



ALL ABOARD

The spacious, artfully done Sport Deck decks out Howard's succession of potent athlete-boats.

Howard Custom Boats' star has never shone brighter: as good as the old cruiser and flatbottoms were under the tutelage of founder Howard Brown back in the day, today's fleet of stunning customs represent excellence in every relevant size, class, and style of contemporary performance boat.

As of this year, Howard's tantalizing mix of superbly built customs includes one of the industry's best deckboats, in the 28' Sport Deck, based on the modified tunnel platform that carries Howard's vaunted air-entrapment fleet.

The same elements that separate Howard's 26' Cat, and their Bullet vee-bottom series, from the rest of the manufacturing fray—superiority in design

and concept, ridiculous attention to detail in building the boat, and highly effectual bottom dynamics—permeate the new deckboat.

Those formidable elements converged with an aggressively propped (28"x15½") MerCruiser 525/Bravo XR train in our event's Howard sampler, creating a fine-driving, thoroughly impressive 80-plus-mile-an-hour deckboat that again brought GM Michael Willen's design and engineering skills to the forefront.

Elegantly dressed in a gray, blue-tinged exterior-interior wrap, with piercing graphics and upholstery that reflected perfect accented work, the Sport Deck was trimmed in pewter and stainless. Flawless: that's perhaps the best description of the way this

boat was put together, by the eye of our inspection team: the Howard scored perfect marks for its glass, tooling, gelcoat (seven colors are standard) and overall installation. "They all start to look alike," one of our ramp men wrote, after combing the boat. "Then the Howard comes along."

Among the most of many appealing features aboard the Howard: firm, comfortable, and correctly forming seating, comprising the L-shaped aft lounge, and the two forward passenger enclaves; tooling that leaves most other deckboats in the dark ages, with thoughtful, advanced detail tooling in its doors, hatches, and entertainment console; and beautifully shaped, highly functional hardware, most of it from Dana. The bar work, cut billet

seat mounts, and various panels and inserts complimented the outstanding tooling and design of the Sport Deck's dash. Hardware fitting and placement were car-like, and driver comfort while operating the boat couldn't have been better.

Livorsi's top-shelf controls and gauges (Autometer instruments are also available), Dino wheel, 12-volt receptacle, electric hatch lift, illuminated rocker switches (part of an extensive interior lighting package), and snap-in carpet, are all standard. Storage is prevalent, easy to get to, and correctly finished. Six pull-up cleats, with bezels are included.

The rear platform is large even by deckboat standards, and it's very accessible, from the water or through a generously sized walk-

through path. A draining ice chest inhabits the rear-seat compartment, and there's a removable one in the console cavity.

Many of the on-board indulgences that define deckboating are offered a la carte by Howard, and this decked-out deckboat ran a \$16,000 options tab, plus the \$19,000 upgrade charge for the 525, over the base 496 MPI.

Among the options: bow and stern washdown system (\$780), dual batteries (\$450), pressurized water and sink (\$595), Aqua Step (\$275), and glove box (\$250). This boat went a step further, with a removable cockpit table (\$400), built-in fender storage in the engine compartment (\$400), depth finder (\$295), a \$3,000 sound-system upcharge, and billet ski pole (\$800). At \$133,000 and change as she ran, the Howard is on the upper end of the pricing spectrum.

It also had a set of stylishly cut, deftly mounted, adjustable wind deflectors, which we used with some effectiveness in avoiding clubbing face winds during very gusty test conditions. They

were less useful at speed, and often laid down involuntarily when we ran it up there.

Howard propped this boat to hit the number (80), and the Sport Deck is naturally faster than a lot of its peers. With a hundred less horsepower than some of its fellow boats, the Howard was still one of the fastest and most efficient deckboats tested. Even with the bigger than unusual wheel, we found it extremely enjoyable and highly competent at low speeds and through midrange. It accelerated reasonably well, wasted no time finding plane, and generated a stable, secure ride with a very large trimming "sweet spot." It turned gently and stayed flat as we brought it through corners, and carried a nice attitude.

The elevated, stable, porpoise-free ride was consistent at 3,000, 3,500, and 4,000 rpm, where it ran a very efficient 54 mph. Tach peak was 5,100.

Illustrious past aside, Howard's "glory days" are plainly upon us, and their skills are well used in the 28' Sport Deck. ■



SPEEDS & SPECS

Test conditions: Moderate to very rough	0-30 mph: 9.59 seconds
Centerline: 28'6"	0-40 mph: 12.02 seconds
Beam: 102"	0-50 mph: 15.75 seconds
Bottom: Modified tunnel	0-60 mph: 20.92 seconds
Drivetrain: MerCruiser 525/Bravo XR	3,000 rpm @ 33.0 mph
Horsepower @ prop: 525	4,000 rpm @ 53.9 mph
Overall weight: 4,800 lbs.	
Base price: \$97,995	Howard Custom Boats
Price as tested: \$133,265	28113 Avenue Stanford
Mfg. estimated top speed: 82 mph	Valencia, CA 91355
Top speed: 80.2 mph @ 5,100 rpm	(661) 257-9275
	howardboats.com

STANDARD FEATURES

MerCruiser 496 Bravo, seven gelcoat colors, stainless hardware, illuminated rocker switches, three bilge pumps, interior lighting, 12V receptacle, Dino wheel, Livorsi or Autometer gauges, Livorsi dual lever controls, six pull-up deck cleats, electric engine hatch.

OPTIONS ON TEST BOAT

MerCruiser HP525 upgrade (\$18,995) dual ram steering with billet tilt helm (\$5,200), upgraded Sony system (\$3,000), bimini top (\$1,200), lab-finished prop (\$865), washdown bow/stern systems (\$780), Bluewater drive indicator (\$650), sink with pressure system (\$595), dual batteries (\$450), fender holders (\$400), removable table (\$400), depth finder (\$295), auto fire extinguisher (\$295), wind deflectors (\$295), Aqua Step (\$275), drive shower (\$275), glove box (\$250), portable head (\$150), cabin fans (\$100).