

Raas at his home in Maui, where he regularly paddles and races in the Pacific Ocean on his outrigger canoe – “a multihull, of course”



DRIVING THE CAT PACK

Lex Raas of US-based MarineMax has spent the past decade driving the global popularity of powercats with Aquila. It's the South African's latest industry-shaking move, having also helped create Leopard Catamarans and led the rapid growth of charter multihulls with The Moorings during a 50-year career in building boats.

INTERVIEW JOHN HIGGINSON PHOTOS AQUILA

How did your boating journey around the world begin?

I grew up in South Africa, moved to France, then moved to the US, France and US again, and spend much of the year in Hawaii. We've dragged our kids through three continents, which has been fun and good for everybody, I believe.

I've been in the boating game all my life, really. My dad was really into sailing and racing, so I grew up sailing and skiff rowing in South Africa. I dropped out of school and started building boats, building my first trimaran when I was 15. I'm now 65, so I've spent the last 50 years in the industry!

I went to college for a while and sort of finished up school, but didn't enjoy it, so went back to building boats. My wife and I had a factory with about 80 staff. We were building small production sailboats, based on Quarter Ton Cup and Half Ton Cup, and I was also racing. In the early 1980s, we became the South Africa importer for Beneteau and that went so well that we shut down our own factory.

In 1984, sanctions were taking effect, there was a recession and by 1985 the exchange rates divided by three, so it was 'game over' for importing boats. One of my kids had finished high school, one was close and the other two were young, so it was time to think what we should do as a family. I saw the challenges in the future in South

Africa for my kids. I reached out to Beneteau and they said I'd have a job with them as soon as I got to France. I didn't even have it in writing, but we took the kids over to France.

Tell us about your time at Beneteau, which involved more big moves.

At that time, Beneteau was setting up its operation in the US (in Marion, South Carolina). I was about nine months into my job in France when they asked if I wanted to move to the States and I said, let's go. A lot of my job was almost Americanising the brand, so I got to learn a lot about the American market. There were significant differences, although there are less today.

I was CEO of Beneteau USA for a short while, then they asked me to take charge of the entire development office in France, so I went back and spent the last year-and-a-half of my eight years with Beneteau in this role. In those days, Beneteau was the trend-setter by a long shot, so it was a really cool role.

What led to the move to The Moorings?

I was selling Beneteau boats to The Moorings, so got to know them really well. Because my kids were in high school and university, we



The Aquila 32 Sport has been relaunched in 2021 with an extended hull, fixed swim platform, upgraded seating configuration and new hardtop

wanted to go back to the US and The Moorings offered me a job in 1994. It was a more junior position, Logistics Director, which I've done a couple of times when moving companies – take a step down but look up at where we can go. I eventually became CEO and later oversaw the merger with Sunsail. I was with them until 2010, just after the global economic meltdown.

What led to the production of Leopard catamarans at Robertson & Caine in South Africa?

When I joined The Moorings, I oversaw purchasing the boats, specs and customer service. The Moorings had six or seven French-built catamarans. I had always been a bit of a multihull guy and thought catamarans was the way to go. At that point, there was only a handful of catamarans in the Caribbean and I surveyed people who used them. Fundamentally, they loved catamarans, but they didn't like certain aspects like the galley being below deck, the traveller in the cockpit and engines too small for when they wanted to motor upwind.

I realised catamarans were the future of charter, made a presentation to build some new designs and got the go-ahead from the Executive Committee. Then they asked, who's going to build them? I needed to find a builder, but nobody was interested. I approached the

big catamaran builders in France, but they wouldn't make the changes I wanted, which included a big platform at the back, traveller on the top and a lot of other things that are normal on catamarans today.

In the end, I called up my buddy John Robertson in South Africa, where we had built some racing boats together and asked him if he was interested in building some cats. We talked and that's how it started. The Moorings placed an order for 18 Leopards. We launched the Moorings 4500 (Leopard 45) in 1997 and it won Boat of the Year straight out of the block and the huge growth in catamarans in The Moorings began. We went from cats making up a few per cent of our fleet to 60 per cent by the time I left in 2010. Sailing cats had been super niche, but now they're mainstream.

So, what led to the power catamarans?

