

**HOT BOAT' August 2002**

## 22 BOWRIDER

Clearly at the peak of their production game and running on all cylinders, Howard Custom Boats continues to spread their time-honored boat-building gospel at a self-induced maximum of a boat a week. Fully three-quarters of their production yield are bowriders, and the 200 Offshore is their best seller.

The screaming 28-foot Bullet vee-bottom and flashy 28-foot Cat, each of which are more popular in open-bow configuration than closed, may get more air play- but it is the more utilitarian, easier-to-trailer 220 that has emerged as the bedrock boat among Howard's nearly fanatical, family-driven ownership. It is also available in the classic hard deck, and crawl-through-cuddy form as well, but the open-bow outsells both of those offshoots.

The Willen family follows a prescribed theme that continues to serve the ongoing Howard legacy by fusing production standards observed through multiple generations with forward-thinking technology and savvy, sensible engineering. Taut workmanship and a keen eye for cosmetic continuity and finish work create results that are predictable in a Howard sort of way. That is to say, that looks reign at knockout level, the feel from back of the wheel is rich and solid, and the drivability is nothing short of splendid.

The 220 uses a conventionally cut, pad-bottomed vee design with a notched transom, a cut that has consistently elicited upper-level performance through tests under various power packages. The 496HO is latest and among the most impressive in a series of highly compatible performance partners, and this very dialed-in package was among the quickest of everything tested in its size range. Balanced with a highly controlled 68.9 top end, no wonder this drive train is the 220's best selling.

Clean and comfortable interior work is a staple of the Howard boating experience, and the layout and execution on this one reaffirmed this builder's unflinching quality standards. Outsourced to the specialists at Land and Water Interiors, the 220's passenger seating encourages extended and



languorous use of the bow area, which is also well suited to four riders. Driver seating is deeply padded and very stylishly cut and positioned perfectly to engage top-level hardware and controls. The rear bench afforded a reasonably unobstructed view. The interior execution was extremely plush and served another of repeated reminders of Howard's uncompromising embrace with the art of fine detail.

A full-on assembly of powercoated hardware and trim pieces played off the boat's beautiful four-color gelcoat and flawlessly cut, color-matched interior. A Dino wheel extends off a matched, billet hub, and rockers are inset against engraved, matched switch panels. The base boat is impressively outfitted with top-quality pieces. Gaffrig throttle shifters and instruments, including depth gauge, are standard. Nine powdercoated cup holders assure access to all aboard, and trick vented grab rails assist climbers-onto the oversized, single-piece, textured swim platform. Standard features also include interior lighting, a powerized engine hatch and a removable billet ski tow.

A large, draining ice chest and over-sized gear locker are cut into the main cockpit floor, adding to an impressive series of interior cubby storage area and netback stash spots. Dash circuit breakers are standard, and the dash wiring was clean and tidy. This boat also took on a reasonably lengthy list of add-on options, beyond the \$6,900 upgrade from the stock 377-inch, 6.2MX to the 425-horse, 496HO/Bravo. Bennett ST-16 dual-ram tabs (\$1,050), thru-transom Mercury exhaust (\$625), dual batteries (\$295) and a Halon fire system (\$255) were added back of the rear bench. Pop-up cleats (\$270) replaced the standard-issue Eddie mushrooms. A digital depth finder (\$250), Sony CD system (\$895) and glove box (\$350) were also added.

Lights were frenched into the bow, and the hull's sides were tooled to receive the swept-back cut of a very stout windshield. Stainless bow railing is standard. The Howard felt solid and substantial from every perspective, from the driver's stanchion while plowing through rough water to the densely padded engine hatched while soaking up the sun.

Howard allows for up to seven colors for standard gelcoat graphics, and this boat mixed four in a clean, seemingly flawless graphic execution that the lines wore very well. Howard's superior glasswork is complemented by color work that ranks with the best the industry has to offer.

## **PERFORMANCE**

This elegant, quiet and very solidly built family machine set the tone for our tests with its obedient low-end maneuverability and fluid acceleration. Teased with a little throttle, it immediately comes alive behind the light, hard-hitting and gratifyingly throttle-responsive 496HO and its 425 horsepower. After a slight lift or its bow, the 220 hunkers down into an instant set, lifting onto plane almost simultaneously with the bend of the throttle stick. We hit 30 mph in a scant 5.91 seconds and experienced consistent throttle surge from that point.

At 4,000 rpm, our test boat occupied a clean, comfortable 50-mph cruise. Although we couldn't find rough enough water to seriously challenge the Howard's deep, sharply cut 22-degree hull, we ran it through five minutes of hard residual boat chop and rollers. Tuck it in a little, and the Howard will blaze through it at nearly full clip, with a firm, controlled and comfortable ride.

In fact, we found this boat a pleasure to drive under virtually every circumstance encountered in the

normal family-boating day. It was utterly controlled and extremely easy to drive and threw off a great ride at every rpm increment. “ A real pleasure to drive at wide-open throttle, “ reported one of our drivers, after unleashing a consistent string of radar sprints, at just under 70 mph.

The 220 is one of those do-everything lake machines that functions so smoothly that you tend to take it for granted- until you drive something less.

### **Specifications**

Test conditions: Moderate

Centerline: 22'4"

Beam: 96"

Bottom: 22-degree vee

Drive train: MerCruiser 496HO/Bravo One HP @ prop: 425

Overall weight: 3,400 lbs.

Base price: \$50,995

Standard features: MerCruiser 6.2MX/BravoI, seven gelcoat colors, stainless railing, powdercoated hardware, two-piece windshield, Dino wheel, anodized ski tow, choice of Faria or Graffrig gauges, Graffrig throttle-shifter controls, built-in ice chest, swim step, electric engine hatch, illuminated rocker switches, interior lighting package

Options on boat: 496HO/Bravo (\$6,900), Bennett ST-16 dual-ram tabs (\$1,050), thru-transom exhaust (\$625), dual batteries w/Perko (4295), Halon system (\$225), bimini top (\$850), stainless pop-up deck-cleat upgrade (\$270), Sony CD system w/floor speakers (\$895), digital depth finder (\$250), glove box (\$350)

Price as tested: \$63,745

Top speed, radar: 68.9 mph

Mfg. Est. speed: 70 mph

0-30: 5.91 seconds

0-40: 7.85 seconds

0-50: 10.50 seconds

0-60: 18.30 seconds

Speed @ 3,000 rpm: 36.7 mph

Speed @ 4,000 rpm: 50.2 mph

Speed @ 5,000 rpm: 68.0 mph