

**W**hen the Editors of HOT BOAT called Howard Custom Boats owner Gene Willen to invite him to a Deckboat Test Event a couple of years ago, Willen politely declined. "We have no interest in building a deckboat," he said at the time.

Fast-forward to January 2006, and you'll see the company's new 28' Sport Deck gracing the cover of HOT BOAT's West Coast issue. So what changed Willen's mind?

"I'm stubborn but not stupid," he explains. "The fact is, the whole industry is going toward deckboats, plain and simple. Left to my own devices, I would still be building the 21-footer we had 20 years ago."

Fortunately, Willen's son Mike knows that you can't stay stagnant in any business, particularly the marine industry. Mike, who most recently designed and built Howard's ►





## WHAT THE DRIVERS SAID

**Driver 1:** "Wow! What a big, roomy boat. They've done a good job in their tooling. It's very spacious. Overall performance and the package was extremely nice. Great controllability. I give the Howard good marks and high praise. It didn't rattle like some of the other ones that were in this test."

**Driver 2:** "We were in extremely rough water, but we didn't get any water inside the cockpit. Gauges are all easy to see. There's lots of storage in the side panels and a very large swim step. The only unusual thing I can see is the manual stern light—but maybe that's a good thing, because that's one less electric thing that can go bad. The doors stayed shut, the carpets stayed down, the interior stayed in place. At these speeds, we usually blow something out or something off. This will probably be a bit pricier than other deckboats, but the man who can afford it will find it well worth it."

in spring-loaded detent that make opening them a snap; in addition, they won't rattle in either position. When closed, the doors also function as a great wind and spray deflector. Additionally, the bow step-off area is actually molded into the boat, not an add-on, making for a stronger hull and reducing any flex.

But Mike's best idea was to incorporate both balsa wood and foam composite materials into the construction scheme. Howard's traditional catamaran sports a complete balsa wood-cored hull, while their 110-mph 28' Bullet, seen at last year's L.A. Show, was an all-composite boat. By combining the materials, the 28' Sport Deck is lighter than other deckboats, yet costs less to build than the all-composite version of the Bullet. (Amazingly, this deckboat weighs in at 4,800 pounds—exactly the same as Howard's 26 Cat.) The Sport Deck's transom and stringers are wood; then, from the chine up, the entire side of the boat is ultra-strong Diab foam composite material, including the boat's Decolite bulkheads. This adds a week to the normal two-week lay-up time, but the end result is a stronger and yet lighter boat.

## On Board

With an overall length of 28'6", the Sport Deck was capable of accommodating extra height—it's a full foot and a half taller than Howard's cat—and the added freeboard makes it especially inviting in rough water and very safe for everybody aboard.

The Sport Deck is built using three main molds—the hull, the forward deck and the cockpit floor part of the deck—as well as a dozen others that encompass various smaller parts, such as the fiberglass sundeck, engine lid, ski locker doors and the sliding front doors. All are bonded together using state-of-the-art Plexus, which is tougher than the actual fiberglass.

Howard's 26 Cat, with its perfect balance point, was the original prototype for Mike as he set out to design a bottom for this new modified tunnel hull. But in adding two and a half feet to the overall length to accommodate up to 14 passengers, he performed an extensive redesign, shifting the weight in the new

28' Bullet step-vee, was also the brainchild behind the deckboat, incorporating the lines of the Bullet that just happens to have the profile of a cat. Its appearance is therefore startlingly different from other deckboats.

In designing the boat, Mike's focus was more on the boat's ergonomics than the performance. The concept wasn't to build a 100-mph deckboat, but rather a luxury performance boat where the driver would spend

most of the time in the 70-mph range. Functionality, comfort and safety were the watchwords; speed was a secondary issue.

In developing the Sport Deck, Mike realized that being one of the last of the Southern California builders to introduce a deckboat would work to Howard's advantage. "We took a look at what everybody else has done and improved on it," Gene Willen says. "We saw what everybody's pluses and minuses were, why

things worked and don't work, threw the worst ideas and kept the best ones." Rather than copying ideas wholesale, Mike incorporated all the best ideas in a unique and innovative way.

One subtle but notable example is a sliding protective door Mike placed at the front of the bow—not a swinging metal "turnstile" type gate, but a pair of sliding fiberglass doors that retract into the port and starboard sponsons. The doors feature a push-





# Howard 28' Sport Deck

boat, making the sponsons longer and deeper and changing the angle of attack—and, finally, finding a new perfect balance point. The result: a hull that bears a passing resemblance to the original cat, but that actually bears little resemblance from the step on back. “Mike has a very keen sense of looking at the bottom of something and figuring out what it’s going to take to make it work,” Gene says.

The new hull, with its ventilated step and 22-degree vee, is apt to remind customers of both the 26' Cat and the deep-vee Bullet. Inside, you'll find deep storage compartments, two built-in ski lockers, a pair of bow seats to accommodate eight, 27" deep rear molded-in swim step, full fiberglass self-draining interior liner with built-in storage compartments, molded-in nonskid floors, porta-potty storage compartment, and a pair of built-in, self-draining 48-quart ice chests.