That's a fun story as well. At The Moorings, we started a power charter business called Nautic Blue. We bought some monohull motor yachts because we thought powerboat owners wouldn't even think of power catamarans – there were no powercats back then. However, we had a lot of issues with reliability, props, shafts, because they just weren't built for charter. The interesting thing is that the boat would break down and we'd tell the customers they could use a sailing cat, but

“I've worked for the world's biggest sailboat builder, the world's biggest charter company and now the world's biggest boat retailer – and all have been incredible to work with.”

don't put up the sails – just drive it. Then guys were coming back, saying, 'Wow, we're back next year! This is the best vacation we've had.' And that was all because they'd been on a catamaran. So, then we just converted the sailboat hulls, added to a flybridge, and that's how Leopard powercats started in 2005.

We changed the name Nautic Blue to Moorings Power. We originally chose Nautic Blue, a different brand, because we thought powerboaters and sailors don't really mix, but that was rubbish. They do mix because they all just want to have a good time in the Caribbean. By the end of 2010, after 16 years, I left on a one-year non-compete clause and then started working for MarineMax.

How did joining MarineMax lead so quickly to Aquila?

We started MarineMax Vacations and Aquila at pretty much the same time. As MarineMax is a powerboat company, we decided to focus on building powercats because there were already a lot of sailing cats in the Caribbean and Leopard were the only real powercats. I was lucky to have the support of Bill McGill, co-founder and then-CEO, and also the father of current CEO Brett McGill.

We asked quite a few builders, but each said they didn't see a future for powercats, so there I was again, looking for a builder. This time, we approached Sino Eagle because they had built some Leopards, so there was a relationship. I called Frank Xiong of Sino Eagle and put him together with Bill McGill and we started Aquila, with MarineMax placing some orders.

LEX RAAS, PRESIDENT, AQUILA

Raas is co-founder and President of Aquila Power Catamarans, a collaboration between MarineMax and Sino Eagle (*Aquila* is Latin for eagle). Born in South Africa, he owned a sailboat manufacturing facility before becoming a local dealer for Beneteau. From

1986-1994, Raas worked for Beneteau, firstly as Technical Commercial Manager in France, then in the US heading Customer Service and Engineering before becoming CEO of Beneteau USA, and again in France as Director of Design. In 1994, Raas began 16 years with The Moorings charter company in the US, instigating the production of Leopard catamarans at Robertson & Caine in South Africa. Initially Director of Logistics, he was promoted to VP of Operations in 1997 and CEO in 2001 and oversaw the company's merger with Sunsail. In January 2012, Raas joined MarineMax as President of Charter and Special Initiatives.



The 32 (left) is currently Aquila's entry-level Sport model; also a Sport model, the hugely popular Aquila 36 (right) is available in multiple versions



The Aquila 36 Sport quickly became one of the best-selling motor yachts in the US in its size sector, challenging some of the world's most famous international yacht brands



Among the brand's Yacht flybridge range featuring inboard engines, the Aquila 44 has been the brand's best-selling model, although the Aquila 36 is fast catching up

On both occasions (starting Leopard and Aquila), if I hadn't really believed in what I was doing, it could easily have not happened. However, I've been very fortunate in having great support each time. I've worked for the world's biggest sailboat builder, the biggest charter boat business, now I work for the biggest boat retail business and all of them had incredible people to work with.

I could never have done what I've done without these people and CEOs like Bill McGill, who supported me even when there was a lot of opposition in the industry and sometimes internally. They've all changed their minds now. And I'm still here at MarineMax, heading development at Aquila and keeping the relationship with Sino Eagle on a strong footing.

How did Aquila grow from building powercats for MarineMax Vacations?

I need to emphasise that the charter business is *such* a small piece of Aquila. We've probably only got about 20 or so boats in the MarineMax Vacations fleet, so charter is a tiny piece of our business compared to other catamaran builders. The Aquila boats were really developed as private boats and adapted a bit for charter, the opposite to some other brands. What I quickly realised when I joined MarineMax is there is no better company to sell boats. They are amazing, ultra-professional. They have everything covered for a boat owner.

I always say, no stool stands on one leg. To have a successful business model in the boating industry, you need three legs: innovation, distribution and manufacturing. If any of those aren't

working, it's not a long-term play. We've used J&J Design from the beginning and now we've expanded to other designers because we're moving into different segments of the industry.

Which models and features have established Aquila's reputation?

The 44 Yacht was the first boat of that size with a full-beam master cabin, so that was a real breakthrough. The forward stairs from the flybridge to the foredeck became part of our DNA for the inboard boats and it's so practical, so you see it on the new 54 Yacht and 70 Luxury.

Innovation is sometimes taking two good ideas and making them into a great idea. Quite often, a lot of the things I did, I wouldn't say it was completely my idea. Probably someone has already done it, but they didn't do the other three things that connected to it and brought it all together.

