

The latest "speeding Bullet" to emerge from the Howard Custom Boats factory is the three-year-old 25', a step-vee hull fashioned by Michael Willen using the company's 28-footer as its archetype. An astonishing midrange rocket, the boat was created during a time when bigger boats were the trend. Willen and his father, company president Gene Willen, wanted to make sure that in the race to build a bigger boat, no size ranges were ignored. And so Howard continues to offer smaller boats like the 19' Superjet and a 21' Custom Cruiser. Beyond that, there's a 22 Offshore, 23 Offshore, 250 Offshore, a 26' Cat, the 28' Bullet and the all-new 28' Sportdeck deckboat.

By faithfully scaling down the boat's bottom in exact proportion—and lowering its profile by 1.5 inches, again, to scale—Howard created a downsized version of the original, blisteringly fast Bullet in their replacement for their veteran 250 Offshore molds. The 25' was given its own styling and considerations (including placement of the step), and has proven to be as thrilling a ride as its big brother. Powering the original bare-shell plug with a Whipplecharged HP500EFI (675 hp), the boat ran 94 mph on GPS. "We knew it had a great potential for speed, and we wanted to tap into that potential," Gene says. "We push our product to the limit rather than have a customer push it. We want to

WHAT THE DRIVERS SAID

Driver #1: "Wow! That was an impressive speed run for a 496 HO. This boat handled everything just spectacular. I'm a fan of this boat. I just like the configuration of the bottom and the performance with the 496 HO package. It's a sweet boat."

Driver #2: "A really good-performing boat. Howard does an exquisite job on the workmanship of this boat. The gelcoat on this boat and the lines and the workmanship on the mold is just really beautiful. They come up with one of the best-performing bottoms around. I did not use the trim tabs getting on plane, which caused the bow to rise a little high. You could drop the tabs to keep the nose down and get on plane a lot easier, especially if you had a lot of people in the boat and you want the boat to get on plane a little easier. I certainly didn't need the tabs on the top end. I think this is one of the best boats in the 25-foot range."

be able to tell them, 'You can put 1,200 hp, and this is what you can expect.'" The finished version of the Bullet measures 25'2" with a 98" beam. It's a boat you can take to the ocean or to the lake; you can go fast or ski behind it. As originally conceived, the base motor was a 6.2-liter (320 hp)—a good 60-mph workhouse engine.

Designed for the performance enthusiast as a family sport boat, the 25' Bullet is a savvy blend of style and performance. Utilizing the latest ventilated-stepped hull technology available, the 25 is equally at home on large lakes and unprotected bodies of water. The hull is constructed using 100% vinylester resin and Knytex knitted bi/tri-directional glass fabrics and Baltec balsa core for the sides and deck. The mold cure time is two weeks, to ensure proper curing and strength.

Our latest tester from Howard was the open-bow cuddy version of the 25' Bullet, which is built using an altogether different deck mold from the hard-deck version—the bowrider

isn't simply a giant hole cut out with upholstery dropped in, but a true interliner boat. Take all the upholstery out, and you'll see that the deck is all one piece, with molded fiberglass that the upholstery fits in for strength and rigidity.

We liked the way the boat has been laid out. The 25' has a very large, deep bowrider section that gives riders up front an extra feeling of security. The relatively small mid-cabin section features a two-passenger lounge, then a small seat on the other side for a single person, along with a small storage compartment containing a built-in Igloo ice chest that drains overboard, so you removing it is never a requirement. Privacy doors are built-in on both the bow side and cockpit sides, for those who might want to get out of some bad weather. Both doorways through the midcabin are large enough so you don't have to turn sideways to get in, so a good-sized adult can enter and exit with ease.

The curved dash panel is

tastefully designed and appointed. The dash configuration itself is essentially the same as the 28'; our 25' sported Livorsi gauges and GPS speedo, with blue color-coordinated bezels and Blue-water mechanical trim indicators. Our test team gave excellent marks to the flip-up windscreen deflectors, which are truly heavy-duty—more solid than most that we've seen. Top-of-the-line billet supports were the framework for the bucket seats, which also sported high-quality upholstery. There's a locking glove box in front of the passenger side. The only slight demerit we recorded was the custom trailer switch—an old-fashioned black push button that doesn't quite fit in with the high styling of the rest of the boat.

Our dry-land inspection team awarded the Howard a perfect 10 all the way down the line, from glass and tooling quality to gelcoat and quality of installation. "Really clean and exceptional rigging and detail," raved our inspectors. The boat is extremely comfortable as well,



SPECIFICATIONS

Length: 25'2"
Beam: 98"
Drivetrain: 496 HO
Horsepower: 425
Propeller: 26" Mercury Bravo One
Base price: \$78,500
Standard features: Seven-color custom gelcoat, stainless-steel hardware and fasteners, heavy-duty marine battery with battery box, illuminated rocker switches, anodized fuel fills, ski tow, gauge bezels, bilge pump, blower, nav lights, interior lights, Dino steering wheel, full instrumentation, dual-lever hand controls, power steering, power trim, Bravo One prop, bow and stern cleats, electric engine hatch, 6.2-L MPI MerCruiser, etc.
Options on test boat: 496 HO upgrade (\$8,400), XR drive (\$2,400), full hydraulic dual-ram Imco steering (\$5,100), Bluewater three-position indicator drive trim (\$650), Dana custom billet seat bases (\$1,100), Dana power hinges (\$1,200), upgraded Sony stereo with six speakers and two amps plus subwoofers (\$2,000), wind deflectors (\$300), prop upgrade (\$350)
Price as tested: \$100,000
Top speed: 74.1 @ 5,150 rpm
Mfg. est. mph in ideal conds.: 75 mph
Idle noise: 76.2 dB
2,000 rpm noise: 82.5 dB
4,000 rpm noise: 88.5 dB
Speed @ 3,000 rpm: 35.3 mph
Speed @ 4,000 rpm: 48.2 mph

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with the rear bench and race-designed bolster seats snaring another 10 for their built-in lumbar support. The ergonomic cockpit offers plenty of interior space than most others in its class. Howard insists on the most meticulous attention to detail, and the 25' is proof.

