



Young at Heart



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Did you know that children today are most likely playing on the same brand of playground equipment that you did? "There is a very good chance that playground equipment you've seen in a park somewhere is more than likely ours," says Mike De Sousa, National Sales and Marketing Manager of Forpark Australia. Forpark is a vibrant, energetic company creating playgrounds that rock, twist, whirl and twirl...

By Kristy Attard

It seems like only yesterday we were children. Do you remember going to the park when you were little – sliding down the slippery dip, climbing ladders, going higher and higher on the swings until it felt like you could touch the sky? Today, you probably relax on a bench and watch your kids have the same fun you did back then. But did you know that children today are most likely playing on the same brand of playground equipment that you did?

"We do have a lot of equipment all around the country so there is a very good chance that playground equipment you've seen in a park somewhere is more than likely ours,"



says National Sales and Marketing Manager of Forpark Australia, Mike De Sousa. Forpark is a vibrant, energetic company creating playgrounds that rock, twist, whirl and twirl. "Our main motto is that of helping young Australians grow."

Bodies in Motion

A family owned company, Forpark understands just how important playgrounds still are for children and the community as a whole. "We've got our name with every council across Australia." Forpark is not just for kids; there is plenty for the grownups too, with a great range of park and street furniture plus outdoor gym equipment. Forpark was the first company to introduce outdoor gym equipment to Australia. Back in



1979, when owner Darryl Hansen founded Forpark, there were no mobile phones, no computer games and no DVD players. Childhood obesity was almost unheard of. Kids were always running around and playing outside with their friends. The generation of that more innocent era lived and played in the real, not digital world.

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Today, Australia, the land of wide-open spaces, is ironically

struggling with a childhood obesity epidemic. Countless doctors, nutritionists and childhood experts have echoed the refrain of 'proper diet and exercise' as the solution to the pressing problem. While many adults criticise the next generation, deeming them 'lazy,' Forpark's General Manager Andrew Reedy believes there is more to the story. "I still think that kids want to be outdoors playing and we sometimes think that kids just play on computers now, but if kids are given the facilities and the opportunity they'll get outside and they'll enjoy playing and they need that." While Mr Reedy acknowledges that technology overload is a reality for today's generation, he believes playgrounds are still necessary. "We need to keep providing those facilities." ►►



► The question is, how do you get kids accustomed to playing with the latest gadgets to have fun in a real life playground? “I think you have to be a lot more innovative and come up with new more challenging activities,” answers Mr De Sousa. Most playgrounds were timber back when Forpark started. There was a slide, a bridge, a firefighter’s pole, a ladder and not much more. “Today there’s a far greater need to come up with a range of wide variety of different, interesting and challenging activities to keep children occupied.” While Forpark loves the time-tested classics, (the traditional playground range forms the bulk of the business) the R&D team is always busy dreaming up fantastic new creations designed to thrill.

Happy Faces

Although Forpark has certainly been in the business for a long time, innovation and openness to new ideas remains a key focus. Playground equipment has to have the fun factor but still be practical and safe to use. The golden question is, what do kids want to play on? At times, Forpark will work with school groups, speaking to the kids directly about activities they like and asking what they would like to see in a playground. “We’ve done that on numerous occasions.”

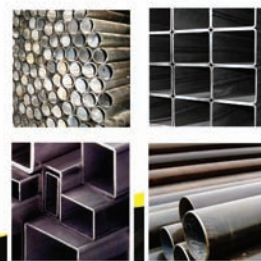
A while back Forpark ran a program with schools asking kids to design a playground, and took inspiration from some of



their ideas. "Usually children's ideas are quite extravagant," remarks Mr De Sousa. "A lot of the time, they can't actually be put into process, but what I've found in my experience is generally things with a high level of excitement, things that bounce or spin, any sort of movement is what they're after. Anything that challenges what they can currently do. What I've found is that children don't necessarily want to be able to do everything, but they're really searching for that challenge."