The aft bar connecting the cockpit and the galley was new when we started but is common now. Because you have so much room on cats, you need to create different places to hang out.

Another feature I like is our steps from the swim platform. They're high but if you turn around, you'll see they're big enough to use as seats and face the water. We have almost stadium seating at the back of the boat.

For our bigger boats, we have bulbs at the front of the hulls. Cats have quite narrow bows and carry a lot of weight due to the flybridge and hardtop. For example, the 44 is a relatively short boat with a lot of height. If you're going into chop, the bulb creates an enormous amount



As shown on the Aquila 44 Yacht, the brand's signature features include the cockpit bar connected to the aft galley (left) and the high platform steps (right) that double as seats



The forward stairs from the flybridge to the cockpit are another signature Aquila feature, shown on both the 44 Yacht (left) and the new 54 Yacht (right)

of additional buoyancy, which dampens the motion, so all our inboard yachts have bulbs.

Our next most popular boat was the 36, a fast outboard with two cabins; it's like a crossover with motor yachts. It created a completely new position in the market and took a lot of market share against established monohull yacht brands in the US. We can't build them fast enough.

We recently created the Cruiser version by adding aft sliding doors so you can enclose the saloon. We now have three versions: the real sporty version with the low windscreen; the full-height windscreen with the back open, which I call 'semi-sport'; and now the full windscreen with sliding door, like a proper cabin cruiser.

What has been the feedback to the underwater Hydro Glide Foil System developed by Morrelli & Melvin, first made available on the Aquila 36 Sport?

It's amazing how much take-up we've had. It has been chosen on about a third of the orders since it has been available. It works amazingly well and improves efficiency and ride. It's more foil assist than really foiling.

To get the same speed as twin 300hp engines and the foil, you'd put on twin 400hps and no foil. Both would reach the upper 40s in mph, but the 300s offer better economy because most of the time people are running the boats at 35-37mph (30-32 knots). With the foil, you've got 35 per cent more range or efficiency at those speeds. That's massive.

The foil has less depth than the props so you can beach the boat.

They're really, really strong. We're putting them on the 44, where the efficiency or range improves by about 18 per cent and the ride is notably better because the foil lifts the boat so there's more tunnel clearance.

It has been used on ferries all over the world. Foils are now on surfboards, catamarans, America's Cup, SailGP, so are becoming more common. It's an exciting period and we've got a solid programme for foils, although the market is only starting to get ready for it. Bill [McGill] pushes me hard on it as he believes it's the future and Frank [Xiong] at Sino Eagle is all for it. It'll be part of Aquila's DNA, for sure, and will be an option on most boats. We'll lead the production builders in the use of these foils. I really think it's going to take off.

How are sales of the one-cabin Aquila 32 Sport, which was recently reintroduced after replacing the wraparound platform with an extended hull and fixed central platform?

Sales are picking up like crazy right now. The wraparound platform worked fine and it's on quite a few boats, but it was really an issue with cost. It was quite a significant option on a relatively small boat and added weight to an area where people were already putting twin 300hp engines.

The challenge is that the 32 may often have the same engines as the 36 and many people simply choose to pay the extra money to get an extra cabin, extra toilet, more space. Most times we lose a 32 sale to a 36, not to another brand, which is fine for us. Sales are not as

The new Aquila 54 Yacht features an innovative crane that's concealed in the flybridge overhang, extends to lift the tender then further aft to put it in the water





Officially premiered in 2021, the Aquila 54 Yacht features a cockpit bar connected to the open aft galley and the option of a main-deck master suite

strong as the 36, but I'm confident the 32 will do well as there's now more separation on price – we needed to keep the price 'lanes' further apart.

Moving to the other end of your range, why did you launch the first units of the 54 Yacht and the new flagship 70 Luxury at the same time?

By accident! The 70 was designed and developed a long time before the 54. We did a lot of surveys because we had to see how to differentiate the 70 from the competitors out there. A lot of motor yacht owners and buyers were interested in large powercats but didn't like the 'squared-off' look and wanted something sleeker and sexier. They also wanted speed more like a monohull motor yacht of that size, so the 70 is a relatively narrow powercat. It was also intended to be semi-production, maybe a couple of units a year, with a flexible interior, really high-end furniture and equipment, carbon-fibre bulkheads and so on.

