

HOWARD 28' BULLET



The new 28-foot Bullet step-vee sounds Howard Custom Boats' dramatic entrance into the evolutionary, contemporary super-boating realm, where the best new industry technology reigns, and where the serious family hot-boaters come to play. This market segment has become a builder's showcase for premium, high-end-model releases—driven by the best high-output power systems MerCruiser has to offer and sporting all-around beauty seen from the beach and felt through the driver's seat.

The new Bullet is an all-original tooling effort that shows off Howard's timeless talents on several fronts. Designed and overseen by Howard GM Michael Willen, the Bullet's production prescription is a potent mix of advanced production technology—most notably in the use of coring throughout and with various fiberglass components replacing much of the traditional wood interior framework—and traditional Howard production values.

It's the biggest and most challenging boat Howard has ever produced, and, not surprisingly, it is instantly one of the company's best-sellers. This exceptional pleasure boat rides on a unique, ventilated running surface that left a trail of like-minded admirers in its jet stream as it passed through our test ranks.

The Bullet was conceived as a boat with an inherent ability to multitask. You're destined to see it most often on the big lakes—it's resilient to rough water, roomy and comfortable with its massive inte-

rior and comfortable cockpit and equipped for overnighting. It will also make appearances as a fast and nimble offshore day-tripper, possessed of a sharply cut entry designed to weave through the swells. None too coincidentally, the Bullet also fits within the parameters of the APBA Factory I Offshore class, and the fact that it was the fastest (albeit barely) of four HP500-powered vee-bottoms in its size range had to make the Howard brass smile.

The Bullet is the genuine item, and it fires directly from the mold to the A-list in this increasingly crowded, full-sized vee category. We found nothing that it didn't do well, and while this new-generation Howard is unmistakably progressive in appearance as well as in its selected components, it also manages to retain some of the legendary feel of its distant brethren. Howard Brown himself would love this boat.

MerCruiser's physically impressive and highly potent HP500EFI package filled our Bullet's well and powered the package to a very well-rounded tour through our timed testing program. Even as this hull courted our performance drivers with its complete lack of porpoise and chine-walk, it ran effortlessly in the mid-70s. And that was under unfavorable conditions that included flat, ripple-free water, 110+ degree heat and the weight of over 50 gallons of fuel.

THE PACKAGE

Howard was committed to building a big, fast, rough-water lake rod with this 28-footer, and they backed the fully warranted HP500 with all the enhancements related to the task. Dual ram IMCO steering eliminated any lag between wheel and hull movement, and the upgrade to full hydraulic is recommended at these speeds. While we had no call for the optional Bennett sport tabs (with Bluewater indicators), they'll be appreciated during this boat's life span while helping to offset loads, drive the bow down in challenging water or run at wakeboard speeds. Exhaust ran through the transom, and the Bravo drive (the bulletproof XR drive is standard now) was cooled via Imco shower and loaded up a four-blade, 27-inch Bravo wheel.

An additional hatch actuator (one is standard) accelerated our



access to the HP500, and the dual ram Eddie hardware was neatly hidden. Dual batteries were added, and they helped power a ten-disk CD system with an external 500-watt amp, sub woofer and six speakers.

The Howard hull has a reputation for being built like a fortress, and the Bullet's substantial feel and solid surroundings affirmed the wisdom of a still-standing edict that has every hull cured in the mold for two weeks. The Bullet's tooling and mold work inspired special attention and unanimous praise from our driving team, which conveyed a collective sense of awe at the creative precision of its fiberglass, inside and out. The Howard's long, pronounced and well-defined deck was incredibly straight and smooth. The precise glasswork extended to the flooring, engine lid and rear-seat base, all balsa-cored and finished off beautifully. The Howard's color work was bold and clean and in tune with the hull's 21st-century arrival. Orange, yellow and blue were expertly interwoven and showed some gorgeous fades.

Whited-out, powdercoated Eddie Marine hardware was just the thing to finish off the clean tone of this hyper-pretty Howard. Fuel fills, vented rear grab handles, ski tow and pop-up cleats and their bezels were snowed into the white gelcoat base. A supersized, textured boarding platform is absorbed into the design and fitted with a standard-issue, retractable Aqua-Step swim ladder.

Onboard, the feel strikes a very appealing balance of stylish lines and freeboard, and the Bullet pulls off its lean, sexy stance while protecting its occupants with a relatively deep cockpit and a generous amount of freeboard beneath its eight-foot-four beam. Removable front passenger cushions facilitate stand-up drivability, but the boat is most comfortably driven while enjoying the deep comfort of this boat's beautiful seating. The cockpit is absolutely huge, with a lot of legroom and spacious neutral area between the front seats. Graphics were simple and tied nicely into the gelcoat exterior. Rear-seat bases were expertly carpeted to match the gunnel-to-gunnel cockpit surfacing. Stainless grab railing is anchored to the reverse side of the front seats and off the dash.

Howard's time-intensive tooling swept through the dash area like fresh air, and two tiers of white-faced Gaffrig dials (with matched white bezels) were arranged above Eddie Marine switch



panels in a very effective and attractive layout. Dual-handle Gaffrig offshore controls were comfortably accessible, and tab and trim controls lay a few fingers' length from the wheel. A Ritchie compass is standard on the Bullet. The controls, seat positioning and feel, gauge and view over the dash were tightly related, and it made for a highly pleasurable driving experience.

