

# A SPECIAL CULTURE

Transport veteran Tony Noske has built an industry return around his people: a young operations manager and a senior driver in particular. It's made the Noske Group an immediate success in specialist bulk haulage.

**Samantha Freestone** writes

**N**oske Group and Kalari founder Tony Noske was young and looking for adventure. Inspired by his father's "innovative spirit", the then 20-year-old was bound for the US to drive the highways of the east coast.

It was in 1971 when Noske found employment with E Stewart Mitchell, still a thriving quarrying and asphalt company to this day. Known for its innovation, passion for staff training and support, and a philosophy centred on the good old-fashioned business principles of honesty, reliability, standards and safety, it made an impression on Noske from the outset.

It was "most definitely" this interaction that instilled the deeply-held business principles Noske has held throughout his career.

Specifically, staff treatment, retention and motivation are hallmarks of the Noske Group's business model. This philosophy receives, Tony Noske insists, "just as much attention as operations".

"You have to make sure your staff get the kudos they deserve," he says.

Perhaps this is why Noske's most senior driver Michael Jeansch and his Operations Manager Jayden Tonkin scooped the awards at the NatRoad conference in August.

On a windy morning by the bay on Beach Road in Melbourne's Brighton, *ATN* met with Noske and his two winning employees. Both Jeansch and Tonkin speak of a business culture thriving on motivated employees.

Only four years old, Noske's fledgling truck business is turning over a good profit. It

has 30 B-double combinations on the move, and several high-profile clients among its diversified customer pool. That there's no just-in-time work keeps drivers happy.

So how has he done it? The short answer: a history of innovation, service and safety, a long list of contacts, great networking skills and a solid foundation of available employees. Beyond that, one must look to the foundations of the business, and the lessons Noske has learned over the years.

One early lesson, in branding, came from his time at E Stewart Mitchell; its familiar trucks run a bright green livery as much for safety as visual recognition.

"It was all about the corporate image, about the branding," Noske explains.

"So when I started Kalari I did the yellow up top for the safety component and because of where the trucks were running — there was a lot of red dirt around that way — we painted them orange at the bottom to hide the dirt so they always looked clean.

"With the Noske colour scheme, we wanted something striking and simple with a focus on looking like a US owner-driver truck. We didn't want the equipment to look like it was part of a fleet. We wanted the vehicle to look special for the driver, a vehicle that the driver feels proud to drive."

Noske says E Stewart Mitchell and other companies he had exposure to, like Penske, were decades ahead of any Australian carrier at the time, and "in my personal opinion, in some cases, still are".

"When you're 19 or 20, exposure to an



Jayden Tonkin and Michael Jeansch



# the big wheel » NOSKE GROUP

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organisation like that, that was leaps ahead of where anyone was in Australia, really makes you take notice,” he says.

“I was driving trucks for Mitchell and then got involved in supervisor roles. I drove bitumen tankers and then over a period of 18 months I worked as a trainee supervisor in many aspects of their operations.”

At the end of his tenure, Noske came home to Australia with no intention of staying — more work in America beckoned. But he never went back to E Stewart Mitchell.

Was love the reason? “Something like that,” he says coyly.

Noske and his father — who owned an asphalt and quarrying business — began building a transport empire with the lessons learned from America (the US industry remains an inspiration and Tony Noske has returned more than 75 times since).

“We implemented their core philosophies into the business ... especially the focus on innovation, customer service, safety and staff support,” he says.

Together with two young employees, Noel Davies and Ian Jacobson, the Noskes operated what was the world’s first mobile asphalt mixing plant and promptly built the business up — based on an innovative angle the father-and-son team had over competitors.

“Three of us built that plant from scratch; Noel Davies still works for Kalari and Ian Jacobson has gone on to become a senior executive at BHP Billiton. We physically built everything; it was how it was back then,” he says.

It was a moderately-sized business when they sold it to Boral in 1980, and after working with Boral for two years Noske promptly moved on to create Kalari. He founded the business in 1982 and ran the fleet until the mid-90s, five years after selling the business to Swire Cold Storage.

“I was simply the leader of a team of young, highly-motivated employees, many of whom are still at Kalari,” he says.

The safety-yellow and tangerine colour scheme remains testament to the beginnings of Noske’s professional life.

“In hindsight Kalari grew quickly using that same simple model: motivated employees providing innovative solutions with a high focus on service and safety,” he reflects.

“Having fun, doing things properly, simply.”

Jeansch, NatRoad’s 2009 Professional Driver of the Year, explains best how the Noske Group came to be. Noske’s oldest son Mark was racing V8 Supercars in 2003 and

long-time friend and employee Jeansch used to sit in the pits. In May that year, in between races in Perth, Jeansch asked Noske what he was going to do next.

“He said ‘Oh Michael, I have itchy feet.’ It was the silliest thing I ever said to him,” Jeansch remembers. “Nine months later I got a phone call and he [offered me a job].”

As the morning sun bounced over an impeccably maintained B-double, painted in Noske’s regal silver/navy blue paint scheme, Noske offered his version — he “got bored”, essentially — to *ATN*.

“I’d gotten re-married and have four young kids and my wife said to me, ‘you can’t stay here doing nothing, you have to go back to work,’” he jokes.

