

Speeding Bullet

Howard's 28 Bullet is a family performance rocket.

BY BOB BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FERNANDO ESCOVAR



Ever since MerCruiser began offering the HP500 stern drive, performance-boat manufacturers have been scrambling to come up with new models designed to optimize the single-engine potential of that package. In fact, the popularity and interest has become so intense in this new breed of vee-bottoms that a separate APBA offshore racing class (Factory I) was created for those who wanted an arena of organized competition. For the most part, however, these

new, mostly step-bottom vees are 27- to 29-foot, family-style performance boats with an acute case of split personality disorder.

One of the most recent entries into this market is the Howard 28 Bullet, a sleek, stepped deep-vee with a generous 22-degree deadrise bottom and a wide 100-inch beam. Since making its official debut at the Southern California Boat Show last February, the 28 Bullet has generated plenty of industry attention, both for its

exceptional quality and its performance.

Because they're a limited-volume, custom boat-builder by choice, Howard takes plenty of time developing new models, and the 28 Bullet was no exception. According to Howard owner, Gene Willen, from concept to first launch it was just about a full one-year project. "My son Michael (Howard's general manager) is responsible for the creation of this model from start to finish," said Willen. "It was his baby all the way. He came up with the

bottom design, did the tooling, made the plug, made the mold, pulled out the first part, and then rigged the boat, all in-house."

As is the case with all Howard-built boats, the construction process is flawless. The standard 28 Bullet is a totally balsa-cored boat, with $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch Baltek in the bottom and $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch on the hull sides and deck. There is no woven roving used in the boat. All the glass cloth is Knytex 1708 bi- and tri-directional fabric. That also gives you a hint as to why there is

absolutely no print-through visible on the deck or hull sides. The gelcoat finish is a wrinkle-free, mirror-like surface. It also doesn't hurt that Howard chooses to use only slow-curing, vinylester resin to do the job. This eliminates the shrinkage factor, and helps keep the boat, when rigged, at a trim 4,400 pounds. Since Howard is a custom operation, the hull spends a minimum of two weeks in the mold, while the four stringers, bulkheads, gas tank and floors are installed, before pulling.

Howard's intent was not to build a Factory I race boat, but to create a roomy and comfortable high-performance sportboat that could, if asked, hold its own in competition. And based on our initial test ride and evaluation, they've done just that. During our scrutiny, we registered a maximum top speed of 76 miles an hour with a 27-inch-pitch prop, and the tach showing 5,200 rpm as the motor frequently bumped the rev limiter. Under most circumstances, this would be an ideal set-up for the ►

everyday recreational boater with several passengers on board. Plenty of acceleration, lots of good throttle response throughout the rpm range and a very respectable top end number. According to Howard, they've tested the 28 Bullet with a 28-inch-pitch, lab-finished Bravo One prop from Mercury, and shown slightly over 80 miles an hour on a radar gun at 5,150 to 5,200 rpm, just beneath the limiter-override safeguard. This puts you right in the ballpark of a serious Factory I contender.

More important than the speed numbers, however, is the fact that Howard's new stepped-bottom is one of the softest-riding 28-footers we've been in. Not only does the boat respond well to trim, but it also gets up on top of the water and holds steady without any chine-walk. Its most impressive attribute, however, is the ability to launch off a large roller and reenter, minus that anticipated bone-jarring jolt. The 22-degree vee-bottom, and the unique step and pad design, seem to be a complementary combination, with excellent rough-water capabilities and plenty of stable, top-speed potential.

Sometimes stepped deep-vees aren't the best-behaved beasts when it comes to cornering and tight turns. Because of all the irregular bottom shapes, some step



bottoms can be touchy and occasionally unpredictable when changing direction. But that's not the case with the 28 Bullet. In fact, it was unusually well-mannered for a 28-footer, having a tighter-than-expected turning radius to both the left and right. Simply tuck the drive unit in a couple of notches, let the bow settle and turn the wheel. Directional response is almost immediate, and easy to predict.

On the inside, in keeping with the Howard tradition, things are neat, clean

and tidy, adhering to their philosophy of "more isn't necessarily better." The driver and forward co-pilot bolsters were snug and comfortable; they flip up, and the bottom of the seat becomes the backrest. We'd also recommend adding a few well-placed grab handles in strategic places, fore and aft, for passengers to hang on to—after all, this is a performance boat.

Upholstery is first class, with genuine naugahyde material and a molded fiberglass seat base for the rear bench. The dash panel is nicely contoured, with ample room for easily visible gauges, and the throttle/shift controls are thoughtfully accommodated on the side gunnel. If you like the look and feel of a long deck, the 28 Bullet will definitely appeal to you. The bow appears to extend forever, giving a true offshore boat identity. Thankfully, the 28 Bullet rolls over onto a plane very quickly, causing only a moment's loss of forward visibility.

Although you could hardly classify the 28 Bullet as a cruiser, it does have a functional forward-cabin area. In order to make it a little more people-friendly, Howard engineered the two facing cabin lounge seats to convert into a two person sleeping berth. That feature, along with the forward vee-berth, suggests a three- or even four-person sleeping capacity, which is quite a bonus for family overnighting.

Suggested retail for the new 28 Bullet is \$68,000 when powered with a standard MerCruiser 7.4 MPI (310 pshp). The upgrade to the HP500 package adds about \$16,000 to the bottom line. But once you're there, you're only a couple of accessories shy from donning helmets and racing life vests and competing in Offshore Factory I. Obviously, there's nothing wrong with owning a boat with a split personality. ■

