

## 28 BULLET

# Howard

It is only occasionally that we encounter a performance custom that is sufficiently impressive to command the full and unanimous attention of our testing team, down to the most jaded and grizzled of our inspectors and throttle pushers. Howard secured this elevated status with the arrival of this spectacular, quad-rotor Whipple-charged 28-foot Bullet, which enlisted and harnessed a wide array of premium-level technology in unleashing one of the most impressive performances in the 13-year history of our performance tests.

This well-planned and equally well-executed single-step vee-bottom left a series of individual triumphs in its wake while weaving its way through our testing stations, achieving highest possible marks through every link of its creative chain. From the rigidity and efficiency of its balsacored, step-bottomed chassis and ensuing installation and into a drive train that tapped into the latest, proven science in supercharging, fuel injection, outdrives and propellers, this Howard had it all going on.

Some among us will remember the Howard specifically for its radar-verified 103.9-mph performance through speed alley, making it the fastest vee-bottom in its size class we've ever tested, along with one of the hardest accelerating. Its blazing speed was only one aspect of a full-bodied repertoire of fine qualities,

however, and we couldn't find a soft spot in its personality.

Not surprisingly, the Bullet, which was released for the 2000 model year, has kept Howard's well-tended set of molds (the bowrider uses a purpose built topside, not a cutaway of the hard deck) in constant incubation since it debuted. It already accounts for nearly a quarter of Howard's overall, self-restrictive yield. Thus far, the closed-bow has been more popular, but in the wake of this bowrider's performance, that's likely to change. The crawl-through cuddy version commands a \$1,900

premium over the hard deck and sports the same amenities except for a forward vee berth and portable head.

Though MerCruiser's venerable HP500/XR is the most popular setup on the Bullet and runs, according to Howard, in the 80-mph range, it was only a matter of time before someone addressed the Bullet from the perspective of the

extreme-level lake boater.

Howard and Paul Pfaff Racing teamed to facilitate that endeavor, and, left unencumbered by traditional boundaries, they conspired to create this quadri-blown, 980-horse, fuel-injected lake boat that lives quite happily on 92-octane pump gas. The project's conclusion coincided with our scheduled evaluations, affording our driving team the opportunity to plug into a ruggedly built, aesthetically elite and finely dialed lake machine that stunned our proceedings with its scream- ▶







ing speed and sure handling.

It is also possibly the most expensive Howard ever built, at just under \$150K; the power, steering, drive and prop upgrades alone more than doubled the \$69,995 price of the base, 377-powered (6.2L) starting point.

#### THE SETUP

There are a number of inherently fast step-bottom hulls on the market, but the adrenaline worshipper's options narrow considerably once aspirations move past 80 mph. Getting a vee-bottom, stepped or otherwise, to run faster isn't in itself that difficult; the trick is to avoid flirting with disaster in the process. Howard GM Mike Willen oversaw the development of the Bullet with a sharp focus on the mainstream; this is as wonderful a boat at 80 as it is at extreme speeds. He also anticipated the boat's pos-

sible future role in Factory 1 offshore racing.

The key to the boat's remarkable stability at high speed, says Willen, is the design of the back third of the boat: the angle of the step, the variable deadrise (22 degrees at the transom) worked into the bottom surface and the strake designs. Rather than carrying the nose and digging a trough with the stern at speed, the hull rides level and flat and stays there.

Ultimately, that provided a sound foundation on which to build a lake boat that not only fuses a variety of progressive thinking and pieces, but also holds its own among any of the dozens of elite Howard playthings that have emerged through more than 40 years of boat-building. Howard Brown left his mark with this company, but the Willens left his shadow

long ago.

Once the hull choice was established, the focus shifted to creating and managing power, and lots of it. Pfaff centered that process around a punched-out 502- (to 540) inch oval-port Merlin block, and the buildup prescription called for top-shelf pieces that would not only support long life at 8:1 compression, but which would support the low-maintenance, pump-gas theme. Imco Power-Flow exhaust expunged through polished stainless Teague transom tips (\$800).

Getting the rest of the way would require extreme measures, and Pfaff recommended the intercooler, quad-rotor Whipple system for a num-

ber of reasons. First, when piggybacked with Pfaff's favored Autotronic EFI componentry, the system yields great fuel management that promotes an easy idle, stress-free shifting and turnkey reliability. Second, Howard wanted to retain the low-profile look of the hatch—show us another 980-horse vee that's able to do that. In fact, this motor is only an inch and change taller than an HP, which enabled Howard to use the stock, flat, padded hatch. The cockpit's open side panels draw cooling air into the engine compartment.



This quad rotor system, when it's properly dialed in like this one was, is the contemporary answer to the nasty, big-displacement roots blowers that drove the big-gun Howards of yesteryear.

In fact, this setup is relatively conservative, compared to what's available. It runs nine pounds boost, and, with a few pulley changes and a reconstruction of the fuel program, there's said to be another 400 horsepower lying dormant.

response and breath-stealing acceleration beyond 4,000, when the rotors hooked it up in earnest. While we can't yet vouch for the system's resilience under hours of any significant measure (it had less than one full revolution of the hour meter when we got it), what we saw of it was dizzying in its all-around drivability and high-rpm impact.