An impressive base of features is built into the stock Howard and includes a full cockpit-and-cabin lighting package, a full complement of cup holders (curiously positioned for everyone but the driver) and finished storage beneath the bench seat, in huge side panels and belowdecks. There is no ski locker or integral ice chests, but there's room for a portable Igloo belowdecks and plenty of cabin cargo stowage. Aside from the deep bump of the Sony system (\$2,500), additional creature options included a hot-and-cold transom shower system (\$425) and a VHF ship-to-shore radio (\$750).

The Bullet introduced Howard's most luxurious quarters to date, a stylish and practical haven that converts to roomy overnight accommodations and anticipates the demands of extended stays aboard. Highest possible marks were noted for the beautiful tooling, the detail work on the facing sofa-style seats and vee-berth and the overall fit and finish. Standards include a small storage cabin with countertop, portable head and efficient lighting.

PERFORMANCE

The Howard bottom utilizes a unique single-step design that is cut with increased dead-rise that begins at the step and gains approximately an inch and a half toward the transom. This platform is one of the few steps in production that doesn't feel like a step. A good step is like a good umpire in baseball: You rarely know it's there, until it's called upon for business.

It takes no more than one trip all the way through the Bullet's throttle span to realize that Howard is onto something special with this boat. The 502-derivative HP is built by Mercury Hi-Performance, backed with a full-year warranty and possessed of a kick that puts a hard snap in this big, 4,400-pound deep vee, and the hull

loves the power. At 74 miles an hour, the Howard runs in the same performance waters as the fastest of the vee-bottoms built in this size range; on this day, it was narrowly fastest of the threesome of HP500-powered, 28-footers tested during the week. And getting there was a good part of the fun.

The Howard did a low glide onto plane and proceeded to show off a perfectly rounded performance personality that was reflected in its ongoing acceleration. "There's no porpoise, whether you're turning 25 or 70 miles an hour," read one test driver's journal. "It just takes a nice, easy set and goes fast."

The Howard cockpit is very, very comfortable in the cruise mode and a nice, secure ride at speed. We found the Bullet to be wonderfully stable at high speed and absolutely consistent all the way up the tach.

This hull is Howard's new flagship, and it feels every bit the role. There was a time when running 72 through rough water in a vee-bottom boat was an adventure not recommended for

hot-boating's faint of heart. Boats like the Bullet have transformed that experience, once a white-knuckler, into an enjoyable cruise. True to tradition, this Howard is built and rigged in anticipation of those hard-use days.

Like any performance vee, running the Bullet fast in the over-trim mode is not advised, but this hull's upstairs sweet spot is wide and easy to find. The IMCO hydraulics telegraphed an appreciated balance between zero torque and a defined drive.

Putting the Howard through our turning tests did little to diminish this boat's near-perfect marks. It banked moderately and equally in both directions, retaining a dry cockpit atmosphere at all speeds, even while buried. At speed, the movement of the long, sleek deck seemed in sync with the slightest movement of the wheel.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Moving into this price range warrants ownership of something out of the ordinary, and Howard's high-caliber Bullet hits that standard at close range and with maximum impact. It's one of Howard's best yet, and that's saying something.

SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Hot, flat to choppy
Centerline: 28'
Beam: 100"
Bottom: 22-degree step-vee
Engine/Drive: MerCruiser HP500EFI/
Bravo One
HP @ prop: 470
Ratio: 1.5:1
Prop: Mercury Bravo I 27" four-blade
Overall weight: 4,400 lbs.
Base Price: \$69,995
Standard Features: MerCruiser
7.4L/Bravo I, stand-up bolster seats,
tilt Dino wheel, interior-lighting pack-
age, Gaffrig gauges, electric sun
deck, actuator, seven gelcoat colors,
Gaffrig dual handle offshore shifters,
Ritchie electronic compass, billet
docking cleats, ski tow, grab handles,
powdercoated bezels, powdercoated
exterior-hardware package, 80-gal.
vents, portable head, cabin lighting,
sleeper conversion, storage cabinet
Options on test boat: HP500EFI
upgrade w/mechanical Bluewater trim
actuator (\$18,000), Imco dual ram

external steering (\$3,000), Bennett
sport tabs (\$950), Aqua-Step swim
ladder (\$295), VHF ship-shore radio
(\$750), Sony ten-disk system
(\$2,500), custom mooring cover
(\$850), dual batteries (\$450), extra
hatch actuator (\$400), powdercoated
pop-up cleats (\$500), hot/cold tran-
som shower (\$425), Ellis triple-axle
trailer upgrade (\$2,300)
Price as tested: \$100,415
Top Speed, radar: 74.0 mph
Mfg. est. speed: 80 mph
0-30: 8.45 seconds
0-40: 11.23 seconds
0-50: 13.93 seconds
0-60: 16.32 seconds
Speed at 3,000 rpm: 36.8 mph
Speed at 4,000 rpm: 50.8 mph
Speed at 5,000 rpm: 72.5 mph

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