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**BUSINESS** MONDAY

## VERTICAL SOLUTIONS

Aqua Marine Partners develops new technology that could greatly expand marine space in slip-starved South Florida

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A tap on the touch screen set the laser-guided crane in motion, gliding on steel rails across the ceiling at The Port Marina, where large boats were stacked four to a rack in above-ground slips.

In a three-minute crawl to slip 124, the crane stopped, turned and positioned a padded cradle under the belly of Andrew Sturner's 37-foot cruiser.

A sudden grunt and the 16,000-pound yacht was airborne, suspended 80 feet above ground, ready to be lowered into an aisle of water below.

The setup responsible for the aerial feat is called the Vertical Yacht System, developed by Sturner's Aventura-based company Aqua Marine Partners a year ago. Using cranes to stack boats several stories high, Sturner believes, could revolutionize the way boats are stored in dry docks around the world.

Pinched by the scarcity and rising cost of marina space, the industry is looking for answers in new technology to make the best use of waterfront property. But bridge crane systems are hardly new. Found in warehouses, factories and construction sites, they use hoists to move heavy loads along runways made of beams and rails.

Applied to boat storage, the overhead bridge crane lets marina owners expand their dry dock facilities to almost unlimited heights.

That is no small innovation in slip-starved South Florida, where marina



**GOING UP:** Owner Andrew Sturner stands inside The Port Marina, a dry dock marina in Fort Lauderdale. It has an operating prototype of a new bridge crane system used to lift boats higher out of the water than older systems were capable of doing in order to stack the boats in taller rows in the dry dock.

space has largely been swept away in the tide of residential development. By allowing them to build up, the system can help marina owners milk more money from their property and avoid selling out to condo developers.

### EARLIER RESTRICTIONS

Mechanical limitations have largely kept dry dock marinas from expanding skyward. Typically, owners use diesel-powered forklifts to remove boats from the water and stack them. The vehicles, though, lose their lifting capacity after they reach a certain height. And, their ability to lift the heaviest boats is minimal.

"We realized a long time ago that we needed to go up," said Frank Herhold, executive director of the 800-member Marine Industries Association of South Florida.

Sturner says his Vertical Yacht System eliminates aisle space needed by forklifts to maneuver, increasing by up to 11 percent the number of boats that can be stored in the same facility.

"By going vertical, I had lower operating costs, which ultimately allows me to have a more profitable business so I can afford to stay a marina," he said.

The man who would revolutionize marinas comes to the industry relatively late in his career. A lifelong boat enthusiast from New Jersey, Sturner, 42, is a bankruptcy attorney by training with a record of launching successful start-ups.

He sold an interactive audio text development company he'd founded to MovieFone in 1994. A year later, he

was one of the first executives hired at Internet sports media company SportsLine.com, in business development.

### **TAKING A CHANCE**

Seeing opportunity in the marine industry, he resigned from SportsLine. He moved to Aventura when the Hi-Lift Marina and Formula dealership went up for sale and started Aqua Marine Partners. The company combines a marina development firm, a Formula retail boat dealership and brokerage. Last year, he hooked up with developer Chris Rosenberg, who had come upon the crane technology created by Tennessee architect/contractor Bill Maffett. Sturner and Rosenberg formed Vertical Yacht Club Development to expand the concept.

The centerpiece of Aqua Marine Partners is a \$20 million expansion of Hi-Lift, which will be renamed Vertical Yacht Club Thunder Alley. Located on the small, legendary peninsula where Florida's speedboat industry was born, Sturner's marina will house 211 boats and include a club where every nautical need is met – from boat provisioning to mechanical services, and from brokerage and sales to tour guides and red carpet valet service. The facility will have a spa, business center and café.

Using the Vertical Yacht System, it will also stack boats nine stories tall. The prospect of a tall building at first concerned Aventura city commissioners, whose opposition led Sturner's company to withdraw its request for a zoning variance to approve the building. After scaling down the building's height from 120 feet to 90 feet, the city approved the expansion last year.

### **BRANCHING OUT**

Sturner has big plans for expanding his Vertical Yacht System in marinas throughout Florida and

### ***Meet Andrew Sturner***

- **Job:** CEO, Vertical Yacht Club Development; chairman, Passport Marine; president and CEO, Aqua Marine Partners in Aventura.
- **Age:** 42
- **Born:** Matawan, NJ
- **Education:** B.S., Washington University in St. Louis; law degree, Brooklyn Law School.
- **Family:** Wife, Sherry; two young children.
- **Other experience:** Sold interactive voice response company to MovieFone in 1994; founding executive of SportsLine.com.
- **Favorite Toys:** Formula 400 Super Sport boat, snow skis, BlackBerry.

the southeastern United States. The company will next start working on The Vertical Yacht Club Marina Mile in Fort Lauderdale, where the crane system will be strengthened to lift boats 75-feet long, weighing up to 100,000 pounds to heights of more than 100 feet.

"That has never been done before," Sturner said.

Aqua Marine Partners is currently partnering with a marina owner in Georgia who is able to build a facility on a graded hillside using the new bridge crane system, something else that was impossible with a forklift.

A crucial marketing opportunity is this week's Miami International Boat Show, where Aqua Marine

Partners will begin selling Thunder Alley club memberships. Starting price: \$130,000. At the Port Marina in Fort Lauderdale, all but eight of the 129 rack spaces – rackominiums – have been sold.

### **SEVERAL BENEFITS**

Sturner ticks off the system's selling points: In addition to pumping up the bottom line, the system is cleaner, safer and quieter.

"Forklifts emit soot and grease, which gets on the boats. They can do damage to the hull. It's called rack rash, when the bottom gets scraped up. The new lift cradle has cushions to protect the hull." Being quieter than forklifts is important, he said, because many marine facilities are nestled in neighborhoods.

Herhold said the importance of the Vertical Yacht System could not be understated, for coastal areas around the country, but especially in South Florida, famous as the world's boating capital.

"The development will enable the area to continue to provide water access to thousands of boaters," he said.