

TECH | PEOPLE

Q&A with Graeme van Zyl

*Director of Manufacturing:
Jendamark Automation*

*Jendamark as a brand
has earned its reputation
for developing and
building thousands of
world-class automotive
assembly systems over
three decades.*



*In this fourth instalment of an interview series with the directors, Jendamark India's head of marketing, **Sayali Mahajan**, chats to Jendamark Automation's director of manufacturing, **Graeme van Zyl**, about life and what it takes to build both quality machines and a successful company.*



Sayali: When was the last time you visited India?

Graeme: It was a week before the Covid shutdown. That was three years ago, in early March 2020. I flew home on the Friday, and on the Sunday the airlines stopped flying.



Sayali: Tell us a bit about your childhood and where you come from.

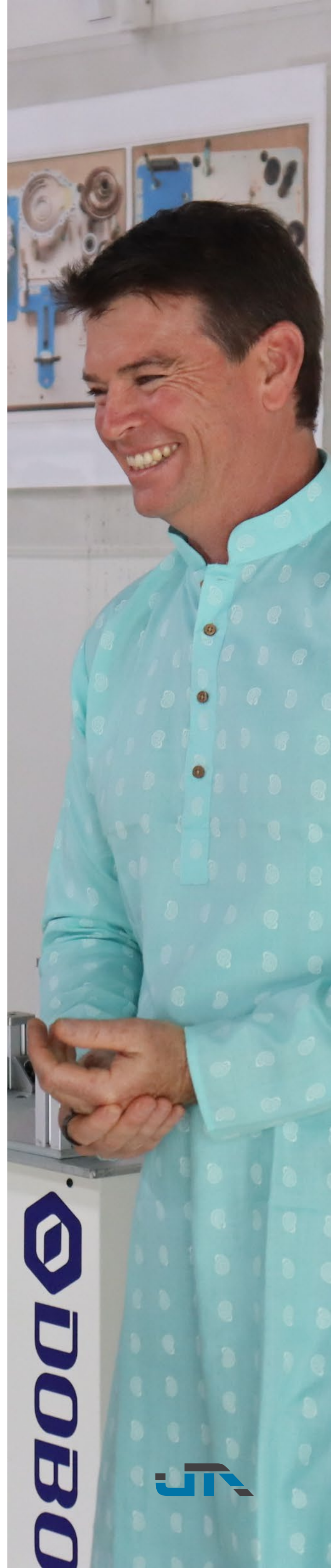
Graeme: I grew up on a citrus farm outside an agricultural town called Tzaneen, in the far north-eastern part of South Africa. Our farm was about 40km outside the town, so we were isolated. My father didn't grow up there, but he moved to the area and established the farm on which we were raised.

My father became a very successful farmer. He always applied himself in whatever he did and expected the same from those around him. He instilled in us that, through hard work and effort, success will follow. Sub-standard was never an option for him. Either aim to be the best or don't attempt it. His success and desire to achieve have rubbed off on us.

With two older brothers, my fighting spirit was nurtured through exposure to a competitive environment and always being challenged for my place. I grew up in a loving family environment where we got along very well. My parents believed in giving us a good education. We were sent to boarding schools from an early age, and I loved my school days.

I grew up in a very privileged lifestyle. In saying that, my parents never spoilt us. We had to work for what we got but, at the same time, we were taught to aim high.

Our family has since moved on from farming life. Neither myself nor my brothers moved back to the farm, which allowed my dad to sell it.



Sayali: Which do you prefer, your earlier farm life or your city life now?

Graeme: Well, I live in a city, but I am very fortunate that my wife's family is still involved in farming. So, we get the opportunity to visit them on and off the farm. I always joke around with my brother-in-law, saying that I would be the most useless person if I lived on a farm.

Sayali: What was your first job? How did you start your career?

Graeme: I studied electrical engineering and we had to do an internship. My first job was wiring electrical panels for a production line. So that's basically where I started. My career path took me to Argentina for two years. When I returned, I joined Jendamark.

Sayali: How long have you been working at Jendamark?

Graeme: I joined Jendamark in 1996, when I was 24 years old. So, you work that back... it's been a long time now!



Sayali: Tell us about your first job. What was that experience like?

Graeme: The company I joined was a very big international company that was huge in automation. Through it, I worked in Argentina for two years. We used to work very hard and put in long hours. We would start working on site at 5 o'clock in the morning and get home at midnight. When you work on site you have to make things work, irrespective of the time you started that morning. We were installing a lot of lines, yet I never got tired, I loved doing my job. I was single, so I didn't have anything else to do. I was getting paid well and those two years have been among the best years of my life. But eventually it took a toll on me. When I came back home, I realised my friends had all moved on in their lives. That's when I decided I wanted to stay in South Africa. I worked hard and got a nice foothold in the industry, and I built on that. And that's one of the reasons why I joined Jendemark.





Sayali: What was your first role at Jendamark?

Graeme: I joined Jendamark as a PLC programmer. When I was in Argentina, my job was electrician. The PLC programmer often used to tell me that the wiring in the panel was wrong because the input/output was not right, so the signals were not coming through. I grew tired of him telling me that I was doing my job wrong when I knew I wasn't. So, I became a PLC programmer to show him. That's how I started working at Jendamark, and I built up my skills in programming the lines. One project started becoming too big not to have a project manager. Then I stepped in and said I would manage the project because it needed some organisation – and that's how I started management progression within Jendamark. I worked with the project management department for a long time. Even after I became a director, I was still heading that department. Fortunately, the partnership we have between the four directors is a very “I've got your back” kind of partnership. We realised that I was in a position where I was just taking on too much and we restructured the company to share the workload between us.

