, and/or 2.5 litre and beyond saloons – but don't take those as critical benchmarks. Boats of this kind have very low windage, and are easily towed with quite moderate 2WD vehicles let alone 4WD's.

**Conclusion** I think I'm probably the wrong person to test this boat because I did come away from it with a sense of disappointment and no little frustration.

*Alf Stessl is capable of building a much better boat than this in 2004.*

Similarly, I'm surprised that the Haines Group, an organization that prides itself on the excellence of their generic product, would be interested in packaging something as basic as this.

It's not that there's anything wrong with the Clark AF530, either. It's just that by today's standards, I think boat builders have to do a lot more to win the support of the customer unless that customer is intentionally seeking a very low priced, entry level, BMT package.

Now if that is the case, and you don't want the extras that you'll find in other competitive craft (for more cost) then this is a very honest boat.

It's also a hull configuration that is true blue, having been tried and proven over the last 25 years or so that Alf Stessl has been building boats exactly like this.

**F&B**