That effect was intensified by the engine's finished appearance, from the vibrant, protective yellow paint that dressed its block to the supportive array of polished stainless (lines, brackets, etc.), buffed-out valve covers and intakes and chrome pieces. We wouldn't want to be the designated boat cleaner, but the detail was very impressive.

On the water



\$11,200 upgrade that relies on beefier and tougher shafts and gears to build resiliency into its 1.42:1 personality. The water-cooled B-Max got peripheral support from an optional, beefed, stress-fighting solid gimbal and transom adapter (\$5,300, from Mercury).

A specially cut, lab-finished 33-inch Mercury four-blade Bravo (\$795) efficiently absorbed the power, and full-hydraulic, Imco dual-ram steering (\$4,300) greatly enhanced our confidence during a series of sustained runs at 90-plus miles an hour. Kiekhaefer K-planes instantly tuned our ride, and an additional ram (\$445) was added to the hatch assembly, giving us hyper-quick visual confirmation of Pfaff's over-the-top dress work and the stunning detail of Howard's ever-shining installation talents.

Looks can be deceiving, and the natural first tendency to dismiss this boat as an impractical, guilty pleasure doesn't stand up upon further acquaintance. The only visible concession to the quad system is a clean, finished notch in the top of the rear seat base liner, which accommodated the pulleys and added another couple of inches to an already roomy interior design.

Also, the Bullet's practical side is reflected in a beautiful, comfortable cockpit and surprisingly utilitarian center cabin,

which defies the industry norm with its abundant head clearance and roomy, comfortable, facing seating for two fully grown couples.

#### ONBOARD

The Howard is as impressive at rest as it is at play, with finely detailed tooling and great fiberglass finish work. The bow seating area is deep and secure, roomy enough for three or four adults to sit comfortably or for two to recline in bliss. Low-profile, powdercoated railing lay close to the glass on bezel mounts, and the crescent seats were neatly accented with the rectangular, yellow-and-checkers color work that dressed the rest of the interior.

Optional slider doors (\$1,800) provided easy and unrestricted access from both directions into a center cockpit that took us by surprise with its abundant passenger space and comfortable, facing sofa seats. Three inches are notched from the stringers in this area, and, along with the Bullet's sharply cut vee entry, that builds an almost unbelievable amount of room into the sub floor while retaining a lean and sleek stance at the waterline.

Two large, pillow-style seats insert into the void between the sofa seats to create a large, convertible sleeper area. Lighting is stylishly integrated into the Howard's softly shaped bulkhead.

"The dash tooling is just outstanding," wrote one of our test drivers, and his impression was seconded, not only there, but also throughout the main pas-

mant. That begs the question: Who needs 'em?

The chip-driven EFI system channeled that power to its smoothest, most manageable potential, and the effectiveness of the blower-EFI partnership was pleasantly evident in our boat's consistent propensity for smooth, uninterrupted idle, easy shifting, steady throttle

where the big boys go to play, the common, missing link is clearly the absence of drive dependability under big power loads. That concern was addressed with one of the initial offerings of the Bravo Shop's new B-Max drive, an



senger area. Front manual, drop-through bolster seats are standard and utilize ornate, powdercoated billet support frames that were uniquely milled per Howard's design. The densely padded seats offered reassuring support and superior comfort as the Gaffrig GPS speedo hovered and climbed above 90 and beyond the century mark. The seats were cut with stylish side recesses and dressed with wraparound graphics that keyed on the 28's bright exterior colors.

Front passenger security is assured through molded footrests (\$300), and, in back, riders can stand and hug rear seat railing and cling-to foot pegs or meld into the rear bench, with grab railing easily accessible. The cockpit is nicely proportioned and promotes easy, free movement with a wide walkway and great access throughout. Footsteps with nonskid are tooled into the passenger's side for easy passage over the top.

Driver-based functions are coordinated and positioned with the obvious benefit of considerable forethought and experience behind the wheel. Gaffrig dual-lever controls seem to fall into your right hand, and the Howard's elegant dash tooling fosters excellent visibility of the two-rows gauge layout (five on top, six smaller below). Our instrument cluster included the cool new Gaffrig GPS speedo (\$400), a ballsy call for an owner who obviously wanted the real scoop and not a seat on Fantasy Island in his quest for 100+. Boost, fuel-pressure and depth gauges were added on. In fact, the only option not built into this show-level machine was a sound system.