Base power in the Sport Deck is the 496 Mag, whose 375 horses will push the boat to 65 mph; an upgrade to the 496 HO will deliver 70 mph—perfectly reasonable for the family deckboat market. For the performance enthusiast looking for 80 and beyond, the 525 would be an ideal choice; it's fully warrantied, runs on regular gas, cuts through the rough water and, most importantly, isn't such a headache when it comes to finding affordable insurance. “I've got customers who own our high-powered catamarans but want to get rid of them to buy a deckboat with a 525,” Gene says. “They've had enough of going out, breaking drives and spending \$4,000 a year on insurance. Our clientele is maturing—they realize that practicality is key, and that 80 mph is still pretty fast.”

All that being said, our test boat—the first out of the mold—came equipped with a Gary Taylor Performance 700 EFI/Imco Extreme Advantage Drive (588 ci) with an Imco Extreme Advantage drive, a package with enough power to make this family-minded craft double as a 90-mph rocketship. This naturally aspirated engine is built to perform, with Dart Big-M Racing block, Dart 355 CNC-ported cylinder heads, Callies Magnum crank, Oliver forged I-Beam connecting rods, J&E



forged 4.560 pistons and Dan Olson 12-quart kick-out oil pan and CMI fully polished elbow top headers.

Standard equipment on the Sport Deck includes Autometer gauges, Livorsi offshore controls, Aqua Step boarding ladder and a choice of cockpit seating (two buckets or driver bucket with a full-length L-shaped lounge on the port side). Our tester came with some of Howard's coolest options, such as bow and stern washdown showers, dual batteries, sink, bimini top, built-in fiberglass fender holders, remov-

able cockpit table and propane stainless-steel barbecue grill. Like any Howard, there are no limitations on graphics; our test boat featured four colors and multiple fades.

## Performance

Howard's craftsmanship is legendary, and our dry-land inspection crew was suitably impressed by the new boat, awarding a perfect “10” to the quality of the glass, tooling, gel-coat, installation, bow rail and pin lines. Our drivers were no less impressed. “This is probably

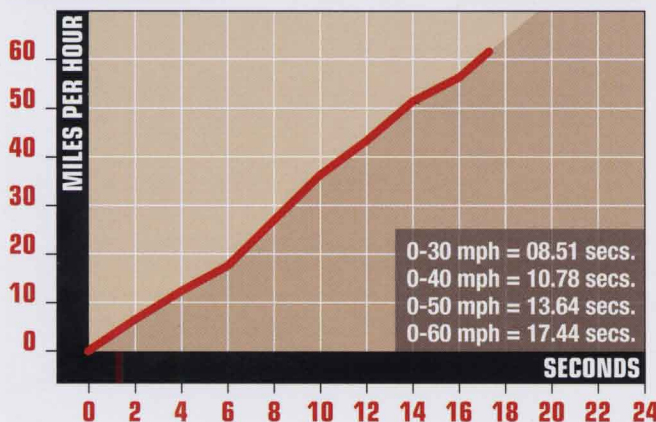
the nicest deckboat we have ever tested,” raved the first team dispatched to the lake in the Sport Deck.

The boat took off with minimal bowrise, so you don't lose sight of the horizon. It was quick getting on plane, and as the Sport Deck leveled off, we fed it a bit of trim and were pleased by the low-end maneuverability—there's no hop or porpoise in the boat at all, and it carried itself extremely well. Controllability was enhanced by the Imco tilt steering and Livorsi shifters. Bringing the boat into the midrange, the 28' cruised and tracked beautifully between 50 and 60 and was very easy to drive.

As we made our high-speed run, we continued to trim the boat out in search of a 90-mph top speed. The boat handled the rough water with flying colors, carving fluidly through some of our test event's nastiest chop. Regrettably, conditions on Lake Havasu were so unimaginably horrid during our test day that we opted not to push it to the extreme—we had to be satisfied with a top speed of 86.1 at about 5,900 rpm. But with this power package, 90 mph is unquestionably achievable in better conditions. Overall performance was spectacular, giving us a smooth ride and a very solid, very clean feel.

Howard remains one of the oldest, most established bastions of hard-core performance boating, and the 28' Sport Deck is a shrewd addition to their line. Kudos to Gene and Mike for finally throwing their hat into the family deckboat ring—they're going to sell a great deal of them. ■

## QUICK SPECIFICATIONS



**Length:** 28'6"

**Beam:** 102"

**Drivetrain:** Custom Taylor Performance 700 EFI/Imco Extreme Advantage Drive

**Horsepower:** 700

**Propeller:** 27" Bravo lab-finished 4-blade

**Base price:** \$95,995

**Standard features:** MerCruiser 496 Mag, dual electric sundeck actuator, Autometer gauges, Livorsi offshore controls, choice of cockpit seating, sliding front doors, Aqua Step boarding ladder

**Options on test boat:** Bow wash-down shower (\$390), stern wash-

down shower (\$390), dual batteries with switch (\$400), sink (\$500), full cockpit bimini top (\$1,200), built-in fiberglass fender holders in motor compartment (\$400), removable cockpit table (\$400), propane stainless-steel BBQ (\$320)

**Price as tested:** \$139,995

**Top speed:** 86.1 mph at 5,900 rpm

**Mfg. estimated speed:** 90 mph

**Speed @ 3,000 rpm:** 27.8 mph

**Speed @ 4,000 rpm:** 52.9 mph

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