

# Finding the loophole

Faced with the ban of the ever-popular 45 ft container in Europe, UNIT45's innovation ensured its survival. Lacey Jones reports

In 1996, the European Union (EU) made plans to harmonise road vehicle weights and dimensions across member states which, as a whole, seemed a good idea. However, one particular proposal relating to the dimensions of a semi-trailer rose eyebrows of shippers and shipowners alike.

The EU's new plans included limiting the length of truck trailers to 13.6 m (44.6 ft) - four inches shorter than the 45 ft container that was becoming increasingly popular on trade routes between the US and Asia. By the early 2000s, European legislation had laid down the requirements for the length and width of road transportation as follows: the total length of the truck-trailer combination had to be within 16,500 mm. From the king-pin till the real end of the trailer, 12,000 mm, and a swing radius from the king-pin from 2,040 mm.

This rule would effectively outlaw the 45 ft container in European member states as it would protrude eight cm at the rear and therefore would not conform to E.E.C directive EN253. While they could be offloaded at European ports, these 45 ft containers could not be trucked inland.

Shipowners lobbied frantically to reverse the ban on the bigger box but the EU ultimately stuck with its decision, meaning Europe's short sea industry needed a creative solution. Jan Koolen, managing director of the Netherlands-based shipping container manufacturing firm UNIT45, told **CM**: "The late Peter van Dijk, who at the time worked for Geest North Sea Lines, came up with a genius plan to - in order for the 45 ft container to be admissible and legal for road transportation in the EU - 'cut' its corners.

"Fitting the 45 ft container with these chamfered euro castings, the 45 ft container became legal for road transportation and UNIT45 was born."

Founded in 2002 in Rotterdam, UNIT45 specifically started to develop and market these 45 ft pallet-wide containers. By simply chamfering the euro castings, the container conformed entirely to the European transportation and was suitable for intermodal transport.

"Now this container size has become the standard unit for European intermodal transport as it enables operators to maximise cubic capacity and payload within the physical and regulatory constraints that apply to Europe's congested transport infrastructure," Koolen added.

UNIT45's primary focus today is to meet the container equipment requirements of shortsea/intermodal transport operators. Koolen explained: "Because most intermodal and shortsea operators order containers in relatively small quantities (compared to deep-sea lines) and have little experience of building in Asia, there is a real need for an intermediary who can provide the link between these operators and the leading manufacturers, most of whom are now located in China.

"However, UNIT45 is more than just an intermediary. It takes full

responsibility for the financial arrangements with the factory and contracts separately with the end user regarding price, currency denomination and required delivery location."

UNIT45 engineers supervise the manufacturing process at the factory and liaise with classification surveyors to ensure that containers meet international regulatory requirements. Additionally, the company also arranges delivery from the factory to the locations nominated by the customer.

While the Rotterdam-based company mainly focuses on meeting the container equipment requirements of the European shortsea/intermodal transport operators, over the years UNIT45 has expanded its activities worldwide. Nowadays the company provides multiple solutions for international markets through its subsidiaries.

In addition to providing its founding 45 ft product for the European market, through UNIT48 Ltd the company provides 48 ft containers for the Australian market and via UNIT53 Ltd it offers 53 ft containers for the North American market available for (financial) lease, short- and long-term rental or purchase.

"As worldwide demand increases across high-performance sectors, such as information technology, energy and raw materials, the global logistics industry faces mounting pressure to develop forward-thinking systems in storage, transshipment and auxiliary cargo services," Koolen said. "UNIT45 designs are constantly revised to take account of demands in the market, new technology and materials as they become available and proven in service."

In line with this philosophy in March of this year, the company extended its product line in the US with the addition of a 53 ft dry safety container, designed to offer the highest standards of cargo security and developed with sustainability in mind. The 53 ft lockable container was designed in response to the widely reported 10-year high in cargo theft.



This Page: UNIT45's managing director Jan Koolen  
 Opposite Page  
 Left: A UNIT45 container  
 Right: UNIT45 produces a variety of models



With regards to its primary European market, UNIT45 has seen its products become more competitive with the truck and trailer business compared to the container business due to a growing shortage of knowledgeable truck drivers.

A report published earlier this year by the International Road Transport Union (IRU), entitled the *Europe Truck Driver Shortage Report*, surveyed over 1,000 operators in the EU, UK and Norway and found a shortfall of over 233,000 drivers. By 2028, this is expected to rise over 745,000 as active drivers retire.

"We see in all continents that the population of the international truck drivers consists mainly of older people who will retire in the coming years," Koolen said. "This job is not fit for younger people, and therefore we foresee that there will be a shortage in availability of knowledgeable truckers although cargo that should be moved will grow and has to be transported."

He added: "This is one of the reasons that the intermodal market will grow

in coming years, mainly as well due to the fact that we are developing more and more specialised containers that compete with road transport like the 900 litre diesel electrical reefer container for the New Silkway route and the safety containers to move high value cargo like cigarettes, electronics and pharmaceutical products."

The 900-litre reefer container was developed in collaboration with UNIT45's client and Belgian logistics solutions' provider H.Essers, and is 100 litres larger than the company's previous design. Depending on the cargo, the new reefer can remain self-supporting for between 18 and 28 days making it a valuable solution in countries that have problems with the quality of diesel fuel.

"Over the years, UNIT45 has proven to be a true intermodal innovator with all the containers that have been tailored to meet individual operators' requirements," Koolen said. This ability to adapt and overcome - starting from its origin - will ensure that the company will thrive in the years ahead as the market continues to evolve.

# UNIT45

INTERMODAL INNOVATORS

Visit us at stand F26

INTERMODAL

EUROPE 2024

12-14 November, Rotterdam Ahoy

CONTACT US NOW:

info@unit45.com

+31 10 211 02 22

MARKET LEADER IN 45FT CONTAINERS AND MORE

UNIT45, worldwide market leader in 45ft containers, concentrates exclusively on the development, construction, financing and delivery of 45ft pallet wide containers for European shortsea/intermodal transport operators.

Achieve efficiency on all levels of environment and infrastructure. Reduce your transport costs and carbon footprint.

Transporting more with fewer movements, all handled with the same infrastructure as used for 40ft containers.

Start your intermodal journey with UNIT45 and contact us today for a suitable offer!

Rotterdam Airportplein 29 3045 AP Rotterdam The Netherlands

phone + 31 10 211 02 22 fax + 31 10 218 32 84 www.unit45.com info@unit45.com