



THE TALL GUY

■ Shaun Juniper, the young half of a formidable partnership building the 77-storey tower Soul at Surfers Paradise, is a man on the move . . . up. **Doug Parrington** talks to the reluctant development tycoon to discover how a private family company seemingly came from nowhere to create an empire

How much is Shaun Juniper worth? He wrinkles his nose and sighs.

"Ahhh, the money question," he says as if he's been asked this before, many times, and clearly finds it to be a source of slight embarrassment.

Fair enough. Juniper doesn't measure what he does in terms of dollars, preferring instead to talk about making high-quality buildings, his racing cars and the creation of the great Queensland dream.

But let's get the answer to the uncomfortable question out of the way early; the worth of the Juniper Group this year, as rated by *BRW Magazine's* Queensland rich list for families, is estimated to be \$550 million.

The amount, as it stands, is not important. What is astounding is how quickly it has been achieved and how the Juniper brand has spread from the Sunshine Coast to Far North Queensland and to the Gold Coast in the blink of an eye.

Company growth has been no less than phenomenal. In 2006,

BRW valued the group's worth at \$335 million, then \$444 million last year and now it easily surpasses the half-billion mark.

Its signature building, Soul in Surfers Paradise, is about to be thrust into the sky – all 77 storeys of it – at a time when the doubters in the building industry have pulled in their horns and decided to sit on their money.

Not Shaun Juniper and his father Graeme.

Virtually unknown on the Gold Coast until only a few years ago when the Soul project was announced, father and son had spent years building a private empire without the help of shareholders and without the hype of publicly listed companies.

Despite his enthusiasm for the burgeoning business, family considerations always come first for Shaun Juniper.

He is careful to draw a line between life in the office and life at home.

He is married to Samantha, formerly of Darwin and a past student of Ipswich Girls Grammar School, and they have a son, Flynn, 4.

"Samantha is very supportive. She can see the passion I have for the business," he says.

And after hours, his business partner father Graeme becomes plain 'Dad'.

"Both wives (Graeme's and Shaun's) banned us from talking business 24 hours a day, as we're inclined to do if we're not pulled up.

"So if we're sitting around at a family barbecue, business isn't mentioned and Dad becomes Dad, not Graeme," says Juniper.

Juniper has friends all around the world as a result of his business and motorsport contacts, and mixes regularly with the rich and powerful in both government and corporate circles.

But mostly the Junipers are quiet tycoons who, by their actions, not words, attract public notice.

Their Soul building, which happened to attract the highest price for a penthouse in Australia two years ago of \$16.85 million (taking in three storeys, thank you very much), is about to become the signature building in central Surfers Paradise.



The massive spire, due for completion in 2011, has made some heads turn in the building industry.

"There have been more than a few in the development game who said we would never do it. They can't work out how a small, private company can pull the finance together, control such a project and build such a huge building," says Juniper.

"But we just keep on going, doing what we do best. The drop in building activity around Australia doesn't really affect our plans. We forge on."

Quite apart from its penthouse, Soul is about to set other records. It is an \$850 million building, which just happens to be a shade short of twice the value of Q1, which set new standards for the Gold Coast – architecturally and in worth – when completed in 2005.

The Juniper Group pre-sold much of its colossus to the value of \$450 million.

"We passed the point of worry about the project's viability long ago," says Juniper.

Shaun Juniper turned 38 last month but, it must be said, looks 28. This may be put down to the fact that he is super fit.

He rises every morning at 5am and goes cycling for an hour-and-a-half, even though he often puts in an 11-hour day afterwards. He also runs regularly and goes surfing whenever he can.

He has a bicycle in every port. It doesn't matter whether he's at his home at the Sunshine Coast or at Hedges Avenue (where he has a house) or at Port Douglas, a bike is waiting for him.

"I have a bike at all three places, but it's not just exercise. When I'm at the Gold Coast I have the chance to hook up with old mates and we go riding for about an hour-and-a-half and on weekends we go for longer, about two-and-a-half hours usually. It's a social outing as well."

In truth he's not your usual exercise junkie.

He has his beloved BlueBerry strapped to his back as he rides and uses the opportunity of drink breaks at cafes to scroll through emails and other messages.

"It's great to be in contact that way because very often

decisions at building sites have to be made very early in the day. Sometimes a 'yes' or 'no' can save a lot of time or money," he says.

