

Howard

By keeping a handle on their production, ratcheting it down to about one boat a week, Howard Custom Boats devotes the same degree of undiluted attention and patently excessive man hours to the building of every boat. Fully half of that focus is devoted to their 26-foot Cat, introduced in 1999 and widely praised thereafter for its natural power-receptive tendencies.



A year after its release, the 22-degree, center-pod running surface was fitted with a new topside mold, and the walk-through bowrider was born. A very large, playpen-styled forward seating area fills the front quarters of the 26-footer, and the long, facing seats invite a comfortable, side-by-side, forward-facing sprawl.

Bowrider sales now outnumber those of the closed-bow 26-footer three to one—a trend that has also overtaken the rest of Howard's line. The 26-foot bowrider bases at \$71,500 (a meaningless number, given the never-done 6.2L power), \$2,500 more than the closed-bow.

Interestingly, the additional 100 pounds or so forward weight and the replacement of smooth deck glass with a more resistant interior surface had negligible effect on this hull's deeply seated performance. We previously tested an HP500-powered 26-foot closed-bow, in carbureted form, and hit 79 and change at peak rpm. This open-bow ran 80 flat with the same horsepower, framed in the new fuel-injected hardware.

Put MerCruiser's beautifully engineered HP500EFI in the well, and this boat emerges a dandy turnkey, family lake skate, making great use of its 470-horsepower reserve, executing every aspect required of the family-friendly performance boat. Our driving trio took turns lauding the Howard's ▶



driving manners, each rating it one of today's superior air-entrapment, sport-boat packages. It's exciting without being insane. It's exhilarating without necessarily fostering a best-friend relationship with your boat mechanic, and you work the throttles a little easier knowing that Mercury Racing stands behind this 80-mile-an-hour beauty for a full year. Howard rigged this super-sanitary 26-footer with Imco dual-ram steering (\$3,250), Teague switchable exhaust tips (1,335) to aid

the 500's respiratory needs, dual batteries (\$400) to assist in powering a clean, tight-sounding Sony system that was upgraded to include a ten-disc changer (\$2,000). Halon provided fire insurance (\$275), and Howard tacked on \$250 for a glove box, \$335 for wind deflectors and \$250 for a driver's footrest.

Hull and Hardware

This is a familiar, well-honed, time-proven bottom, and Howard has nailed the dial-in. The extra bow weight is coun-

tered by the considerable degree of natural lift built into the single-stepped pod-bottom. The boat's running surface is actually the center pod, which cuts with a 22-degree vee, and it protrudes one inch deeper than the sponsons, which act as stabilizers that you never feel, from above. The sponsons are stepped to relieve air. The Howard projects a relatively low profile, as the class goes, but also has enough inherent freeboard to prevent forward-riding pas-

sengers from enduring sponson spray at low speed. It measures precisely 26 feet, sponson tip to trailing edge, and weighs 4,200 pounds—about average for this class.

Howard retains some of the time-honed production values that stand tall today in those 30-year-old Howards still representing at your favorite hot-boat haunt—every boat cures in the mold for two weeks—but the Cat also wears contemporary technology very well. The hull is fully balsa

cored. Gaffrig throttle and shifter controls are standard, as are Gaffrig instruments. A full complement of powder-coated hardware is standard, and Eddie Marine built the batch on our test boat. A power hatch lid, with hidden hinges, is also base equipment throughout the Howard line.

The Eddie hardware, including vented rear board-

offer up to seven colors on a standard paint job, but in this case, less was definitely more. The over-the-top sano theme ran true aft of the back bench, where the HP500 was center stage in a sanitary, accessible and distinctly low-maintenance partnership.

