

# A (Pretty) Good Time to Buy

BROKERAGE EXPERTS SAY THE MARKET FOR TRAWLERS AND LONG-RANGE CRUISERS IS SHIFTING. BUYERS MAY HOLD AN ADVANTAGE.

story **KIM KAVIN**





Some brokers report that private deals are on the rise. With a good boat priced right, it's often sold before the public knows it's available.

Jason Dunbar, who is vice president at Luke Brown Yachts in Fort Lauderdale, has been thinking lately about a boat out of time.

Since the 1960s, when the Grand Banks 42 first appeared as a wooden boat, more than 1,500 of the hulls have been built in that material and in fiberglass. The model had a four-decade-long production run, with modifications that largely stuck to the original's layout and features. To cruising yachtsmen who love the trawler lifestyle, the Grand Banks 42 might as well be the logo on the club T-shirt worldwide.

"The Grand Banks 42 is arguably one of the most successful designs ever created," Dunbar says. "If the Grand Banks 42 were designed and built today for the first time, I suspect that it would not have the same success that it had from the 1960s to the 1990s. I just don't know."

His skepticism is based on sales trends that show a shift in the market for trawlers and long-range cruisers, which are not as popular as they were in decades past. Today, Dunbar and other leading brokers say, there do seem to be more buyers than sellers for trawlers and long-range cruisers, giving the buyers an advantage—but it's only kind of an advantage in a marketplace that's relatively small compared to other types of boats.

"I think there are more buyers than there are sellers, and the inventory is down. There's not a lot of good, quality boats

priced correctly that stay on the market very long," says Jeff Merrill at JMYS Trawler Specialists. "The sellers are getting what they want. So is that a buyer's market or a seller's market? It's a fast-moving market when the right boat is available at the right price. That's the reality."

Fast moving is also how Kevin Althoff at Burr Yacht Sales describes the trawler and long-range-cruiser marketplace right now. As the East Coast dealer for Fleming Yachts, his company makes deals about 99 percent of the time for Flemings.

As recently as two years ago, Althoff says, it was rare to see even one Fleming on the brokerage market. Today, of the 300 or so Flemings that exist, there are 10 available for sale from about \$500,000 to \$3 million.

"Two years ago, every time a boat was listed, it would sell. It was a seller's market," he says. "People would come into our showrooms, either in Annapolis or down in Florida, and they would have a \$750,000 to \$1 million budget. They'd look at boats that might fall in that range should they be put up for sale. Then they'd see a listing that Hull No. 132 was up for sale in their price range, and we could sometimes put a deal together before the boat was even advertised. As soon as the boat was listed, I had a buyer.

"This past year, we started the year that way, but then we picked up more listings than we had buyers for," he continues. "It became a little bit more of a buyer's market. It used to be



Jason Dunbar (above) of Luke Brown Yachts, and Jeff Merrill (left) of Jeff Merrill Yacht Sales say they are seeing more buyers than sellers in today's market for long-range cruising yachts and trawlers.

buyers saying they'd buy a Fleming if they could find one. It's now buyers seeing two in their price range, and they get to choose."

Sellers with good-quality boats realize that buyers are in that position, he says. It's not exactly the catbird seat for buyers, but the marketplace is favoring Sylvester over Tweety. If a seller sets the price right, then a deal can be done, Merrill says. In fact, he adds, his sales of trawlers and long-range cruisers are up; at the time of this writing,

It's not a total buyer's market, experts say, but things are shifting in that direction. Buyers are passing up major overhaul projects and looking for good quality at the right price.



Kevin Althoff is with Burr Yacht Sales, the East Coast dealer for Fleming Yachts. In the past two years, he says, buyers have gained an advantage, with more boats to choose among in their price range on the brokerage market.

Kevin Althoff at Burr Yacht Sales says that of about 300 Flemings in the world, 10 are now available for sale.

he had expectations for record dollar volume and record units sold for 2019.

However, the types of deals are changing. On the West Coast and in the Southeast, he says, he's been doing more private deals than in years past. When the buyers know they want a boat and the seller has priced it right, he can put the deals together without the boat even being advertised.

"We've done five private sales this year. The boat never came on the market," Merrill says. "It never was shown on our website or on a multiple listing service. I knew somebody who was looking for the boat, and I knew somebody who had the boat, and I was able to put together a deal. The public never even knew that the boat was for sale."

Those types of deals only work if the boat is in good shape, he says, not just cosmetically, but also mechanically. The boats that are





*The Outback 50 combines the feel of being aboard a trawler yacht with the ability to cruise faster than 20 knots.*

selling are able to withstand the scrutiny of a hull surveyor as well as a diesel mechanic as part of an inspection.

“Nobody wants to buy a project,” he says. “There’s customizing and tweaking versus restoring, and nobody wants a restoration project. Buyers are looking for the right boat with the right equipment at the right price.”

Dunbar says he’s also seeing what appears to be a generational shift among buyers. Younger boaters are enamored with center consoles and outboard engines, while older boaters are going for midrange motoryachts with separate crew quarters. Trawlers and long-range cruisers fall between those two styles of boat, and historically were the choice for people in their 40s, 50s and 60s who wanted to leave the marina and go cruising.

“They would go to islands in the Florida Keys and Bahamas on a regular basis, up and down the Eastern Seaboard,” Dunbar says. “They are aging out. They might not be able to climb up and down ladders like they used to. Are the Gen Xers filling in? Are the Millennials stepping up to be more adventurous? I don’t know. I haven’t seen it.”

Althoff, though, says he has seen some younger buyers coming into the long-range-cruiser market. A few of the Fleming owners he knows own their long-range cruising boat in addition to a center console.

“They’ll tow their 27-foot center console over to the Bahamas and then use it to run around while they stay on the Fleming,”

Althoff says. “And I’ve actually seen a downward shift in ages of buyers. I’ve got younger people saying, ‘Before our kids get too old, we want to go do some cruising.’ One Fleming owner is in his 30s.”

Dunbar says one likely trend is that the trawler market will adapt to try and appeal to younger boaters, adding features and designs that could push sales higher as those younger boaters look to trade up for bigger models.

“You even see Ranger Tugs with outboards on the back of them,” he says. “Outboard catamarans are something that I find interesting. My partner has invested in an Outback. It’s a long-range, high-speed, owner-operator trawler that fits a demographic of anybody between 45 and 75. They used an innovative Michael Peters hull design that allows the boat to do in excess of 20 knots and still get 400 nautical miles of range in a 50-foot boat.”

In other words, the boat combines what younger yachtsmen are buying today with the longer-range cruising comforts that older yachtsmen have typically tended to want.

“Maybe, just maybe,” Dunbar says, “the guys that are on the center consoles today, as they are buzzing around the Bahamas with their kids and using those outboards because time is money, maybe when their kids are out of school and in college, maybe that’s when the trawlers and the long-range cruisers will see demand return.” ❁