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OCEAN 57 PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2014

# Renaissance Man

Rod Salmon has a truly prodigious appetite for both work and play. After a lifetime of keeping a low profile, here the tireless entrepreneur explains to Nigel Bowen how luxury boats and fast cars provide a welcome distraction from overseeing a wide-ranging business empire.

**Text** Nigel Bowen **Images** Gary Graham

If you wanted to play armchair psychologist, you'd be tempted to conclude that his father passing away during his childhood was what propelled Rod Salmon on to a lifetime of frenetic over-achievement. While Salmon himself doesn't dwell on it much, he does identify it as the start of what has been an incredible journey.

"The defining moment was probably when my father died when I was 12," he says. "There was no money in the house and it was around that time I got my first job, selling newspapers on a street corner on commission. When I got that financial independence, I thought to myself, 'This is pretty good – this allows me to buy stuff when I want it.'"

Throughout his high school years, Salmon continued to work part-time jobs and, at an age when other kids were just learning to drive, he first branched into the world of entrepreneurship by buying old cars, doing them up and selling them for a profit.

Did all this extra-curricular money making have a negative impact on his schooling? Not at all.

"I went to Epping Boys High, captained the first XV and was also school captain," Salmon remembers. "After graduating, I got an engineering cadetship with Holden, which involved working for the company while also studying mechanical engineering at what's now University of Technology Sydney."

Salmon being Salmon, he decided to get a part-time job at a squash centre on top of his day job and study commitments. "That was probably another one of those defining moments," he remembers. "Through that job I'd become mates with a guy who sold sporting goods. He offered me the opportunity to expand his business into Victoria. So at age 20 I quit Holden, dropped out of uni and moved to Melbourne. I made a deal with my new boss – I'd give him 100 per cent for two years and he'd teach me everything he knew about business. When the two years were up he offered me a very attractive package to set up a branch in Hong Kong but I stuck to the plan to have my own business."

By this point, you probably won't be surprised to learn that Salmon had already started a business, which he now devoted his enormous energies to expanding.

"When I was 19, my brother and I started a lighting and sound company in the garage of the family home. This was the late 1970s and we were making mirror balls, strobe lights and chaser lights. Anyway, I went from a really well paid position to making \$50 a week operating out of this crappy old wool store in Ultimo. Over time, I bought my brother out and the business evolved into three separate companies: a manufacturing one called Dynalite, a lighting one called Lightmoves and an events one called Nightclubs Australia, which would put on dance nights in RSLs around Sydney."

By the time he was 27, Salmon was in a position to retire. Surprisingly enough, he did – for a short while. "The business was growing rapidly but it needed a big injection of capital to go to the next level. So, while I stayed involved, I sold a majority share of all the businesses to a medium-sized public company and went and bought a waterfront mansion in Sydney's Hunters Hill for my wife and I to enjoy."



Salmon with his co-drivers Jason Bright and Liam Talbot after winning the NZ round

of the GT Championship.

#### PUBS, PROPERTY, PEDAGOGUERY

Shortly after Salmon bought his home, the 'recession we had to have' began wreaking havoc.

"The banks foreclosed on the company I'd sold out to, all the companies I'd created were in receivership and I was facing the prospect of bankruptcy. In partnership with selected staff members I bought all three companies back. Over the next few years they traded their way out of difficulties and I sold out of them once more. They're all still around in some form. In fact, Dyalite got sold to Philips for \$60 million a couple of years ago. If you stay at hotels around the world you'll see that the controls for the lights and curtains are often made by Dyalite, the company I started in a garage in suburban Sydney."

In 1993 Salmon bought his first pub "in a barren wasteland", punting that events would ultimately make it a profitable investment.

"We bought a pub in Homebush before Sydney was awarded the Olympics. There was nothing out there then – no stadiums, no anything. We made that pub work then ended up buying seven more. One day I bought a pub in Gladesville that had a big sawmill next door. I suppose that was another defining moment. I knocked on the sawmill owner's door and, by the end of our chat, was in a joint venture with him to build 300 apartments on our adjoining properties."