Howard's proficiency in the glass shop was also reflected in the sleek form of their glass hatch lid, which enables virtually any naturally aspirated engine, including 540s, to run unexposed—a fine point that tends to weigh favorably with the female half of the buying equation. Our HP500 Howard was satisfyingly quiet, but rang the right bells when awakened by the jab of the throttle. Just so you know, air is funneled through the cockpit into intake vents, which cools the engine in the absence of a top-mounted induction scoop. Bennett tabs were rigged into this boat, solely for the use of extreme low-speed tow duty. They weren't a factor in our tests, but the wakeboarders in your group will appreciate them.

Interior and Amenities

Land and Water Interiors (Santa Ana,

California) was instructed to tastefully white out the inside of this 26-footer, indulging just the slightest bit of blue trim and logo embroidery to bring out the full impact of its shapes and texture, thereby emphasizing the boat's sano theme once more. The interior work was strong, with a great look and feel, and the comfort level rose to the level of the cosmetics. Every slot was comfortable. The molded driver and front passenger seats were well padded and very secure and locked occupants in place—the driver more so, with the cost-optional assistance of a fiberglass footrest (\$250, and both sides should have one). The driver's starboard arm panel presented a padded, natural extension to the awaiting controls, which were, of ▶

ing handles, fuel fills, ski tow, grab handles, stern and bow cleats, bolt-on engine vents and bezels, was beautifully finished and fit to the boat. Judging by the look, feel and drive of this 26-footer, which was hijacked from two-time Howard owners Dave and Dawn Dressen, Howard's production team has never been more at the top of its game than under the current regime of Mike Willen. From pristine tooling comes fine fiberglass parts, and Howard's labor-intensive finish work lends a fine sheen to the lamination.

This boat's three-shade blue and gray gelcoat was alive with fade work. The Dressens were obviously in the hunt for a clean, crisp look in the water, and Howard nailed it. They

course, plotted within range of a natural grip.

The front seat bases were dampened with the same high-density carpeting that covered the cockpit, rising nine inches off the floor, where they found an elegant contrast with the supportive, white vinyl. The walk-through is conveniently wide and steps down into a forward-seating area. Two can recline in great comfort, with just the right back angle contoured into the rectangular, playpen-styled bow seats. The seats aren't seeded as deeply as they are in some sport tunnels in this size class, with Howard's inherent, wind-piercing lower profile. The 26's rear bench is large and very accommodating, and, just like those up front, rear passengers are made to feel very secure and comfortable. Grab handles are within reach of all side passengers, with the white powdercoated rear ones neatly embedded into the padded, easily accessible gunnels. More deft Howard engineering surfaces elsewhere, as well, notably in the angled, paneled design of the dash, optional flip-up windscreens on stainless mount railing (at \$335, it's a feature this genre calls for) and the hidden hinge assembly, to name a bit.

