

BRETT & LEONIE: STAGE 3

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Most people think only B-train behind a dirt motor unit is a standard combination for the Brett Marsh Transport fleet. Kenneth is the dominant brand, and it likely to become even more so as older units than other brands are retired. Brett Marsh Motor logo was derived by the fleet drivers and shows the shape of a reversed Mack CL.





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RETT AND LEONIE MARSH HAVE HAD THE TRANSPORT industry tiger by the tail for close on 25 years.

And it's been quite a ride, characterised by the couple's close relationship – in which constant communication is paramount – a hands-on management style, and an ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

The journey so far has fallen into three broad phases. There was a modest startup, followed by steady growth...and culminating in a profitable sale.

Phase two involved buying an existing company and growing it very quickly, before being caught up in the backwash of the Global Financial Crisis and forced to retrench to a single-truck fleet.

The current cycle has seen strong regrowth, underpinned by a more conservative approach – a key element of which has been the acquisition of used trucks to cater for increased workloads.

Now, say the Marshes, it's time for a stabilisation phase, in which the fleet's size is likely to stay consistent, and replacement vehicles will be bought new.

Brett Marsh Transport currently runs 23 units, the majority



The Marshes married 26 years ago, but first met a good time before that – as kids. Spectacularly-restored Mack CL is Brett's toy, sneaks past his love affair with Kenworths "because it's a V8"

of them based at a purposebuilt facility in the industrial area at Tauriko, just south of Tauranga. The two-year-old, 1000-square-metre building sits on a 5200sq m site and incorporates offices, workshop, wash bay and a covered freight-loading area, attached to which a new warehouse/storage facility is nearing completion. The Marshes plan to lease this to one of their clients.

Both could be said to have trucking in their blood. Leonie's father had a carrying business at Te Puna, picking up cream cans from dairy farms in the area and delivering them to the local dairy factory.

She grew up in that environment...but it certainly wasn't a natural precursor to a career in the transport industry, she laughs delightedly: "No, I left school at 15 and became a checkout operator at the local Four Square supermarket!"

For Brett it was more of a classic progression. His father Dave was a trucker from way back, and as far as Brett was concerned that was all he wanted to do as well: "I was always getting pulled up at school for gazing out of the window at the trucks going by," he recalls, "and as soon as I could I left and got my heavy licence."

The qualification under his belt, the 17-year-old left home at Maungatapu and shifted to Whangarei to drive for United Carriers. Then it was back to the Bay for about four years with Dawe & Sons in Katikati, followed by a

short spell working for his father.

At the time Dave Marsh was running two trucks, distributing bulk molasses cattle food supplement for Agri-feeds out of Mount Maunganui to dairy farms around the North Island. The tractor units were hooked to bulk tankers carrying the warmed liquid molasses. Some months down the track, Dave sold one of the trucks to Brett, just 22 years old at time – and not long married to Leonie.

The two had known each other since they were around nine, Leonie explains: "My elder sister got married and shifted to Maungatapu and Brett was a neighbour. I got to know him when I visited her. We stayed in touch and became sweethearts as teenagers."

The truck Brett had bought was an old W-model Kenworth that had previously belonged to Forest Products. With it he took on linehaul freight work under contract to Trailways, among the jobs carting sawn timber off Matakana Island.

On long and inter-island runs, at night he would simply hang towels up on the windows and stretch out across the front seats to sleep. He recalls that the old truck wasn't tops in performance: "It was capable of just 80km/h, flat-out! It made for a long, long overnight trip to Wellington, loaded to the gunwales with tarped-down freight."

Two of the Brett Marsh Transport units are dedicated to supply runs for Foodstuffs, and are decked out in the client's colours



The molasses work was expanding, but Dave didn't want to take on too much more, so after some time the young Marshes came back into that line of work.

"It grew from there," recalls Leonie, then corrects herself: "Not just grew...it went mad!"

The W-Model meanwhile had been repainted a pale blue, but the couple now painted any new trucks in a similar black scheme to the one Dave had been using, but with a different striping treatment.

Over the next decade and a half – and in response to the upturn in dairy farming – the business grew to 12 units, distributing the molasses all over the North Island. They also had two trucks based in Christchurch to service the booming Canterbury area.

Then, in August 2007, bulk fluid transport rival BR & SL Porter made an offer to buy them out....which they accepted.

But, after 17 years of non-stop work and ploughing every bit of profit back into growing the business, the couple didn't know what to do with themselves, explains Leonie.

"Brett nearly went mad. We'd always worked, always been in debt, and now here we were – cashed-up, with nothing to do."