Aside from still running four hotels and a property development business, Salmon is also a major player in the educational software industry.

"When I was helping my third child do his school assignment on the gold rush era I got to thinking that there should be something on the internet to help parents assist their children with schoolwork. I didn't do anything about it until I struck up a casual conversation with a guy who was helping me coach my son's rugby team. He told me he built websites, so I told him about my idea. Anyway, we had a meeting, which turned into a pilot project, which turned into a business – Red Apple Education – that was employing 65 people within six months of launching. The resources it provides are now used in around 800 schools Australia-wide and we had 4.6 million unique visitors to the site last year. We have opened an office in the UK and will soon have one in Dubai as well."



Rod and Kylie celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary with their children, Nathan, Lauren and Kiara onboard *OneWorld*.

#### CARS AND CRUISING

Salmon has never been an all-work-no-play achievatron and has long had a passion for both very fast cars and very luxurious boats. We'll get to the cars shortly, but first here's the story of Salmon's stop-start introduction to the joys of boating.

"When I was 30, I bought a waterfront property where there was an opportunity to put a swing mooring down, so we applied to have one. Then I got a letter saying everything had been approved and I've got three weeks to put the mooring down and another two weeks after that to put a boat on it. Anyway, we rushed out and bought a 30-foot sailing boat. A year and a half later we sold it, never having used it."

After that false start, Salmon took a more cautious approach to his next foray into the world of boating. "Eight years later I was wanting to get back into boats and I discovered Pacific Boating had a timeshare arrangement, where you paid a sum of money to have access to a boat when you wanted to use it. Plus, the guys at the club would take you out and show you how to drive a twin-screw motorboat and help you get your licence. I'd recommend to anyone who's interested in getting into boating that they do something like that and then decide whether or not they want a boat."

"I got to the point where I could take a 40-foot flybridge cruiser out unsupervised and I discovered I really loved doing that, and the family enjoyed it as well. We'd take the kids out on the weekend and my wife and I would nick off work on a Tuesday and motor around to Manly."

But just as he was contemplating purchasing a boat he might actually set foot on, Salmon's head was turned by another famously all-consuming pastime.

"At 38 I got back into motor racing, after having abandoned it when I was younger following the realisation that I didn't have the financial resources to pursue it properly. I remain heavily involved to this day in the Australian GT Championship. I find both boating and motor racing relaxing in different ways. Motor racing is a great diversion because when you're on the starting line you're not thinking about any of the other dramas going on in your life. You're in a life and death situation and have to maintain a single focus for the 6-12 hours that you're racing."

While Salmon has friends who race both cars and yachts, racing is not something that's ever appealed to him with the latter. "I think introducing that competitiveness into boating would change my approach to it and reduce the fun. And I tend to get seasick in rough conditions, so I don't think I'd be great at it."

#### SAILING INTO THE SUNSET

Around five years ago Salmon and his wife began to seriously contemplate sailing around the world. "The Global Financial Crisis meant we had to put those plans on the backburner but in the last couple of years we've been getting back into boating," he says. "Last year we bought a Sunseeker, which was previously owned by John Longhurst, the owner of Dreamworld. But we soon realised that wasn't going to be appropriate for long-distance journeys so we're now looking to sell that by the time the 33-metre Gulf Craft, that we're getting built in Dubai, arrives. The Gulf Craft is the current model, brand new. We love everything about that boat."

When Salmon isn't using the Gulf Craft it will be put out to charter. And, in time, he's planning to upgrade. "We will probably get the next size up when it comes time to head off around the globe. I'm turning 55 next birthday and the plan is to take off when I'm 60 and still young enough and fun enough to spend a couple of years sailing the world. It will be my wife and I, plus a crew. And we'll keep our Facebook page updated so friends and family know where we are and can come and join us."

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