Armed with a 496 HO (425 hp), our 25' proved a super performer and handler, turning amazingly well—just flip the wheel a bit and the boat responds instantly. It's quite an easy boat to drive, with no tendency to porpoise. The 25' wants to get up, take a nice set and get going. And you'll find the best performance after you trim the boat out and give it a chance to run. It's enormously fun to drive. "This is

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smooth as a trouble surface that does not exist, although at times the boat seems to hop a bit, causing it to roll off the cutting surface.

We noticed the bow of the boat, and one of its most appealing traits is its excellent efficiency under power. Our strong crew reported a light, stable ride at speed, and turned in a handled rough water well to its credit.

ESSEX

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When through the passes, we found the boat to be one of the quietest, least responsive boats at our event. Thanks to its set, the boat ran down beautifully and accelerated instantly. "Great control, really, left and right," wrote one of our strongmen.

We took advantage of good conditions to test the boat's deck, and were very impressed. We were able to sit down the deck to mitigate rough, white-water chop, and acted as a great ride through some moderate head waves at speed. The boat responds phenomenally well to slow turns. Picking up the pace, moving into the 30-plus range, nothing changed. We checked the fuel and oil flow through water that became increasingly rough, and the resulting ride reinforced the boat's speed as it thrashing, so any slow turns require a careful eye. I noticed other boats were extremely well done and sailing off.

We also noted the boat's extremely smooth ride in moderate water. The same element of predictability and sailing performance that has long been a focus benchmark drove through on the boat in speed, and we had nothing to prove to its performance level.

FORCE

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Our boat accelerated extremely well from nearly any movement in its performance spectrum. And it exhibited world-class maneuverability, turning at speed at sea with a great set-back design.

And of course, at speed, it was very efficient—well-handled, comfortable to the touch, wonderfully controlled, and distinctly efficient.

The Bottom Line

Force has changed the concepts of high-performance family boating and the way to handle with ease and style, and the resulting ride makes huge waves in the performance and price. When the bow of our boat made it a point to ride that they had to see one.

GENESIS

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power. The 2011 experienced a little bit of trouble off the line, but settled in quickly and managed a nice, calm run to the finish. The ride and drive were smooth and consistent in the outboard.

I also noted that the boat is very much at home in rough to its highest frequencies, and its power output was impressive from 20 miles an hour onward. Running the boat anywhere from 20 to 70 produced a level and reactive motor, and it drove efficiently. We set the boat back to easy water, and when we started back, we had good fun with it. We noted during that process that when we increased a head wind while at speed, the ride was very stable in sailing off a bit when we were fully trimmed, and we'd have to back off our engine.

Overall, the Genesis is a fun boat to drive, and we found the ride to be very comfortable at all speeds. The boat was very precise, and it had a lot of fun. The rigging was light and stable from 20 to 70 miles an hour, and we found the ride to be very stable through all early stages of our test.

The Bottom Line

Genesis offers an impressive amount of boat for its \$49,999 (MSRP), and it's a highly flexible machine. The boat is quiet and well built, and we had a lot of fun with it, and the boat was offering the correct responsive experience.

HOWARD

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one of my favorite vee-bottoms," wrote one of our test drivers. "Maybe even my favorite in the 25- to 28-foot class. It's very straight, very crisp and very true." The boat's ride is remarkably stable, which speaks volumes about the bottom design and positioning of the stakes. Trim the boat up at high speed, and you'll notice it lift quickly and responsively. The ride offers Howard customers an excellent compromise—it's a great all-around family boat as well as an exquisite high-performance craft. One note: if you begin to accelerate without using the tabs, the bow will rise significantly, blocking the horizon. So use them quickly so you can bring the bow over. (Our 25' was set up for optimum top-end performance, propped with a 26" Mercury Bravo One, which could easily account for the bowrise at the low speeds.) The X dimension is fairly high, so you can overtrim it if you're not careful. But the boat planes quickly, and offers superior controllability and cruisability. "When you roll in the throttle, I was sur-

prised it was a 496 HO, to be honest," commented one of our drivers.

As we cruised around in the 25' at about 4,000 rpm, we made some large sweeper turns and found that the boat seemed right at home in those conditions. With a little up-trim, even in the wind-blown chop we drove through, this boat takes a marvellous set, carrying itself extremely well.

On our top-end run, the 25' is effortless to drive. Just put some trim in it, touch the rev limiter and tuck the drive back down and the boat carries itself very well. This was one of the few boats we tested that really felt comfortable as we made our way through the whitecaps into the wind. It's a completely comfortable and fun ride. With the stylish 25', Howard's Bullet series is shaping up to be a significant subset in the builder's fabled big picture. Taking a large cue from its elder sibling, it represents step-bottom family boating at its most refined and efficient. You pay more for a Howard—their slow-brewed production schedule, resulting low annual yield, and time-intensive finish command it. But what a boat!

HOWARD

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Howard is generally well known for its family-oriented boating style, but it's also a company that's been making waves in the high-performance market. The company is currently well known for its use of carbon fiber and other high-tech materials, and it's also known for its use of aluminum and stainless steel. Howard's boats are known for their speed and performance, and they're also known for their reliability and durability. Howard's boats are also known for their excellent customer service and support. Howard's boats are a great choice for anyone who wants a high-performance family boat that's also reliable and durable.

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