

REPRINTED FROM THE SEPTEMBER 2003 ISSUE OF

HOT BOAT

HOWARD CUSTOM BOATS

25' Bullet

"Howard's Bullet has become the shining superstar of the single-engine high performance sport-boat market. The product that Howard produces is as close to flawless as anyone has a right to expect."



Back in 2001, Howard Custom Boats made a conscious commitment to reinvent and improve the high performance single-engine vee-bottom sport boat. While other manufacturers were pre-occupied with fine-tuning and developing 35-, 38-, 42-foot and other bigger vee hulls, Howard recognized an important part of the market was being ignored.

"If you looked at where most of the step-vee R&D was being done, it was on the ultra-high-dollar twin- and triple-engine side of the vee-bottom market," commented Howard Custom Boats owner, Gene Willen. "Since that's not really who our customers are, we decided to concentrate our efforts on a new model that better fit our niche."

The next thing that Willen knew, his son Mike was out in the back of the factory cutting wood and piecing together a totally new step-bottom design for a 28-footer. "The 28 Bullet was totally Mike's baby," said Willen. "He had some definite ideas about what would work, so I just let him do his thing."

Since then, Howard's 28 Bullet has become the shining superstar of the single-engine high performance sport-boat market. Not only has it been extensively tested and reported upon with a variety of engine packages, but it has been the recipient of unanimous rave reviews, whether it's powered by a stock stern-drive package or a 1,000-horsepower supercharged monster motor. Not only has the hull design earned the reputation for efficiency, but it's also remarkably stable, something that's all too often missing when a single-engine vee-hull approaches anything over the 90-mile-an-hour mark.

Now fast-forward to early 2003. With the success of the 28 Bullet firmly entrenched, Howard wisely elected to bring out another version. But instead of succumbing to the temptation of going bigger, they went smaller, to a 25-foot version.

Essentially, the 25 and 28 Bullets look like near twins except for the obvious three-foot difference. The distinctive exterior styling is unmistakable. And the cockpits offer nearly the same dimensions which is a plus for the new 25.

From a quality and craftsmanship vantage point, Howard doesn't take a back-seat to any brand in the industry, thanks to its commitment to being a true custom-boat builder. "We have no desire to be the largest volume performance boatbuilder," Willen says. "That's just not what we do. We prefer to take our time and build the boat

Howard 25 Bullet

FIRST IMPRESSION:
HOT BOAT climbs behind the wheel
of Howard's new 25, a speedy
rocket with distinctive exterior
styling, quality and craftsmanship.

by Bob Brown

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB BROWN



exactly the way it should be built. No corners cut...everything has to be just right."

True to his word, the product that Howard produces is as close to flawless as anyone has a right to expect. The mold work is a ten, and so is the gelcoat (up to seven colors is standard). The laminate schedule is top cabin with a combination of vinyl ester resin and Knytex knitted bi/tri-directional glass. Just to be on the safe side, Howard even allows each hull to cure a full two weeks in the mold before pulling.

Sitting behind the wheel, a driver immediately senses they're in a genuine performance machine. Gafrig instrumentation is thoughtfully positioned and easily viewed. The dual-lever throttle/shifter is comfortably placed along the starboard gunnel on its own independent console. The steering wheel is a racy-looking Dino model. The two forward deeply upholstered bucket seats rest upon substantial-looking fabricated billet aluminum frames bolted to the fiberglass liner floor. The rear bench seat is four-wide with room to spare.

Surprisingly, the 25 Bullet has more cabin than might be expected. The entryway can be secured with a radiused acrylic sliding privacy door; a nice touch for a 25-footer. Inside the cabin, available space has been put to good use with two facing lounge couches and a spacious forward vee-berth. The standard-equipment list also itemizes an onboard porta-potty.

Usually we're lucky to get one new evaluation model for our review and scrutiny, but in this case, Howard provided us access to two 25 Bullets; one, a nearly option-free standard version and the other a fully customized fire-breather. Which did we like

better? Being the consummate diplomat, the answer is both, and for different reasons.

The "stock" 25 Bullet, if there really is such a thing, was powered by a MerCruiser 496 Mag HO package. What's not to like, except it might seem a little tame for some tastes, since the hull has absolutely no problem handling the 425 available horsepower. In fact, if you didn't have a GPS speedo on board, you'd probably have a difficult time believing that you were speeding across the water in the mid-70-mph range. It was just that effortless. No porpoise, no bow steer, no uneasy feeling when you threw it into a tight turn—just predictable reaction to whatever you wanted to do.

The fire-breather 25 Bullet is not that dissimilar to the "stocker," except everything happens a whole lot quicker, thanks to a nearly 1,000-horsepower Whiplercharged 540-cubic-inch Dart block engine built by Taylor Performance. To accommodate this massive amount of muscle in the engine compartment, the Bravo One drive unit was a combination Teague Custom Marine Platinum XR upper with an IMCO gearcase and Teague internal components. Hydraulic steering was also provided by IMCO Nevada.

Whereas the 496 Mag HO really didn't pose much of a challenge to the 25 Bullet, the Quad-Rotor 540 definitely made its presence known. Anytime you accompany a vee-bottom at slightly over 100 miles an hour, it unmistakably has a way of commanding your undivided attention. Remarkably, the 25 Bullet was nearly as stable at triple digits as the 28. That says a lot about the unique ventilated step-vee

Howard hull configuration aided by a conscious effort to optimize the balance and weight distribution of the entire package. No, 100-plus isn't something everyone is going to enjoy in a 25-foot vee-bottom, but it is an impressive achievement and says volumes about Howard's in-house design and rigging capabilities.

If you're a connoisseur of high performance vee-bottoms, both Howard Bullet models should be must-sees on your consideration short list. The new 25 Bullet starts at a suggested base retail price of \$69,995 with standard MerCruiser 6.2 MX (320 PSHP) power. From there, it's whatever your imagination and pocketbook will allow. Pleasant dreams!

SPECIFICATIONS

Length: 25'2"
 Beam: 98"
 Approx. weight: 4,100 lbs.
 Hull deadrise: 22.5 degrees
 Standard Equipment: 100% hand lamination w/Baltek end-grain balsa and Baltek foam reinforcement, bi- and tri-directional Knytex glass, vinyl ester resin, full-length hull stringers, seven-color gelcoat, stainless steel hardware and fasteners, heavy-duty marine battery w/box, illuminated rocker switches, anodized deck hardware, bilge pump and blower, navigation lights, interior lights, Dino steering wheel, Gafrig instrumentation and controls, power steering, power trim, stainless steel propeller, bow and stern cleats, electric engine hatch, built-in storage compartments, full appointed cabin w/porta-potti, naugahyde interiors, 40-oz. marine-grade carpet, vinyl rub rail, 6.2 MX MerCruiser stern drive

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