They built a new house at Te Puna and Leonie threw herself into a spectacular (and ongoing) landscaping project on the large hillside section. They looked at several business opportunities, but none got them excited, so in the end, they went back to what they

knew. Brett had heard that Thomas Transport in Paengaroa was selling its general freight operation, and a deal was struck – the couple back in business with a six-unit fleet by April 2008.

However, they soon found out that it wasn't just a matter of slipping back into a familiar routine, says Leonie: "Even though our time away had been quite short, in the interval fuel prices had shot up...and the type of work was quite different.

"With the molasses, the cows didn't really care what time of the morning you turned up, and we had essentially the one client. The freight business was quite a lot more complicated."

The Thomas fleet comprised mainly Ivecos, with some Kenworths. It was finished in a dark green colour scheme, but Brett and Leonie already had the livery for their new enterprise sorted by the time the sale was completed. Leonie admits that the design was a straight lift: "I saw pictures of an Australian fleet, Don Watson Transport, and thought that would work perfectly. I showed it to Brett and after a bit of convincing he liked the idea."

The design uses pale blue below and white above, with broadly curving blue stripes set into the white, and the stripes keylined in navy and orange. The Brett Marsh Transport logo that adorns the truck doors in the sides of the truck and trailer bodies were designed in consultation with Marty's High Performance Signs of Mount Maunganui. A hint of Brett's love affair



At a glance you'd hardly tell that the Marsh trucks were all bought secondhand. Presentation and condition is outstanding

There are several other Freightliners in the fleet, in addition to this FLB. They've given good service, but are coming close to retirement.



The 904 began life with Total Transport in 2000 and the Marshes picked it up when it had close to a million kilometres under its wheels

with Kenworths is captured in the vertical stripes of the design, echoing those in the truckmaker's logo.

He's happy to admit he's a total fan of the brand: "They're tough and reliable, and the drivers love them too. When they get on a bit they're easy to rebuild. The 904 we've got has been fitted with a brand-new engine and gearbox – it's like a new truck."

The 904 began life with Total Transport in 2000 and the Marshes picked it up when it had close to a million kilometres under its wheels.

The Ivecos picked up in the Thomas Transport sale were fairly quickly replaced by new Kenworth cabovers and within three years the fleet was up to around 13 units. One of the major contracts carried over consisted of carting export and hanging meat from AFFCO's four North Island plants. To back up the expansion in this area, several chiller trailers were ordered from the likes of Fairfax and MaxiTRANS.

During this period, a relationship was established with

AF Logistics (Foodstuffs Wellington) to service North Island supermarkets, the work often providing backloads to the meat cartage. Carrying produce like kiwifruit and avocados from the Bay of Plenty and chiller work for Dairy Transport Logistics (Fonterra) were other lines of work that Brett Marsh Transport became involved in at the time.

But tough times were around the corner. In 2009 came every trucking company's nightmare scenario – a young company driver died after his truck crashed off SH1 into Lake Taupo, a subsequent coroner's inquest revealing he had cannabis and methamphetamine in his system.

The Marshes fall quiet when they recall the tragedy, and the effect it had on the other drivers. It reinforced once again the need for a total commitment to the most rigorous standards in the area of drug use, they say.

Then in 2010 came the GFC and local recession. Work shrunk, fuel prices rose sharply, and – caught without cover on fuel surcharges – the company was struggling.

"The previous operators often can't believe the work we put into them and how they look when we finish sprucing them up"



Brett and Leonie sold several of the newer trucks to owner/drivers to service the AF Logistics (now Foodstuffs North Island) work, giving themselves some breathing-space capital, and reducing their truck ownership to just one vehicle.

It was a tough time, but the pair are philosophical: "Doors close, doors open," comments Leonie.

"It's the way things go. You just try to learn from each circumstance, and adapt. We learnt some lessons then that have helped us since."

A key strategy of the post-recession approach has been to minimise exposure to downturns by buying used trucks. The couple have found that by keeping a close eye on what comes up for sale and remaining selective, good value can be found. In several cases the acquisitions have had new engines fitted and have been brought right up to date before being put up for sale.

For those whose value has been in their price, rather

than condition, the standard procedure has been to bring them up to spec as soon as possible. This might mean a crate engine or other drivetrain updates – at the least it's a full new paint job, making the newcomers look as smart as the rest of the fleet.

As Brett comments: "The paint job alone has sometimes been close to half what we paid for the truck."

Adds Leonie: "The previous operators often can't believe the work we put into them and how they look when we finish sprucing them up."

Working alongside Marty's High Performance Signs in effecting the transformations has been another longterm associate in the form of Te Puke's Peake Panel & Paint, which looks after all the fleet's painting.