“I’ve always looked for niche markets and I could see that [specialist bulk haulage] was going to become a big business going forward. We established relationships and moved forward from there.”

## YOUTH AND EXPERIENCE

Noske is quick to credit his staff, proudly boasting to have one of the best teams in the business. “What we are doing now all comes from all of those guys,” he says.

Jeansch is as much a driver as he is a mentor to younger staff, like Tonkin who was named the Young Achiever of the Year at the NatRoad awards.

Noske has always put emphasis on retaining senior drivers, with its own reward system acting as an incentive to stay on beyond retirement.

“These people are spending most of their time out on the road and you can’t be there keeping an eye on it all. The mentoring program is very important,” he explains.

“We call them our elite foundation employees and they are a part of an employee share structure. We have a lot of young people and they know they can ask the senior guys questions, and they know the drivers are watching them.

“We measure performance. We’ve got a way of rewarding the ones who achieve and we have a way of measuring that accurately,” Noske says.

Tonkin explains it has created a healthy peer-based culture among drivers and operations staff.

“We have a team leader or a senior driver looking after each particular area, in terms of having eyes and ears in the field so to speak, and their feedback is very important,” he says.

“They are quite experienced in what they do and they know what you are looking for

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and are very important in the process. Of course they have their own ideas about how things should be run, but I guess it is very much a collaborative process.

“It is the only way you can do things because of how remote the work is. I am very proud to say that our guys are very good at what they do. Our guys are in the top echelon of what they do.”

Tonkin’s father was a long-time Noske employee at Kalari and a young Jayden spent hours in the depot eager to follow in his dad’s footsteps.

His future was assured, Noske remembers: “He was always going to be in the business”.

“He started his first business at 12 washing trucks and was backing B-doubles into the wash bay at 12 or 13, so he has been around for a long, long time.”

Noske says focusing on staff, on their motivation and especially their personality type when recruiting, is key to a healthy work culture when growing a new business. The strategy is a “very deliberate” one, he says.

“We put a lot of effort putting [the culture] into work and focusing on a very stringent selection process for new employees, making sure they fit into the culture,” he says.

“Between customer service, making sure our level of innovation is the way we want to be, ensuring safety and focusing on a very simple system, it will always run well. You don’t want to bog your staff down with paperwork.”

The main selection criterion at the Noske depot is simply “attitude and pride”.

“Pride makes them want to have the image correct and put the extra yard to make sure they keep the trucks well maintained,” he says.

“All the staff should be self-motivated. People have to be happy in what they do. Everyone works because they have to but if they love what they do and where they work they’ll be better employees.”



## BIG-HAUL CONTRACTS

The business first began carting raw material for a glass plant in South Australia. Kalari had lost the contract five years previously and Noske heard it was up for tender.

Aware the contract was secure months before it was officially awarded to the brand-new outfit, Noske began implementing a detailed compliance system. It’s a lesson he learned from his years building up Kalari.

“At the start of Kalari we had a strong focus on safety, on being compliant. But it was a culture, it wasn’t an official system. Today the process has got to be detailed and documented as a procedure.”

One of the largest contracts the company has secured is with global green energy giant Suzlon, hauling large parts for a new wind farm in specialised over-sized equipment.

Initially sharing the work with Portland-based carrier Porthaul, Noske ended up purchasing the business and winning the contract outright.

“We have a specialist business down there [in Portland] and that is all does, for the companies that are manufacturing those large wind towers,” he explains.

The focus on safety and systems from the beginning is responsible for a smooth growth strategy, Noske attests.

From his office in the Melbourne suburb of Brighton (an unusual location that keeps him closer to his young family) Noske can sit back and monitor his fleet on plasma screens fed with live tracking information.

“At the beginning I was living in Brighton, I like to take the kids to school, so our head office is here in Brighton still, but we have a depot and operations are run out of Geelong,” he says.

## PORTLAND TRIAL FOR SUPER B-DOUBLES

The same morning *ATN* met up with the men behind the burgeoning transport outfit, Noske himself was on his way to meet with management at a new export woodchip mill being constructed north of Portland.

Noske Logistics is the company signed-on to complete the so-called ‘Green Triangle’ leg of the super B-double trial for the Minister for Roads and Ports, Tim Pallas.

It will use the vehicles next year to haul woodchips from a Portland mill currently under construction.

Super B-doubles are capable of carrying two 40-foot containers and 30 percent more freight.

The trial will allow them on freeways that link the Port of Melbourne with industrial areas in the west and north, including the West Gate Freeway, Western Ring Road and Hume Freeway to Somerton.

In Portland, super B-doubles will have access mainly to the Princes and Henty Highways.

The Brighton office manages financial control and business development, with depots in Gippsland and Portland along with Geelong running different aspects of the operation.

“We have a focus on dry bulk,” Noske says. “The Geelong operation is all short and long-haul bulk transport, and in Portland we are doing some large export woodchip contracts and also renewable energy.”

Noske split the business into four divisions, now overseen by Tonkin.

“There is forestry, long-haul — guys like Michael who might be away for two weeks at a time — short-haul, which is basically those drivers are home every night, the oversize team servicing the renewable energy market and the forestry division which has key contacts that involve the use of super B-doubles. (See breakout story).

“The motivation is to do things properly. I love building teams of people. The people in the industry are very honest and hard working, and the customers are the same.” ■