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The Ultimate Rockstar:

KHAN ARCHBOLD OF K.V.A EXCAVATIONS

K.V.A Excavations: off to a great start with Hidromek

Khan Archbold, owner of K.V.A Excavations, operating out of beautiful Mullumbimby in NSW, has never been one to stand still. A man with an innate creativity and quietly entrepreneurial spirit, this isn't even his first business.

"After I left school at 16, I got an apprenticeship as a cabinet maker and I was a tradesman by the time I turned 20," Khan says. "Then I got into the horses and started strapping horses down at Ballina racecourse. I ended up being a Farrier and even started my own business doing that. Later, I had a mate in Mount Isa who reckoned I should get out there and get a job in the mine. So, I got a job with Epica as a Form Setter and Steel Fixer concreter."

It seems like a long way from cabinet maker to Form Setter, but Khan says they're more similar than you'd think. "Form setting was pretty much still doing a bit of woodwork," he explains. "Only it was building stuff inside out and doing it with concrete."

Of course, you're unlikely to work anywhere near a mine without ending up in the cab of a machine at some point. "That's where operating all started for me," Khan shares. "You can't go and lift a pack of timber unless you've got your Bobcat ticket. Once I had that, I started accumulating a few of them. The last one I got in Mount Isa was my excavator ticket."

At that point Khan moved to the Gold Coast, faced with the option of being either a Form Setter or an excavator

operator. "I applied for an excavator job. I had no experience, and I pretty much threw myself in the deep end and taught myself," he laughs. "Straight into six-meter-deep sewers and subdivisions. And I loved it. So, every time I hopped in, I just tried to do the best job I could. And that's what I've done for the last 20 years."

Khan says he was fortunate in terms of the machines he got to drive. "My first digger was a new Caterpillar 325CL," he recalls. "I've been lucky enough to operate top-notch, brand new diggers pretty much everywhere I've gone."

And what's good about driving a new machine from an operator's perspective? "What isn't?" Khan laughs. "You can't beat the smell of a new Digger. It's like that new car smell. It's how tight and smooth it operates. And it's pretty much yours to look after from day one. You treat it like your own."

Khan's been driving 20-tonners almost his whole career and says there's a reason it's a popular size machine. "They're not too heavy, so they're easy to transport," he explains. "And they're a great all-round size for subdivisions or dams, deep trenching, lifting - most things you'd want to take on. Go smaller and you'd be struggling to lift anything big in the civil game."

After seven years operating excavators, Khan was looking for something new. "I was just a bit over it," he shares. "I ended up on a backhoe for about four years over on Russel Island. By the end, I'd mastered that, and I really enjoyed it. But when we moved back here, it was good to get some tracks under me instead of the wheels. Although the good thing about a backhoe is you can drive it up to the shop at smoko."



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Khan Archbold



Coming back to Mullumbimby was always the plan. Khan and his wife, Vicki, wanted to give their kids a better life. But just before they made the move, the family suffered a terrible tragedy. “We’ve got three boys, Dylan, Tyson and Noah,” Khan shares. “But we lost Tyson – he got hit by a car when he was nine. That was in 2013.”

As they worked to rebuild their lives, Khan took a job with a construction company called Bashforth. “They’re pretty big in Brunswick Heads,” he explains. “I was there operating for around seven years. Then recently, an opportunity came up – one of my friends’ clients really wanted me to do work on his property. I explained that I couldn’t because of working for Bashforth. He put out the idea of going out on my own?”

With a guaranteed 12-months of work ahead of him, Khan decided to give it a red-hot go. “When you get given an opportunity like that, you don’t knock it back. So, I got finance and set myself up,” he says. “I’ve been on wages all my life, living week to week. This is the best thing I’ve ever done. So, hopefully it all rolls.”

Khan’s even got his oldest son, Dylan, in a cab. “I’ve got him helping me out on the skid steer Bobcat,” he says. “I’m teaching him how to set

rocks and do rock walls and ponds. A little bit boring, maybe, but you’ve got to start somewhere.”

Speaking of starting somewhere, getting a business up and running meant Khan was faced with choosing his gear. “I was originally tossing up between the 315 Cat – the new Next Gen – and a Kobelco,” he shares. “And they’re both great machines. But when I came across the Hidromek excavator, I thought gee, that’s a good-looking digger.”

It wasn’t a brand Khan was familiar with. “I’d never heard of Hidromek before,” he says. “I was just looking at secondhand diggers online and really liked the look of it. That’s what brought me in, the black, white and red. It was nice to get away from the yellows and the blues like everyone’s got. I wanted something different. And once I started looking into it, it was just a no brainer. It’s a really well-built machine. And great value for the money.”

Still, Khan thought he’d get a few quotes. But ultimately, it was Hidromek that came up trumps. “I emailed Onetrak and the next day Al Garcia, the sales rep there, rang me straight back. He was just so helpful,” Khan recalls. “I told him what I wanted – twin Kawasaki pumps, the rubber pads, a full set of buckets and a



Doherty tilt hitch. And he put that all together for me.”

Khan says it’s the wealth of experience and top customer service that sets Onetrak apart. “Al was just awesome,” he shares. “Always happy to answer questions and that line of communication was there the whole way through. That was important for me – especially as someone just going out on my own. Not knowing the purchase process and exactly what I was wanting, it was good to deal with someone that genuinely wanted to help. He wasn’t just in it to sell the machine.”