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As a result, Forpark is at the vanguard of new trends happening worldwide, creating equipment that causes a buzz in the playground. During regular production meetings, think tanks, and round table discussions, staff bounce ideas off each other and refine promising suggestions. "Any opportunity that we have to discuss with our customers and suppliers or anyone we come into contact with, we see that as an opportunity to draw from a resource," comments Mr Reedy. Putting heads together draws upon the company's collective experience and ►



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► skill sets, and ideas start flowing.

Creating equipment that looks great but is still safe and fun to play on for kids of all ages is the name of the game. “One of the things that customers are often looking for is something out of the box, something out of the ordinary, maybe a little artistic and what we try and do is balance that with playability.” Playability refers to the age ranges the equipment suits regarding a child’s ability. Forpark equipment mixes dynamic lines with bright colours, making a bold, modern statement. More importantly, Forpark equipment is loads of fun and built to last.

Proudly Australian

Forpark is determined to remain Australian owned, operated and manufactured, helping to protect the local economy. “The long term future of our people depends on manufacturing remaining in Australia,” says Mr De Sousa. All Forpark products come to life at Welshpool in Western Australia. “We have two manufacturing facilities. The main manufacturing facility [and head office] is basically where all steel fabrication including welding, drilling and powder coating, and any timber fabrication is conducted.”

Located just five minutes away from head office is the plastics manufacturing plant. Inside, two different processes, rotor



moulding and injection moulding, create slides, roofs, panels and the like. Manufacturing locally gives Forpark far greater control over quality and keeps prices down. These savings are passed on to customers directly, although most do not choose Forpark exclusively for price. Forpark customers, primarily local governments, know they are purchasing a high quality product with the services, support and spare parts to back it up. Forpark expects nothing but the best from its suppliers and over a thirty year history has developed solid business relationships, guaranteeing that customers receive a premium product.

"Forpark equipment mixes dynamic lines with bright colours, making a bold, modern statement."

Forpark also has a long-term commitment to its staff, many of whom have been with the company for well over a decade. "We believe that we can sustain a viable manufacturing industry here, keeping those staff employed as well, and we've resisted the temptation to go offshore for that reason." Given the resources boom, maintaining key staff has been ►



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► challenging but Forpark is staying true to its core values. “We’re committed to maintaining a presence here and ensuring that the industry is viable.”

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Over the years, Forpark has seen many competitors come and go. When customers require spare parts, having dealt with a ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ company proves difficult. “We’ve been around constantly over that time and have a reputation for longevity so customers know that we’ll always be there and that’s something that not everyone else can offer, particularly with a lot of imported products at the moment.”

Forpark remains as popular as ever here in Australia and overseas. The company is gaining interest internationally, with buyers recognising the signature style and impeccable quality that makes Forpark a market leader. Forpark currently exports to markets in South East Asia and other parts of Asia including Singapore where buyers are looking for a high quality product. “I think it’s interesting that we do get a lot of enquiries from Asia when we know that there are many Asian manufacturers that are cheaper compared to Australian



products," Mr Reedy remarks. "I think the fact that they're looking to Australia for equipment indicates that they recognise that there is quality here that is not always readily available in their own backyards." The company also receives many enquiries from New Zealand and the Middle East, with the latter region showing a lot of interest in the last six months.

Constantly developing innovative new products and ranges gives Forpark the competitive advantage. "One of our new ranges, the orbit range, has definitely grown legs and we're seeing a lot more of that being sold across the country. That particular range offers a different play value and a different type of activity, but we're also doing very well in our other areas."

Forpark is enjoying significant success across its entire portfolio, with the current outdoor gym range becoming particularly popular across all states. And get ready to work up a sweat, because Forpark is set to release an exciting new range of stainless steel gym equipment early next year. To be sure, Forpark is not just stepping forward to wow today's market; it is bouncing, climbing, spinning... ■

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