Sayali: What does 'successful' mean for you?

Graeme: Successful for me is about identifying and acknowledging what you want to achieve. That to me is the most important thing. I don't profess to want to be richest man in the world. That's not my ambition. I strive to be happy. If I want to achieve more than where I am now, I must realise I am the one that has to do things differently, change my strategies, my goals, opinions, and actions to become whatever I want to be. I think for me that's the most critical thing. To understand and acknowledge what you want to achieve and what you must do to be able to achieve that. Throughout life, your goals and ambitions change, and one has to keep up with the changes one expects from oneself.

Sayali: I have noticed that you love being organised and having a dedicated system for everything. Are you that organised even in your personal life?

Graeme: No. Not at all. At work, I am the boss, I know what I want. At home, I am not the boss. I take a step back there. I am a disciplined person but at home I choose not to be the disciplinarian. My wife complements me in allowing for a change of roles. It's better that way for me. I must have a break from my work life.



Sayali: I don't know how many people know your cycling story. You have been cycling for the last 21 years, doing a major cycle race every year. Could you tell us more about that?

Graeme: In South Africa there's a bicycle race which used to be called the Argus Cycle Tour, which is the world's largest individually timed cycle race. Today it's known as the Cape Town Cycle Tour. Anybody who knows the city of Cape Town knows there's a peninsula, and the race is around that peninsula.

The story behind that is we were playing squash one night and, after having a few refreshments following the game, we were discussing what our next challenge would be. One guy suggested we go down to Cape Town and do this 100km cycle race. We all thought that's a good idea but that, if we have to do it, we must do it right. Associated with this race is a "21 Club". After completing 21 races, you get to join this club. Becoming a member is supposedly a prestigious thing. By the end of the evening, it was not only about doing 21 cycle races, but about doing 21 cycle races in succession so that you can never miss one.

The main reason I started was because I never used to take leave from work. I thought this could be a good reason to commit myself to something outside of work, which would force me to take leave for a long weekend away at least once a year. 22 years later, after not missing a single event, I sit here, part of the "21 Club".





Sayali: What is your biggest achievement in life, personally and professionally?

Graeme: I think my biggest achievement is being happy. I didn't have any preconceived idea of who I should be and where I should be. I have faced adversity and I have faced opportunities. The fact is, I am happy with myself. I am happy with the environment that I have created for my family. I love my family and am proud of them.

I am also proud of the fact that I have managed to attain a company of this calibre. The status, the success, and the joy of building Jendamark is tremendous. I am fortunate that I have an awesomely supportive wife and family, allowing me to commit myself to a company that I share with three partners, who are as committed and dedicated to achieving the same goals. We have built it up ourselves from next to nothing. That's where my success lies and that's my achievement.



Sayali: What are you passionate about in life apart from Jendamark or work?

Graeme: I enjoy outdoor activities. Fortunately, I am a reasonable sportsman, so I will always enjoy any sport. If somebody invites me to play a game of squash or cricket, go for a swim or a cycle, I would be happy to do that. Also, the directors go on a fishing trip every second year. I am not a fisherman, but I enjoy fishing just to share in the opportunity to spend some out-of-office time with my partners. The fact that we can get together is what I enjoy.

Sayali: How did you meet your wife, Angela, and how did you end up marrying her?

Graeme: As you know, I started at Jendemark as a PLC programmer, so I knew how to use and fix a computer. Often, I used to help people set up their computers. Angela called me from the reception desk because she was facing some computer issues and that's how it all started. In no time, one thing led to another, and the rest is history.

Sayali: How do you feel coming to Jendemark India after three years?

Graeme: I am the last director to visit since the world re-opened after the Covid shutdown. I have heard a lot about the incredible growth and fabulous things you have achieved. I was a bit sceptical before coming here as I had already heard a lot. The purpose of my visit wasn't to meet the customers, as I knew that side was well taken care of. What I wanted to focus on was Jendemark, our people, the quality of the work you guys are doing. It's clear to see the progress you have made. How you have upgraded everything is very impressive.

Previously, India was dependent on South Africa, but now you are managing everything well, especially during and after Covid. You were always capable of achieving this. Now the focus should be on having the correct mindset and finding the correct solutions to keep getting better. If everyone shares the right mindset, it becomes easier to achieve what we want to achieve.





Sayali: How many times have you visited India apart from work?

Graeme: Never. I would definitely like to travel outside of work the next time I visit though.

Sayali: What are your suggestions for Jendamark India?

Graeme: My suggestion for Jendamark India is to keep doing what you are doing. Currently, to me, Jendamark South Africa is like a young 20-year-old and Jendamark India is its younger teenage brother. I say this because the growth process that you are going through now is the process we have already gone through. When Jendamark South Africa was a teenager, Jendamark India was just starting out as a toddler but today you guys have matured a lot.

Sayali: Where do you see the global Jendamark brand in the next five years?

Graeme: I don't have any preconceived idea. I think I can comfortably leave this up to my partners – Quinton, Siegfried and Yanesh. I leave them to guide the ship while I am in the engine room. I will share my opinion if I don't think the way they do but, at the end of the day, the vision of where we are going is up to them. As you mentioned earlier, I am the type of guy who likes to set rules and have order in achieving the objective.

Sayali: How do you manage or handle the conflicts among the four of you?

Graeme: If you knew us back in the day, when we were younger, we used to argue a lot. Soon though, we realised that this won't get us anywhere in the long run. We then started to acknowledge and capitalise on each other's strengths for the betterment of us and the company. Our partnership is built on trust. I don't believe I have to check up on what my partners are doing in their fields, just like they don't have to check up on me. This allows me to stay focused on what I must do to the best of my ability, knowing they are doing the same for the company.

