

ALIVE AND WELL

Ed Higginson visits Alive Technologies Group in Tasmania.

The origins of a transport company usually fall into one of two categories – an owner-driver who has grown the business over the years, or a small business that realises the only way to effectively service its customers is to run its own fleet.

The history of Alive Technologies Group stems from when, after high school, David Bell started as a freelancer in the events industry. Over time he slowly built up a small amount of lighting and sound equipment for hire. As the business expanded, he officially started the Alive Technologies Group in 2000.

With a need to move equipment day and night, seven days a week, David decided in 2002 to start his own fleet, buying a Hino 500 Series 17-tonne medium rigid container truck. As a multi-purpose unit, the Hino could work on events most of the year, then carry a refrigerated container between December and February to cart cherries for his father's farm.

Within two years, the addition of a Hino 700 Series prime mover improved vehicle flexibility, transporting cherries during summer and covering the transport requirements for the events business through the rest of the year.

Continuing expansion created a solid demand for the trucks to operate year-round, and it soon became obvious that there was a need for Alive Technologies Group to run a dedicated truck fleet, just to handle its own transport requirements.

Today, employing 21 full-time staff including 11 drivers plus casuals, Alive Event Production runs major annual events such as Dark Mofo, Party in the Paddock, Symphony Under the Stars, and tours for well-known artists such as The Foo Fighters, and Fatboy Slim.

On a Thursday evening in Launceston, I caught up with one of Alive's drivers, Jordan Carter, while the team was busy setting up the stage for the Symphony Under the Stars concert, to inspect Alive's most recent fleet addition, an 8x4 DAF CF85.510 fitted with an unusual soft-sider Alltruck body.



The PACCAR MX 13 engine has been available for some time in the Kenworth T409 range as well as DAF's flagship XF105 model rated at 510 hp (375 kW). PACCAR Australia only recently made it available for the DAF CF85, which was a great decision.

Jordan said: "I love driving the DAF. It's only done 5000 km but so far, it's been awesome with the extra grunt and the safety features, including the Access system which gives us a touchscreen radio, Bluetooth, GPS, and a screen for the rear camera. It would have been nice to have a couple of extra cameras fitted, though, which we may look for next time."

Another key safety feature you may not usually appreciate is the option of air-horns. "As we usually move the trucks around parks after concerts to pack up, decent horns are essential to get revellers to move out of your way."

With a mix of production equipment and a demand to take them anywhere, the fleet currently comprises several rigids set up to pull various trailer types. Until now, they have all been Hino – a 2009 Hino 816, along with a 2013 Hino 500 FM heavy rigid, a 2015 Hino 500 FC medium rigid, and a 2016 Hino 500 GH medium rigid, plus several vans and utes.

"When we started to look at 8x4 for improved loading, Hino couldn't give us a load-sharing twin-steer, so we had to look elsewhere. We decided to go with the DAF as we heard it was a reliable brand and could meet the demands of our work," Jordan said.

"Our warehouse team usually load the trucks ready for us to jump in and drive to events, so the 8x4 means we don't need to worry too much about overloading our front axles and can easily spread the weight. It also handles so much better than the single steers on the twisty roads around Tasmania.

"We decided to go with the 510 hp because we often pull heavy trailers and go into some remote areas for the events. We also have two coupling points on the rear, a 75 mm ball for the small trailers and generators, then the 120 mm ball for the larger 15-tonne stage trailers and concrete counter-weights which hold down the stages. Some combinations may be too long with the 8x4, but we are looking at PBS for maximum efficiency."

With 2500 Nm (1850 lb/ft) of torque available from around 1000 rpm, the CF85 is ideal for many rigid applications to pull heavy trailers, with maximum power delivered between 1500 rpm and 1900 rpm.

The CF85 with the 510 hp engine also gets the 16-speed ZF AS-Tronic Automated Manual Transmission (AMT) instead of the 12-speed fitted to the 460p engine.



FEATURE

It's a similar driveline to the XF105.510 that I test-drove pulling Steve Richards' B-Double motorsport trailers last year. It performed extremely well at much higher weights, so I imagine it has more than enough power for the CF85.

"The automatic is great in the city, then I often use manual mode on the twisty hills around Tasmania to hold the gear," Jordan said.

One unusual aspect you may not notice initially, is that the DAF appears as a box van from the driver's side, but a tautliner from the other.

Jordan explains: "The soft-sider concept is that we can forklift heavy crates and boxes through the curtain, then pack and tie them against the hard side to secure them. The curtain side then has extra high gates that hinge open, making loading much easier. We always go with Alltruck bodies because we like them and don't have any issues." To assist with loading, the DAF gets an Anteo three-tonne cantilever tail-lift.

When it comes to maintenance, Jordan adds: "All the maintenance and warranty will be done with CJD, who have been excellent. The Hinos still go back to the Hino dealer, then we have an in-house fabrication team for some specialty work, so they repair the trailers. They can also fabricate the trailers to suit our equipment. We have two stage trailers which were made here in-house, and they are currently working on a third.



"We also own two stage trailers which are self-contained fold-out structures that are easy and quick to set up, so benefit clients who may be on a budget but still need a great-size stage. Generally, they are a one-truck-and-trailer setup which would normally be approximately three to four heavy trucks' worth of equipment to transport."

In the future, Alive Technologies Group is looking to expand further. Today, they are Tasmania's largest event production company offering lighting and audio equipment, vision systems, staging, roof structures, plus more. They also run conferences around the country from Darwin to Perth, Cairns, and all down the Eastern seaboard.

"As the business grows, I personally believe we will end up with another prime mover and a few trailers to reduce manual handling, as well as having more capacity, but just need a bit more space for this," Jordan said. "Things are forever growing, and we are trying to expand at the same rate, but often it's a hard balance. We have just come out of the busiest festival season in our 19-year history and things are only looking bigger for the rest of the year." □

