

Tugela Steel chooses Bell as preferred telehandler supplier

Tugela Steel and Bell Equipment are both family-owned businesses that had humble beginnings on a farm. They are also specialists in adding value to steel, but where Bell produces earthmoving equipment, Tugela Steel is a leading manufacturer in the Southern Hemisphere of standard size portal frame structures.

Tugela Steel is privately owned by Knut Haug who founded the business 40 years ago and has since been joined by his two sons, Bjorn, and Kristian. The company's head office is in La Lucia Ridge, Durban and the production facility is based on the family farm, King's Valley Farms, in Colenso.

Knut was four years old when he arrived in South African from Norway with his parents after World War II. His father, Theodore Haug, found employment at the Norwegian whaling station in Durban and later took a share in The Nest Hotel in the Drakensburg in 1963, which he ran successfully for 16 years.

During this time Knut started a supermarket in Loskop, in the Central Drakensburg, and wholesaled steel to the building trade. He closed the supermarket to focus on wholesaling steel, opening branches in Winterton and Harrismith. When a national steel manufacturer and distributor bought out the business Knut changed tack and used his knowledge and expertise to manufacture steel structures instead.

Tugela Steel was established in 1984 in a small workshop in Winterton and moved to Colenso in 1987 when Knut bought King's Valley Farms. Today the family's farming operation includes a 1 500-hectare game farm that has a focus on game breeding and a stud herd of disease-free buffalo, and 430 hectares of irrigated land under wheat, soyabeans, and yellow maize.

However, Tugela Steel is the cornerstone of their commercial endeavours. Although mass producing standard size portal frame structures in the 9m to 45m span range is its core business, it offers the whole spectrum of structural steel for the local market and exports into Africa, Australia, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Madagascar.

The family employs about 130 staff, which includes four fully equipped erection crews who travel throughout South Africa and the SADC (Southern African Development Communities) region erecting steel structures such as warehouses and assembly plants for clients in the mining, agriculture, retail, logistics, and aviation sectors. As one of Bell Equipment's preferred vendors for steel structures, they have erected several structures at the Richards Bay factory.

Knut's elder son, Bjorn, credits his family's business success to the fact that he, his father, and brother are hands on in all departments and "live and breathe by the principles of producing a quality product with the utmost integrity, and providing the highest level of service".

"We're very competitive in the market because of how the business is structured," he says. "We're the only business of this kind in the industry that keeps over 150 buildings in stock. In addition, we keep 4 000 to 6 000t of raw material in our stores at any one time, which reduces lead times and gives us better control over pricing."

Steel is both locally sourced and imported from reputable mills around the world, especially the longer, larger beams, which are not always readily available in South Africa.

As with most businesses, productivity is key, and Tugela Steel has a fleet of nine telehandlers that keeps their operation running like clockwork. "Some keep the production facility going by feeding the welding and component shops. Others are in the painting division where the steel is cleaned and painted, and some are dedicated to loading and offloading trucks, and loading containers.



"Without the telehandlers this place doesn't run. All our steel gets moved by telehandlers." The four newest machines are all JCB 560-80 Telehandlers – two purchased in 2020 and two in 2023.

Each have each clocked between 300 and 2 000 hours. Says Bjorn: "We only moved across to JCB once Bell became the dealer. We had an existing relationship with Bell and their Sales Representative, Keith Milne, and

knew that they are strong on backup. We're production-orientated and downtime is costly, so backup is important to us, especially being so remote. We also relate to Bell Equipment and like the relationship-based way they do business. Besides that, JCB as a brand is renowned around the world for its telehandler."

Tugela Steel does its own earthworks and construction and its relationship with Bell dates to 2015 when the company bought a B18E Articulated Dump Truck and an 11m³ dump trailer. The ADT has only worked 2 000 hours, but its service is invaluable building dams and platforms, maintaining roads on the property, and the district road.

The company has owned multiple brands of four-ton telehandlers but the JCB 560-80s are its first six-ton machines. Bjorn adds: "We custom ordered these machines from the UK to suit our specific purpose because we wanted the versatility. We chose the top-of-the-range agricultural machine because of its greater capability and speed. It's got superior lift (6 tons) and reach (7,9m) and we like the operator comfort and ease of use."

With the way the machines quietly purr around the plant it is no surprise that the new generation JCB EcoMAX engine, the hydraulics, and fuel economy have impressed.

The machines work a standard day shift, but the Telehandlers are fitted with premium lighting to enable them to offload trucks that arrive late or load containers afterhours to meet shipping deadlines when the need arises. Furthermore, they are used for farm tasks like moving hay bales and loading and offloading fertiliser. The added illumination is handy during night-time planting operations to load fertiliser into planters.

According to Bjorn the greater capacity has improved efficiencies. "We can now stack our steel higher in our storage facilities, and the Telehandlers can carry the full weight of a bundle of steel and place it in storage. We unload up to 18 trucks on a busy day, so this is a huge advantage as with our smaller machines we need to split the bundle and sometimes use two machines to offload."

While JCB LiveLink is not used to its full capacity, Bjorn appreciates that the software gives Bell technicians remote access to diagnose any issues, and his managers are able to book services and order spare parts. Bell Pietermaritzburg carries out services during the warranty period and the company is happy with the service and parts availability.

Looking to the future, the Haugs intend to own a fleet of eight JCB Telehandlers and would like Tugela Steel to become a trusted household brand in South Africa synonymous with steel structures. "When people think of steel structures, they should think of Tugela Steel much the same way people associate ADTs with Bell Equipment," says Bjorn.

Tugela Steel's JCB Telehandler operators (from left): Alfred Mazibuko, Gaga Buthelezi, Fanilo Buthelezi, and Bovan Mchunu with Bjorn Haug of Tugela Steel (second from right) and Bell Equipment Sales Representative, Keith Milne.