

PRESS RELEASE - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Yachting Ventures Announces Jury for 2026 IBEX Startup Pitch Competition

Yachting Ventures has unveiled the judging panel for the 2026 IBEX Startup Pitch Competition, bringing together a group of investors, startup advisors and marine industry leaders to evaluate the next generation of leisure marine innovation.

Taking place during the International BoatBuilders' Exhibition & Conference (IBEX) in Tampa on Tuesday 6th October from 1pm – 2:30pm in room 107, the competition will see some of the industry's most promising startups pitch live to an audience of investors, media, corporate partners and industry professionals.

The competition sits within the wider Yachting Ventures Start-Up Pavilion, now in its third year at IBEX, which gives emerging companies a dedicated space to exhibit, build commercial relationships and enter the US market. Participating founders not only have the chance to compete for a prize, but also to receive feedback from leaders who have collectively helped hundreds of startups scale worldwide.

Among this year's judges are:

Matt Vranich, Senior Advisor at BCE Consulting and former commercial executive at Navico and Brunswick Corporation. With more than two decades of international leadership experience, Matt has helped global marine businesses accelerate growth across North America, Europe and Latin America.

Brian Karas, angel investor, startup advisor and former early employee at companies including HubSpot and LOOKOUT. Brian now advises and invests in startups across the marine, cybersecurity and intelligence sectors and brings both operational and investment expertise to the panel.

Jeremy Fritzhand, Vice President of Platform and Member Engagement at Embarc Collective, Florida's largest startup hub. Prior to this, Jeremy was the CEO of VentureStudio at Ahmedabad University, one of India's leading startup incubators. During his career, Jeremy has supported more than 670 startups across multiple accelerator programmes, helping founders collectively generate tens of millions of dollars in funding and revenue while building internationally recognised innovation ecosystems.

Les Ares, General Manager of Freedom Boat Club Tampa Bay & Central Florida, part of Brunswick Corporation. With more than 25 years in the recreational marine industry, Les has held senior leadership positions across Raymarine, Navico Group and Brunswick, giving him extensive experience in product development, OEM partnerships and boating operations.

Drew Orvieto, Director of Marine Solutions at Siemens Energy and an active startup advisor and investor. A recognised leader in marine technology and sustainability, Drew combines expertise in naval architecture, electrification, product development and commercial innovation, with multiple patented maritime technologies to his name.

Brian Hunter Hardman, M&A professional at Edison Business Advisors, serial entrepreneur and strategic advisor. With a background spanning marine, aviation, SaaS and luxury travel, Brian advises business owners and startups on growth, investment and acquisitions. A licensed Yachtmaster and former luxury yacht captain and marine engineer, he brings a unique combination of hands-on marine industry experience and commercial expertise to the panel.

Together, the panel represents decades of experience across the global marine industry and startup ecosystem, bringing valuable commercial, technical and investment perspectives to this year's competition.

"We're incredibly proud of the calibre of judges joining us this year," said Gabbi Richardson, Founder of Yachting Ventures. "Each brings a unique perspective - from investing in startups and scaling global businesses to developing technology. For founders, this is about much more than competing for a prize; it's an opportunity to present their business to people who can genuinely influence the next stage of their growth."

Applications for the IBEX 2026 Pitch Competition are still open now and will close on 31st August 2026. [Interested startups can apply here.](#)

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Notes to Editor:

[Please follow this link to access imagery.](#)

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About Yachting Ventures

Yachting Ventures is a growth platform for leisure marine startups and scaleups, focused on founder visibility, industry access and strategic connections. Through a curated community, media and content, and activations at major international boat shows, Yachting Ventures supports founders as they scale into new markets and engage with investors, partners and customers worldwide.

About IBEX

IBEX, Where Better Boats Begin, is the marine industry's largest technical trade event in North America. IBEX is owned and produced by the National Marine Manufacturers Association (www.nmma.org) and RAI Amsterdam (www.rai.nl). The 2026 IBEX is scheduled to take place at the Tampa Convention Center, October 6-8, in Tampa, FL USA. For more information, please visit www.ibexshow.com.