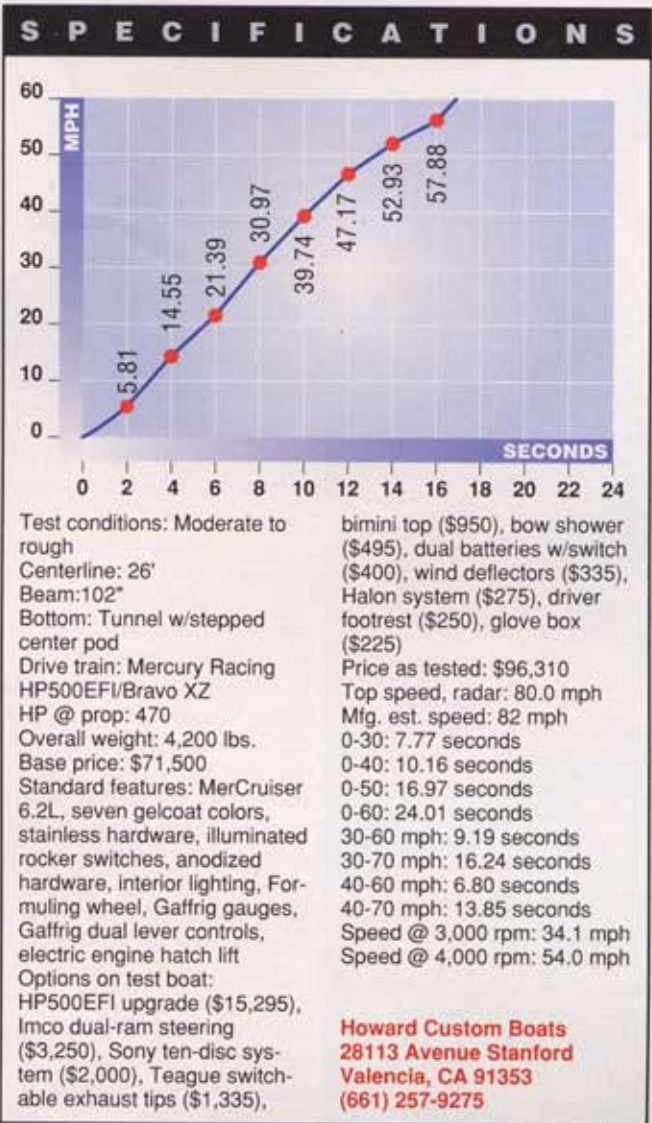
The dash design is pretty basic in design, and the angled design works well to neatly plot an engraved switch panel, with backlit rockers and some of the smaller Gaffrig gauges. A Bluewater trim indicator and Formling wheel are nice standards. Our boat had an optional glove box (\$225), and a hard-hitting Sony ten-disc changer, with 15 speakers and assorted additional hardware included in its \$2,000 price, was tucked neatly under the port dash. Interior lighting, eight cup holders and a hinged floor-mounted ski locker are base-boat inclusive. A bow shower (\$495), mounted and operated from the bow's anchor locker, sprays out a retractable, ten-foot hose that pulls water from a transom-mounted pump.



Engine and Drive

It is at this powering point, or in the proximity thereof, that the Howard really comes alive and that the controlled groove of its bottom begins to earn the appreciation of the performance-boating enthusiast. The

470-horse, HP/XZ drive upgrade presented a great-looking, highly reliable and most potent source of power to a hull that thrives on it. The HP represents a \$15,295 upgrade over the unimaginable base-listed engine, the 6.2L.



Our XZ drive, standard on the HP, was packed with 1.5:1 gearing and spun a 28-inch Bravo four-ear. Imco Stern Advantage dual-ram steering (\$3,200) further solidified this boat's driving manners, and the CMI exhaust ran Teague Custom Marine switchable exhaust tips (\$1,335). A Halon system (\$275) and dual batteries (\$400) occupied the well, which was roomy enough for relatively easy access and which showed nothing but tidy wiring work and hardware installation.

Performance at low and moderate speed: Howard has bred impressive civility into their lineup's only tunnel boat, and, paired with the HP, it delivers a delightful ride, superior handling and absolute control. It seems to instinctively find lift, in quick cadence with the trim button, and goes right over the top with no bowrise. The tunnel bottom tends to be a little noisier at low speed than a vee, with some water slap, but it doesn't lack for low-speed response—it tracks extremely well. You don't have to be particularly tunnel savvy to run this boat at any speed—it's very driver-friendly.

The Howard doesn't require much speed at all to find cruise mode, and it didn't throw off any low-speed porpoise or lobe. It liked rpm and began to feel truly like a sport boat beyond four-grand. Moving our weight around in the boat didn't dramatically affect its ride or feel, owing partially to the package's low center of gravity. Something is working to give this boat a balanced feel: It's one of the few tunnels you'll drive that carves a true, inside lean in the turns. It cuts the S-turns consistently well in both directions and does so at all speeds.

One last thing to consider when comparing the relative merit between vee-bottom and tunnel. The former is known for carving effectively through hard chop, such as you'll see on busy boating days on Havasu. But the best of the

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