Al’s famous in the industry, both for his depth of knowledge and his commitment to customer service. Khan’s experience certainly backs that up. “After the floods he came down to Mullumbimby just to see how our family was. It wasn’t even to do with the digger,” he shares. “That’s the type of bloke he is. He even came up from Sydney and took me to Kyogle to see a machine. That was all prior to me buying the

digger. You just don’t see that kind of thing with the bigger companies.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of rock wall work with the Hidromek HMK145LCR. That’s been good through the wet weather because you can’t do much digging.”

Working on rock walls, Khan has really appreciated the Doherty tilt hitch. “I knew they had a good name. My previous employer always had tilt buckets,” Khan explains. “The main advantage of it comes when you’re interchanging buckets. If I’m placing rocks and need to backfill, I can just dig and not worry about taking the hoses off when I need to change the mud bucket. I can just put it on backwards. You do that a fair bit, filling behind rock walls.”

It was no one thing that made Khan choose to go with the HMK145LCR. “The machine weighed 16.8 tons, so I knew it was pretty well built,” he shares. “And it’s that midsize digger that can handle big jobs and has good lifting



capabilities. And it's not too pricey, which is great when you're starting out."

With future AdBlue supplies still in question, the Hidromek presented another major advantage. "It's got no AdBlue, so there'll be no issues with that," Khan says. "It wasn't too long ago we were all worried about everything coming to a standstill because of low supply, so that was a bonus. And I've heard about other brands having a lot of problems with the soot sensors and all the afterburn gear associated with that as well."

As any operator knows, sitting in the cab for 12 hours a day means comfort is king. "It's just got everything," Khan shares. "It's got the touch screen. The aircon's awesome. Pedals are good. And the seats are really comfortable."

One thing he hadn't expected to value so much was the full cage that came standard on the machine. "I was planning to take it off and just put it on when I'm doing the tree clearing," Khan explains. "But there's been no need, I just leave it

on. Having that protection just in front of you is an added bonus. And it's a big cage, so it doesn't obstruct your view like I thought it might."

Another great feature from Khan's point of view has been the built-in fuel hose. "That's a game changer," he says. "If I'm working on a hill, I can't take the digger off to refuel - I won't get back up again. So, I use jerry cans and walk them over. But, instead of climbing up on top to tip it in, which is dangerous, I can stay on the ground, whack the hose in, turn the pump on and it sucks in the fuel. How good is that?!"

Khan's also been impressed with the RAM Five Finger Grapple. "Yeah, it's been awesome. Works really well with the high flow and it's got the 360 rotation," he says. "I've never had one before but always wanted one, so I included that in the package. It handles really well. Plus, it's red and black so it looks great on the machine," he laughs.

And what about attachments? "The machine comes with a Hidromek GP bucket, which is



pretty well built,” Khan shares. “All my other buckets came from engineering, including a 450GP. The standard mud bucket for that machine was supposed to be 1600, but when I drove the one at Kyogle, I could tell it would handle an 1800. I also got a ripper, a 1600 skeleton bucket and a compaction wheel. That’s been a pretty good start package.”

In terms of the future, Khan’s still feeling things out, but for now he’s in a good spot. “The plan is to train Dylan up on the 14 and I’ll get a 21-ton Hidromek. Start building my fleet up from there,” he explains. “But it all depends on how much work you get. I’ve already got a few jobs lined up. But right now, I’m devoted to this one client – he’s the one who helped me get out on my own. I don’t mind knocking back a bit of work at the moment. If they’re happy to wait for me and I’ve got work afterwards, that’ll be good.”

Khan’s also in the middle of doing his CAC. “I want to get into recreational dams, so I’ll need to be a Certified Aquascape Contractor,” he explains. “Then I can do wetlands, rec ponds and water features. I really enjoy working with natural rock. It’s more my speed than digging dirt all the time. Plus, I get to be a bit creative. I do a pretty tidy rock wall and that’s a skill not

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every operator has. So, that's a bit of a niche market to work in."

Being a new business owner, Khan doesn't get a lot of downtime. "I don't get heaps of time to do fun stuff," he laughs, "But when we can, we try to head out into nature. Do a bit of bush walking and see the waterfalls. After all, it's been a rough year."

Khan's family was particularly impacted by the devastating NSW floods earlier this year. "We got completely flooded out," he shares. "We ended up in my parents' shed for four weeks before we could find a new house. A lot of people in this area got wiped out. There was 700mill of water that came through. We had to rescue the horses and swim them out. You know, I reckon if I can make it through this year, I can make it through anything."

So, what advice would he give to anyone considering going out on their own? "Well, it took me 20 years," he laughs. "But seriously, I couldn't have done it without that work in front of me. That would've been a lot riskier. Even so, I'd say to just go for it. You'll only wonder what could have been. And what have you got to lose? You can always go back on wages. I'm stoked that I did it. Best thing we've done."

Khan would recommend they think about Hidromek. "I don't think most people know

about them," he says. "But once they find out, they always want to know more. I've already told a few blokes to go check them out and they've rung up Onetrak. So, I think they're going to flood the market once they get a name for themselves."

Everything he loves about the machine comes down to the build and attention to detail. "That steel undercarriage - it's like a 20-tonner undercarriage on a 14-ton machine," he says. "Then it's all the little things - like the grease nipples in the door hinges. It's the reach, the smoothness and how well-balanced the machine is. I could go on and on. Basically, it's just so well put together."

With everything they've been through, Khan says it's been an amazing support having his wife, Vicki, in the business with him. "She's doing the book work. It's been great having her involved," he shares. "It was a big deal for me, going out on my own. I know what I'm doing in a digger but talking to people about jobs and quoting is a whole other thing. That's why this first job has been such a good start. I can get a feel for what I've got to order and how things work with that side of the business while I've still got that support."

It's a running start but we reckon Khan's the guy to keep things rolling. We'll certainly be cheering him on. **AE**