It is easy to get the impression Juniper hasn't quite become used to the idea of being in control of, or having, serious money. For him, it's the doing of the business, not the number of storeys in a building or the dollar yield, that really gives him a thrill.

This attitude comes from reasonably humble beginnings.

He was born at Essendon Hospital in Melbourne, the son of Graeme and Rosemary Juniper, and raised with his younger brother Scott in the working-class suburb of Pascoe Vale.

The difference between those days and today couldn't be more stark.

Back then, the Juniper family lived in an unremarkable three-bedroom, basic brick home facing a very noisy freeway leading to Tullamarine Airport.

By contrast, 33 years later, he is sitting back and chatting in the air-conditioned comfort of a \$3 million Junipers Group apartment ... no traffic noise, no highway outlook and just the broad panorama of Mooloolaba harbour, Mudjimba Island and the Pacific Ocean to take the eye.

While the Junipers were at Pascoe Vale, Graeme owned a few shoe shops and a footwear factory, producing what Shaun describes as 'Ugg boots and moccasins'.

Juniper can still remember the smell of the tanned leather being cut and stitched during his many visits to the family factory in Footscray.

These days, Juniper has his shoes handmade in Germany, not by his father.

The Juniper family always has been close, and back in the days of Pascoe Vale, grandparents Frank and Dot used to live just a couple of doors away.

The kids would kick a footy in the nearby park, and life was uncomplicated.

But after a lifetime of southern winters, Frank and Dot, originally from Castlemaine in the north of Victoria, decided they wanted to move to Queensland, in particular to Mooloolaba.

"Dad helped them to move up, took one look at the place and said: 'This is fantastic, this is for us,'" says Juniper.

"So the decision was made to resettle and Mum and Dad sat Scott and I down and explained we would be shifting to a place far, far away. At the age of 4, I couldn't imagine what it would be like.

"But basically the family threw away its jumpers, left behind the cold weather, embraced the sub-tropical lifestyle and never looked back.

"Dad sold the shoe factory and the shops, and 34 years ago we all settled into a house on a canal at Mooloolaba. Everything was suddenly different – we had a runabout and for the first time in my life I went fishing."

The Junipers found they were not alone in the great waves of migration that swept from Victoria to the Sunshine State in those days.

"Most of the Victorian settlers were retirees who had been told by their doctors to go north for better health or lawn bowlers who had been here for carnivals, saw what a good life it was, and decided to stay," says Juniper.

"But if you were young, and you had to get a job and make new friends, you definitely had to have a sense of adventure. You had to be brave and make a life of your own."

Juniper went to Immanuel Lutheran primary and secondary schools in Maroochydore, performed well enough scholastically, loved economics (surely a portent) and enjoyed sport.

As a dasher, he played as a winger in rugby and spent a lot of time riding motocross.

But the need for speed, ingrained in him in his formative years and destined to become part of his adult life as a competitive Porsche driver, most probably is in his genes.

Both grandfather Frank and father Graeme were handy motorcycle racers. Frank used to ride a Harley-Davidson well before it became fashionable, and both he and Graeme rode at speedways all around Australia. ▶



Not surprisingly, Shaun Juniper had his first motorbike – a Honda 50 – when he was just three, and it came with him from Melbourne when the family moved to Mooloolaba.

“I used to ride it about in the scrub behind Mooloolaba on weekends, and later I raced in motocross competitions around the Sunshine Coast,” says Juniper.

“But things change and racing of any sort went into hibernation for a few years. I left school, travelled and worked overseas, and I guess I just grew up.”

He wandered the globe, spending time in Africa and the Himalayas and finally ended up working in pubs in England.

“This was a time when my outlook broadened and I began to see possibilities of all sorts.

“For a start I had to earn money to make my own fun, but more importantly, I experienced other cultures and saw magnificent architecture, particularly of Antoni Gaudi in Spain.

“It opens your mind.”

Juniper returned to Australia and, at 22, joined Graeme in the building developer business.

Their first collaboration was a project of seven townhouses at Maroochydore.

He was to spend the next seven years as a foreman on building sites, learning the business literally from the ground up.

“It’s the detail that matters,” says Juniper. “You have to think about every bit of formwork, every fitting, every bit of steel and concrete, and how it all fits together. There’s no other way to learn the building game.”

While his brother Scott went his own way as a successful Sunshine Coast developer, Juniper and his father began to

form a formidable partnership that has changed the skyline of the Sunshine Coast, Port Douglas and is about to change Surfers Paradise through Soul.

