



HOT BOAT AUGUST 2001

22' Sport

Howard Custom Boats remains one of the true premium builders in the industry, a standing that only solidifies under the vision and elevated standards of the Willen family. While Howard is perhaps best known for a succession of thoroughly impressive offerings in the upper size range and for their hard-deck cruiser line, more than three-fourths of their deliberately low volume is dedicated to openbow 22s.

The Sport was tooled specifically as a bowrider, not converted from an old harddeck design; like all of Howard's late tooling efforts, it has taken firm footing. Within months of its release, the Sport displaced the 22-foot Offshore as Howard's best-selling family bowrider.

It's more contemporary in design, the interior is more elegant, and a series of subtle styling touches distinguish its look. The Sport has struck a chord with the skiing and wakeboarding enthusiast, who prefer it to the Offshore's more substantial look.

Base power is the 250-horse carbureted 5.7L Bravo, and Howard offers the Sport in a full array of engine packages through the new 496H0 Ours was powered by MerCruiser's outstanding special-edition Scorpion/Bravo package, which builds 350 prop horsepower out of its fuel-injected, 377 cubic inches. This upgrade was rewarded with a very stout 66.4 mph top end, run with 40plus gallons of gas and two well-fed HOT BOAT staff.

The \$7,500 Scorpion upgrade and two grand worth of nonessential but admittedly desirable add-ons (including dual-ram Bennett tabs) pumped our base from a healthy \$39,995 to a positively flourishing \$49,535. That covers a full array of powdercoated hardware, one of Howard's routinely spectacular gelcoat paint jobs and a full immersion into the true-story custom-boating experience.

WHAT YOU GET FOR YOUR MONEY

Howard takes proportionately more time in building their boats than most custom builders—they produce about one a week, and every hull is left to cure for two weeks.

Undoubtedly this is overkill in a 22-foot lake bowrider, but Howard's efforts do result in a strong, solid foundation for the entry level or any other lake experience. Powdercoated Eddie hardware is installed throughout, matching the clean paint (you can mix up to seven colors, but Howard is best known for clean and classy). Fixed cleats, vented handles and anodized rubrail are included, along with a contiguous fiberglass swim step with a raising center piece. Stainless railing wraps the bow seating section.

Driver and front passenger seats are base- and side-mounted, and all of the interior is extremely comfortable and very

plush. The layout is open and makes great use of the allocated space, with passenger comfort and legroom a priority throughout the boat. The bow-seating area is lowered about five inches from the rest of the cockpit. The clean, low-profile gray carpeting covers the kick panels and front pedestals.



Switch panels are easy-access, and basic Merc controls mount to the side. Dino wheel is standard. The Faria gauges are easily read, and they're backlit, like the rocker switches. A floor ski locker will house your wakeboards, and stash space is engineered throughout the boat (like the netted, extra-deep recesses in the front seat backs). Grab handles and cup holders (two per side in the rear) are within easy universal reach. The pushbutton hatch raises to reveal a fire extinguisher mounted on its inside lid, and there was also an optional, automatic Halon system.

Other cost options on our boat included dual batteries and a Sony stereo (Howard doesn't include systems in their base boat).

PERFORMANCE

The Scorpion was a great choice for this boat. The most powerful of Mercury's growing small-block engine stable, the Scorpion delivers big-block potency at small-block weight, and that ratio agrees with this variable deadrise, small-stepped bottom.



It performed all of the family functions especially well, with complete maneuverability at low speeds. The Scorpion started easily and idled well, and our Howard received prime grades for its turning ability at all speeds, and the ride was dry and secure.

Give it some power, and the Sport rolls right over the top and takes an immediate set. It trims up nicely, and the ride cleans with conservative rpm. The feel is very controlled, and the ride is firm and reactive. It feels like a performance hull. There's no hesitation following throttle or wheel command.

Though the Howard's acceleration numbers were rather ordinary, the resulting feel to throttle, through the low- and midrange, was crisp. The ride at cruising speed was stable and true, and at a smooth 4,000 rpm, the Scorpion had us buzzing along at better than 50. Of ten boats we tested, the Howard was fourth fastest at 66.8 mph. Two of the three faster boats were powered by 496s.

TEST-TEAM TALK

Driver 1: Excellent job with quality and construction. Secure and comfortable ride at cruise. No porpoise anywhere when trimmed properly. Fast boat with a loose ride over the rollers'tuck it in a bit, and it's easily controlled. Trimmed out, has a tendency to be easily offset by boat wakes.

Driver 2: Just as quick as it can be in low- and midrange feel. Planes easily. Trim button on the Merc shifter stuck throughout the test, an irritant. Had tabs, but this hull doesn't need them. Has a firm ride, stable and responsive. Upholstery is first-class.

Driver 3: Comfortable recliner bow area. Nice match of the interior to the gelcoat. Clean carpeting. Nice drive at speed, comfortable, stable and secure. Strong ride. Surprised us with its performance at speed through rough rollers.

POWERING OPTIONS

Run the base 5.7L, and you're not going to tap into one of the most appealing inherent characteristics of this hull: its natural speed. The Scorpion's a great package, but definitely look at the new 496 (8.2L) which will blow the bow

railing off yester
year's base 7.4L.

SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Flat
Centerline: 224
Beam: 96
Bottom: Variable vee
Engine/Drive: MerCruiser 377 Scorpion
HP @ prop: 350
Ratio: 1.5:1
Prop: Mercury 21 Bravo
Base Price: \$39,995
Standard Features: MerCruiser 5.7L/Bravo
One, seven gelcoat colors, stainless railing,
grab handles, Dino wheel, Faria gauges, ice
chest, swim step, electric hatch lift, lighting
package
Options on test boat: 377 Scorpion upgrade
(\$7,500), Bennett dual-ram tabs (\$800), dual
batteries (\$295), Halon system (\$195), Sony
stereo (\$750)
Price as tested: \$49,535
Top Speed, radar: 66.4 mph
Mfg. est. speed: 68 mph
0-30: 7.66 seconds
0-40: 9.83 seconds
0-50: 13.10 seconds
0-60: 18.53 seconds
Speed at 3,000 rpm: 30.5 mph
Speed at 4,000 rpm: 50.3 mph

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