Our 48 had not been as successful in the private market as the 44, so we had a big gap between the 44 and 70, and the 54 fits right in. The 54 is a production boat and the beam-to length ratio is more like the 44 and cats by other traditional catamaran builders. We started developing the 54 much later than the 70 but we got so interested in the 54 that we fast-tracked its development. The 70's launch was slowed down because of this and it just so happened the first units came out at the same time.

Have you been surprised by sales of the 54? They're astonishing for a big new boat.

It's crazy. I've never known a boat sell so well even before it has been shown. The 54 follows the looks of the 70 even though it's almost as wide (it has a 25ft 2in beam compared to 26ft 11in on the 70). It's a very high-volume boat with the option of three, four or five cabins, so there's flexibility in the design. The forward full-beam master suite is a massive thing. J&J did a magnificent job.

It also has a really cool crane system that I designed with J&J and uses Harken sailboat equipment. The crane slides aft out of the flybridge to attach to the dinghy, extends to put the dinghy in the water, then retracts. It keeps the boat looking clean. The 70 has a central platform that tilts like a slipway, which is quicker but uses up length, which we can afford on the 70 but not the 54.

Can you also talk about how Aquila has grown since 2017 from being a US-centric brand to becoming genuinely global including growing sales in Asia, where Simpson Marine is among dealers?

Yvan Eymieu has done a really good job since becoming International Sales and Distribution Manager in 2017. Business is about people. I knew Yvan from The Moorings, managed to convince him to join us and he's been stellar. I've been asking him what he's eating because we need to share it!

He has pushed us hard in certain areas to consider his markets. On



The Aquila 54 Yacht's optional full-beam master suite (left) is forward of the saloon; the model has multiple accommodation layouts including three, four and five cabins



Aquila's new flagship 70 Luxury features a purpose-built 14ft tender (left) that's stored in the central platform (see below); the interior (right) features Natuzzi furniture from Italy

the 54, we have a full Asian layout, on the 70 we have a full Asian layout which is also somewhat European with the galley below, so there's a much more open saloon. There are now a range of layouts ready to go.

Interestingly, when he was first setting up the international network, he was looking at catamaran dealers, then we all realised we should be working with motor yacht dealers and positioning ourselves differently. Look at MarineMax itself, for starters, which is selling Azimut, Galeon and Aquila. As well as catamaran lovers, we're also appealing to monohull motor yacht owners.

Some people were worried about a new catamaran brand, but if I hear of someone else building catamarans, I'm like, 'bring it on', because I believe there's room for all of us. Catamarans are just starting. The more people marketing catamarans, the better for all of us and it'll drive all of us to keep building better boats.

Your son Jean is CEO of Sino Eagle's US office, while Alain was appointed Aquila's Brand Manager last year. How is it working with your sons – and do you have any other family working with you?

Ha ha – we have another son, David, and a daughter who's a doctor. Jean and David used to work at The Moorings with me, then David moved into marketing and has his own company.

Last year, we were looking for a Brand Manager and Alain said he was interested, so I suggested he speak to Dave Bigge, our VP of International Sales. He said, wow, he'll be perfect. I didn't hire Alain, but I'm proud he's onboard. Working with family can be a double-edged sword, but people know I'm tougher on family than others.

Alain reports to Dave Bigge, while Jean is part of Sino Eagle, so

he reports to Frank Xiong. It's pretty cool to be able to work with two of my sons. I don't know how many more years I'll keep doing this, so hopefully they can take over some of my work!

How do you feel looking back at what you've achieved, particularly in the catamaran sector?

The true success of Leopard and now Aquila have been due to the management executives at the various times to support my vision, even though it seemed 'right field' to most industry folk at those times. Right from racing rowing boats at school, racing sailboats later and the 50 years I've spent developing boats and in executive positions at marine companies, I've recognised you need the right people around you to get to the top.

While my vision may seem related to the product, that's only a third of what I focus on with a new brand. As mentioned, the other two are distribution and manufacturing, and they're more difficult to establish. You need all three to succeed.

For Aquila, we now have one of the best boat factories in the world with the Xiong family, MarineMax as distributors in the US led by Brett McGill, and the amazing work that Yvan [Eymieu] has done in setting up an international dealer network that represents the best in their markets. It has been truly a remarkable result in the few years that Aquila has existed.

It has taken a village of amazing folk to get to where we are today, building 14ft to 70ft pure power catamarans. And the cool thing is, we're only getting started. ☺

www.aquilaboats.com
www.simpsonmarine.com



The platform and aft steps on the Aquila 70 Luxury (cover and Review, Issue 59) create 'stadium seating', where guests can spend time overlooking and playing in the water