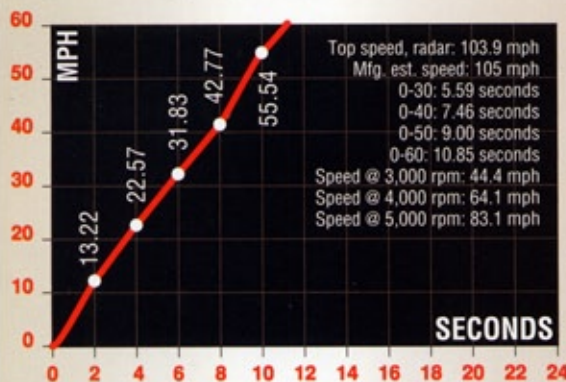
Eddie Marine did their usual nice work on Howard's hardware, including the compact, anodized pewter switch panel, which served the backlit rockers up in fingertip range. White and pewter bezels framed the gauges. A Bluewater three-way, mechanical drive and tab indicator (\$575) is directly above. A Ritchie compass is sunk into a smoothly tooled dash recess. Optional wind deflectors (\$300)

## SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Moderate Centerline: 28' Beam: 100 inches Bottom: Stepped 22-degree vee Drive train: Quad-rotor Whipple charged 540-inch Pfaff/B-Max drive HP @ prop: 980 Overall weight: 4,400 lbs. Base price: \$69,995 Standard features: MerCruiser 6.2L/Bravo I, balsa coring, seven color gelcoat, illuminated rocker switch, anodized hardware, interior lighting Dino wheel, Gaffrig instrumentation, Gaffrig dual-lever hand controls, hydraulic steering, electric engine hatch, portable head Options on test boat: Pfaff quad-blown, fuel-injected 540 (\$46,500), B-Max drive (\$11,200), Imco dual-rum hydraulic steering (\$4,300),

Kiekhaefer K-plane tabs (\$2,395), lab-finished Mercury prop (\$795), HP gimbal and transom adapter (\$5,300), Bluewater three-position drive indicator (\$575), wind deflectors (\$300), Teague custom exhaust pipes (\$800), footrests (\$300), bowrider cuddy option (\$1,900), dual sliding cabin doors (\$1,800), glove box (\$300), Imco drive shower (\$200), dual batteries w/switch (\$350), dual electric hatch rams (\$445), Gaffrig GPS speedometer (\$400) Price as tested: \$147,855

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are striking, though they were only minimally effective in reducing face wind.

The classic Howard feel is reinforced with a very clean installation of top-grade carpeting. Interior lighting is standard, along with the array of four cup holders and tilt Dino wheel. A molded glove box (\$300) is built into the dash. Oversized storage canals utilize gunnel space, and you can drop an ice chest or other self-contained cargo into the engine hatch. There's more storage in the bow and rear seat bases.

Our test boat supported Howard's reputation as one of the industry's top glass houses, and it stood out even among a week full of outstanding fiberglass and color work. An oversized rear swim platform is absorbed smoothly into the boat's natural lines; it's surfaced with nonskid, and stainless grip bars span its length. Pewter

hardware, including fuel fills, ski tow, bezels and Eddie matched vented grab handles to perfection. Howard through-bolts a generous total of six pop-up cleats to the sides. Front running lights are frenched into the hull. Maximum impact was made through four gelcoat colors that encompassed a clean, fade-enhanced checker design, and the execution was outstanding.

### PERFORMANCE

Proper fuel delivery is the most critical link in making a blower setup work—without manageability in such real-world situations as launching, docking and idling, the most potently powered machine is rendered useless outside the dyno room. Pfaff counter-balanced the gargantuan horsepower reserve in this engine with a mild side that required very low rpm to retain a steady idle, facilitated clean and clunk-free shifting of the B-Max and didn't require

the high-maintenance throttle work that you'll see on a lot of nasty installations.

Roll into the throttle, and the Howard surges into a clean plane mode and shows off a highly receptive attitude to trim tuning along the way. Nudge the bow down into dirty water or bend the stick and air it out: Either way, the Bullet is telegraphically reactive to trim.

"Level it off, and it just flies," one of our drivers wrote, attesting to a hard and consistent throttle response that is also reflected in the Bullet's vitals: 0-to-40 in 7.46 seconds, 0-to-60 in 10.85. The power was there, no question: Still, the hull knew what to do with it. Even at zero boost, this hull is alive. At a pedestrian 3,500 rpm, our dial moved between 55 and 60. Talk about stress-free cruising.

Not only was this the quickest vee at our test and among the quickest we've ever tested, but also it was second-quickest of all 21 boats attending our tests. Not bad for a 28-footer that was set up essentially for extreme top-end speed. We noted an 83-mph cruise at 5,000, and a relatively easily attainable series of 101- to 103-mph passes followed a 6,400-rpm peak.

Low-speed maneuverability and cruise handling elicited top marks, and the only way to induce porpoising in this hull is to overtrim it. The Bullet showed off excellent lateral stability at speed—when it's aired out right, the stance is sticky, but it's right on the tail. Imco parts assured responsive turning.

### DRIVER'S HUDDLE

A pleasure to test...a stand-out in every respect, a rocket with an excellent personality. A truly fun 28-footer that's easy to drive and outstanding in every type of water. This setup had it all: It's fast as hell, had comfortable bow seating, a center cabin with adult-sized headroom, a beautiful cockpit and a thoroughly impressive drive train. Responds immediately to wheel and trim. Unbelievable acceleration all the way up the ladder. A spectacular boat—as custom as it gets, with great dial-in.