

BUILDING THE BUSINESS

Hino's latest 500 Series is proving a worthwhile addition to the LEETS fleet of West Australia – Report by David Meredith

There's been a lot of press on the Hino 500 Series Wide Cab, including several pieces in *PowerTorque* recently as our various correspondents have commented on how this model continues the resurgence of interest in the brand that started down the weight range with the 300 Series.

However, the drive impressions of journalists can only go so far in terms of comment. An operator story is what's been needed – how the truck performs in real-world conditions, with drivers who are in the cabs every working day.

My first drives of the 500 Series Wide Cab were memorable because of the contrast to the previous model. For several years the mid-range Hinos were a class behind the mainstream of Japanese trucks. Old styling, mundane fittings and adequate performance were compensated for by enviable reliability.

But the competition drew the most attention. No matter what deals Hino could do, Isuzu kept stretching out its lead in the market.

From the outset the new model impressed. A clean, fresh look, with a better-equipped cab, better control placement and more supportive seat made each drive a pleasure.

The turning circle was a noticeable improvement, and well ahead of rival brands. In the daily delivery market, this is a crucial asset, and one the fleet operators haven't missed.

I've been expecting the truck would get a good reception in the cold hard world of a genuine work application, and it looked like the two new 500s bought by LEETS, in the Malaga light industrial area just north of Perth, would be a good place to start.

In 1998, Tony and Mick Martinovich bought an existing builder's support business called Modern Hiring Beam and Lintel Sales. The name was later changed to LEETS. The premises in Malaga was perfectly placed to supply the residential building boom in the metropolitan area.



After 19 years of growth and development, Anthony Martinovich, one of Tony's sons, is now running the company. Anthony decided to join the business in 2003, after 'an offer he couldn't refuse' from his father, and started on the shop floor, doing all the things any newbie would be required. His brother is also involved in the business.

Anthony steadily gained experience in the steel fabrication and supply market, gaining proficiency in the critical business of estimates, to the extent that he was made general manager.

The company has seen a shift in its product sourcing over the years. What used to be 100 percent Australian-made steel is now spread between local and overseas producers, particularly those from Asia.

Quality issues are constantly under the spotlight to ensure steel and galvanising ratings are consistently in line with local industry standards.

The international testing and certification group, ALS Global, conducts quality audits each few months, testing thickness, steel strength and galvanising from a random selections of products.

But the mix of suppliers also means lead times vary from days to weeks depending on the product needed. Anthony keeps close tabs on stock ordering and movements, balancing shifts in housing demand with a keen eye on established builders who are the business's major customers.

The key to customer support is a strong record of on-time deliveries, and to that end LEETS has stuck with Hino trucks for its delivery fleet.

Although the company has a five-year rotation schedule for its trucks, the recent market setback meant an earlier change would set the business up for future growth.

Two of the company's trucks were at the four-year mark, so Anthony started pricing early replacements. Additionally, the two trucks had served through the boom times and been worked hard, leading to more frequent brake reconditioning and clutch replacements.



FEATURE

Despite past relationships, it's always good business practice to test the competition, so another dealer selling a competitive brand was invited to quote for the replacement.

But following the usual negotiations, the decision came down in favour of two of Hino's new 500 Series Wide Cabs, a GH 1832 XXL wheelbase 4x2 and an FM 2632 XXL 6x4 with a further 800 mm extension inserted in the chassis.

The new trucks have impressed in many ways – more than just the pure financial common sense of a new truck and fresh warranty period.

The Allison gearbox is a big hit, particularly after a call to service people helped the drivers utilise the transmission's electronic programming more effectively. The engine brake and retarder are a huge benefit, and the 320 hp six is never really stressed.

Eliminating clutch replacements, and reducing brake maintenance to a minimum was the cream on the cake.

I asked Anthony's brother Matt, who is the operations manager, what he liked about the new trucks. "Turning circle, no gear changes, more power, reversing camera, and much less AdBlue," was his immediate response.

"We now get through around three tanks of diesel before we have to top up the AdBlue," he added.

He had one criticism. "We'd prefer a PTO that'll run to 1500 rpm, but that rate hasn't been approved yet".

But above all things, manoeuvring ability and traction were the biggest wins from the driver's point of view. The Hino's tight turning circle has allowed better access at delivery points, and the diff lock and cross lock on the 6x4 have made easy work of kerbs that often interrupt some delicate reversing.

Matt said they used to have a rule for all their drivers: "Never go off the bitumen." There were too many instances of a delivery truck getting stuck when a crossover left a wheel hanging in the air without traction. The new set-up has completely eliminated the previous concerns over the potential loss of traction.

The Hino's extra-long wheelbase has enabled Anthony to task the trucks with jobs that previously required a truck and trailer, and, since putting the two new 500s on the fleet, the LEETS dog trailer has sat idle in the depot yard.

At the time the bodies were being built for the new trucks, the trailer was considered essential, and so the bodybuilder placed the Effer 100 cranes at the rear of the chassis to access both load beds. The 6.2-metre body and trailer allowed several site loads in one trip, however, with the 8.0-metre body on the 6x4, the two trucks are now able to manage all deliveries as rigids.

There has been some discussion about relocating the cranes to the front of the chassis now that trailer loads aren't required. But the drivers reported that deliveries were easier without having to make sure the crane cleared the truck cab. So the cranes have stayed put.

LEETS does most of its own general servicing, with major work sent to the local dealership, WA Hino. As is often the case, the relationship between LEETS and WA Hino started with a personal friendship. Tony Martinovich and dealer principal, Paul McGovern, knew each other before Tony bought the business, and had stayed in touch during the development of their business careers.

Ultimately, the latest Hino 500 chassis and spec have proved to be the perfect fit for the company's delivery requirements. So much so, Anthony says the Hino's have allowed him to put much of his fleet management work aside for a few years and focus on growing the business.

The specs of the new Hino 500 Wide Cab look like being a much stronger challenge to Isuzu's dominance in this market sector. 