“It’s a great partnership really. Basically, it’s Dad and me against the world,” says Juniper.

“We share. Graeme has a lifetime of experience in the financing, banking and legal world while the other side of the business, construction and marketing, is in my court.”

The Soul project, by any reckoning, is a massive project, equal to its Surfers book-end Q1 just a few blocks away in engineering achievements.

Like Q1, Soul’s foundations reach 40m into the earth to be anchored into the bedrock and the building is to soar well above most other structures in Surfers.

It has 80 storeys while Soul will have 77, but who could build the tallest building in Surfers Paradise was never an issue, according to Shaun Juniper.

“This is not a competition. We do business our way,” he says.

The key to the Juniper success story, begun in 1992, is quality of site and price, in that order.

“We bought the two-acre (.8ha) Raptis Plaza site for Soul from Japanese company Dia Kensetsu in 2002 for \$33 million, which was a premium price in those days, but what matters most? It was the best site in the best beachfront place in Australia, Surfers Paradise,” says Juniper.

“Our belief is, if you can’t buy the best, don’t buy it.”

One of the keys to the Juniper success story is that the company builds a building, sells it off but keeps the retail element of

the project. This allows them to have quality control of tenants, thereby keeping standards high wherever they may be.

Altogether, the Juniper Group employs about 100 people and has a property portfolio of more than \$1 billion, with Graeme and Shaun currently overseeing 21 separate projects.

There is another side to Shaun Juniper, and it involves more than the high-speed action of the building game.

“My brother Scott raced in the Targa open road event in Tasmania some years ago, and the normal brotherly competitiveness kicked in, so I also drove Targa in 2005, where we came ninth, and in New Zealand, where we came in 12th,” says Juniper.

This was the introduction to the Juniper Group sponsoring the Porsche Carrera Cup in Australia in 2006 and to Shaun’s ultimate involvement in racing cars, a huge jump from his youthful days as a motocross racer in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast.

His personal involvement with the Carrera Cup was by pure chance.

Juniper’s top sponsored driver Ian Dyke switched from Carrera Porsche to A1 racing, and Juniper suddenly was left without a star.

Into the breach stepped Shaun Juniper, untrained except for his amateur days as a motorcycleist and a Targa driver.

“Let there be no question, it was like diving into the deep end,” says Juniper.

“It was like switching from being a passive investor to being an active one – from being on the sidelines to being in the driver’s seat, going at 300km/h.”



Top: Juniper gears up for the Porsche Cup at Willowbank Raceway. Above: In his race car at Nurburgring for the 24-hour Enduro in May



Shaun and father Graeme with a model of the Soul Tower

The fully fledged Juniper Racing Team this year has had a gruelling schedule – a 24-hour race in Dubai in January, the Nurburgring 24-hour endurance in Germany with fellow drivers Max Twigg and Gold Coaster Warren Luff (their engine blew up in the 10th hour of the race), the Carrera Cup round five at Sandown this month, the SPA Francorchamps 24-hour in Belgium starting on July 31, followed by the 12-hour Merdeka Millennium race in August.

The creation of the Juniper team comes at a hefty price; for example the team's new Porsche 911 GT3 RSR – one of only two of the hand-built models in Australia – has an ex-factory Porsche price tag of more than \$600,000.

But Juniper insists the link between his day job of property development and his passion for motor sports has paid off handsomely.

“Our investment in motorsport has more than paid for itself,” he says.

“It is amazing how many of our clients have an interest in motor racing and how many doors it opens up.”



Family ties . . . taking time out with wife Sam

“After the Dubai race, we were walking down a street in our Juniper Racing Team colours and we ran into a few people who had bought into the Soul building. They made the connection immediately, so obviously we've gone truly international.

“And during last year's Indy carnival, Indy driver Nelson Philippe walked into our Surfers Paradise office to buy a Soul unit and I met him and we immediately agreed to sponsor his car in the race that weekend. Motor sport speaks all languages.”

Juniper certainly is a driven man, admitting he is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the Juniper Group.

He reveals, without going into detail, that the Juniper Group probably will follow its Soul building and its extensive development on the Sunshine Coast and Port Douglas with international projects. The horizons for Juniper seem limitless.

Yet the boy who once played on his Honda 50 in the backstreets of Pascoe Vale has not entirely disappeared.

“I'm not one to seek attention,” says the quiet tycoon. “I suppose you could say I'm a bit of a one-out.” ■