Adding to the strength of the approach, says Brett, has been great buy-in from the company drivers, who are given quite free rein to personalise their trucks and are consequently proud of the image they project: "We've got



The couple's first truck was this W-Model Kenworth (*above*) which helped out Brett's father with his molasses work for Agri-feeds, as well as general linehaul for Trailways. Later, when the molasses work grew, a black colour scheme was adopted – as on this 2001 Western Star 4964FX (*opposite page*)

a wonderful bunch of drivers. I couldn't ask for better. They really contribute to the culture of the company."

There's an example of this sort of contribution in one of the used K108s, bought from a ChemCouriers operator. The truck's interior is borderline OTT, all chrome and red pintucked vinyl, every minor gauge surrounded by an eyelidded binnacle. Brett reckons that there's quite a lot of competition between the drivers to see who has the shiniest setup....and sometimes they even have to be reined in a bit.

So buying used obviously hasn't detracted from internal morale. And Leonie especially believes the company couldn't have achieved the turnaround of the past four years without following that path: "I can't see the sense of a brand-new unit running down the road but not making any money. Brett and I have always been slightly at odds over this question, because he has more of a preference for new.

"There's the R&M on a used truck, sure, but new ones have their costs as well. Something can go wrong a year or so down the track and you find it's out of warranty. Then there are costs like insurance, which are tied to the capital value of the unit.

"It's not how everybody might want to run a trucking business, but at the end of the day, if you're worried about what everybody else is doing you'll get nowhere."

The rapid growth in the work handled by the company – and consequently the size of the fleet – has also partly been tied to the purchasing strategy, she explains: "What has happened is, we'll buy a newer truck, with the idea of replacing one of the older ones. But then, because the replaced unit is not worth much on the market and is carrying an expensive paint job that's no value to anyone else, we decide to hang onto it.

"However, Brett hates to see a truck sitting idle in the yard, so he'll go out and find some work for it...and

The near-new depot facility has undercover areas for loading/unloading



“I see around 25 units as a fleet size I'd not like to go beyond. Anything bigger I reckon could get too awkward to handle”

before you know it the fleet has grown again!”

Both agree that phase is coming to a close. Brett reckons the current fleet size feels about right: “This last period of expansion has been mainly via existing customers giving us more work. If anything, we're now close to the point of turning work down.”

That said, he admits his feeling is not in line with any grand strategic vision for the company: “I've never had a master plan. The bank manager frowns at me for not having one, but we've just taken things as they've come.”

However, he reckons new truck acquisitions from now on will likely be new models on a replacement basis: “The five Freightliners we're running are getting on a bit, and due for retirement.

“I see around 25 units as a fleet size I'd not like to go beyond. Anything bigger I reckon could get too awkward to handle.”

And their replacements will be Kenworths, in line with his preference for a one-brand fleet.

That vision is still a way short of realisation. The current lineup, though centred on 12 Kenworth K104 and

K108 Aerodynes, also includes the Freightliners, a T904 Kenworth conventional, two Western Stars, one Mack, an Isuzu and an MAN.

These last two, painted in Pak 'n' Save yellow, are dedicated to Foodstuffs work. The MAN, a 540, runs to Auckland daily and picks up a load for distribution to supermarkets in Kawerau, Whakatane, Rotorua and Tauranga.

The fleet contains half a dozen combinations of eight-wheeler trucks with five-axle trailers, five four-axle tractor units with quad trailers, plus seven six-wheeler tractor units towing six-axle B-trains and running under HPMV permits.

The HPMV rigs take advantage of both cube and weight, depending on the cargo.

Trailer stock is primarily curtainsiders, some of them chiller units, backed up by a couple of remaining hardsided chillers. Brett says there's no real preference for trailer suppliers, the company having bought in the past from TMC, Roadmaster and Domett.

New overlength H-permit B-train trailers from



A flashback to the Marshes' successful molasses tanker era. There are two Western Stars in the current fleet lineup

Roadmaster and TMC have been put on the road recently, while around 18 months ago a couple of the older trailers were extended to run under HPMV regulations.

When it comes to engines, Brett's preferences lie with Cat...and in response to their current unavailability, with Cummins. The fleet currently runs around four Cat C-15-equipped trucks, with the rest Cummins Signatures – a couple of 620s and the balance 580s.

So given Brett's love of Kenworths, what's the deal with the Mack CL that's recently been refurbished from front to back and is now a stunning image maker for the company?

Leonie lets out peals of laughter: "Brett's toy. He says he'd quite like a boat, but there's his boat there."

Brett explains: "Sure, I'm a Kenworth fan through and through, but I also love V8s...and the Mack is a V8. I picked it up three years ago when I was looking for a tow vehicle for the boys' race car trailer (our two sons, Jamie, now 21 and Bradley, now 17, were racing ministocks at speedway).

"I got it from Matt Sherlock, who'd bought it from Uhlenbergs. Rumour has it that it has done something like 3.5 million kilometres. Well, it was double-shifted for five years with Uhlenbergs so that would alone account for a huge distance.

"Anyway, we had it here just a day when I got a job for it, and it hasn't stopped working since! Then, about six

months ago we put it through a full rebuild programme. We stripped and gutted it completely – took off the cab, dropped the engine and gearbox, took it back to the bare chassis. The driveline was in really good nick, and not long ago we'd replaced both diffs."

The CL carries fond memories of the past, he adds: "When I was a kid Dad was driving a Mack V8 for Graham Manson. We used to lean out of the window just to hear that exhaust sound – it was wonderful. That's why I grabbed this one when the opportunity came up."

Local companies Mike Deane Motors, Peake Panel & Paint, Micam Auto Electrical and Universal Motor Trimming and Upholstery have combined to produce a truck that would challenge for best in show anywhere. The Marsh Mafia door logos are the work of Cliff from Truck Signs in Tauranga. And stunning though the Mack looks, Brett reckons that there's 30-odd running lights and more polished stainless still to be fitted.

The CL sports a modified colour scheme, with the company light blue dominant, while on the doors is a variation on the company logo headed Marsh Mafia and peppered with bullet holes. It's the work of the drivers, says Brett: "They've really bought into the whole project, and are so proud of the truck."

Flash-as doesn't mean the Mack isn't a drone, however.

Son Bradley's mini-stock racer sits on the back of the Kenworth T904 for a Christmas parade. The job of towing a full-size stockcar to meetings has been taken over by the refurbished Mack CL.



Every night it heads off to Auckland towing a hardsider trailer.

On race weekends, it'll be hooked to the trailer carrying Bradley's stockcar.

The latest expansion phase of the company hasn't been confined to growing fleet numbers: The Marshes, who previously operated out of leased premises in the Mount, took a deep breath two years ago and invested in the site at Tauriko. It was a brave move, but they're pleased they did it. The facility works ideally for the fleet, and presents a smart and businesslike image to the world.

In the workshop a technician is able to look after the fleet by way of regular servicing and CoF work. The couple have yet to work out whether it's saving any money, but the control over scheduling for checks is proving very valuable, offering a lot more flexibility time-wise compared with going to an outside workshop.

A wash bay operator cleans the trucks between shifts, though the drivers regularly carry out their own cleaning as well.

The office area in the new facility is a far cry from the nerve centre of your classic trucking fleet. Being able to

start with a clean sheet for its design has meant dedicated rooms for client meetings, while in the dispatch office the realtime EROAD location tags for trucks on the road are displayed on a wall-mounted 60-inch screen for easy general viewing.

A mezzanine area above the workshop has been set up as a social venue where the drivers get together on a Friday night and discuss the week ("...gossip, tell tall stories, recount what's happened on the road and who's doing silly things," as Brett puts it). Banners liberated from a recent public celebration and proclaiming 50 years of Kenworth in NZ flank a section of wall destined to carry a super-sized version of the Marsh Mafia logo.

Ever since 2010 the couple have handled the administrative side of the business on their own, explains Leonie: "Previously in our businesses we've always had office staff, but starting off this last time around I handled the books and Brett looked after everything else. I had no experience as an office person, but I just grew with it as the size of the business increased."

Handling the business virtually on their own has meant huge hours for the couple. The fact that they've



Left: The depot facility has an integrated washbay and workshop


Below: The fleet in the late 2000s. Several trucks still carry the green colours of Thomas Transport

that a wider number of people can see what's going on. And Lynley has brought so many good systems to the admin side."

Alex's arrival has given Brett the chance to occasionally get behind the wheel again, something he enjoys: "I like being on the road, chatting with other drivers. It gives you the chance to catch up on what's happening, something you'd not get behind a desk.

"It might not be long before Alex will be telling me to keep my nose out of things, but that's no bad thing. For the past three years it has been pretty hard trying to handle every aspect of the business, with growth being so rapid, so it's good to have people like Alex and Lynley on the team."

The Marshes' conversation is fairly liberally peppered with terms like "team" and "family" and "communication"...but not in the selfconscious, sloganeering, "we're talking the talk" fashion so often encountered in business.

You get the impression that they use the words almost without recognising them – so fundamental are they to their core values. And a pivotal explanation of how they've achieved what they have in the business over the past few years. 

been able to come through it, she reckons, is down to communication and working as a team. And, Brett adds, the fact that he remains "indisputably, the boss."

The situation has improved considerably in recent months. Leonie has for nearly a year been assisted in the office by Lynley Pickering, while for the past two months Alex Elms has relieved Brett of the fleet dispatching duties.

"They're both brilliant," says Leonie: "When Brett was in the office everything was in his head, but now Alex has introduced spreadsheets and other files so

