



# 2015 BOAT EVALUATIONS

## HOWARD 288 SPORTDECK

Howard Custom Boats 25544 Avenue Stanford, Valencia, CA 91355 • 661-257-9275 • [www.howardboats.com](http://www.howardboats.com)



Fifty years ago Howard Custom Boats was all about setting drag boat speed records. Company founder/owner Howard Brown drove his 18' flatbottom SK hull, "How 'Bout That", through NDBA's quarter mile timing traps at an unheard of 137.82 miles an hour. A performance dynasty was officially in the making.

Today, a half century later, Howard is still on that dynasty track, just not in the world of drag boats. Some years ago, Howard Brown sold his boat building business to Gene Willen, a Howard customer with a penchant for getting things exactly right. And since then, with the expert contribution of his talented son Mike, the Willens have evolved Howard Boats into a finely honed custom boat manufacturing operation resulting in some of the most exceptional family high performance sportboat models the present-day marketplace has to offer.

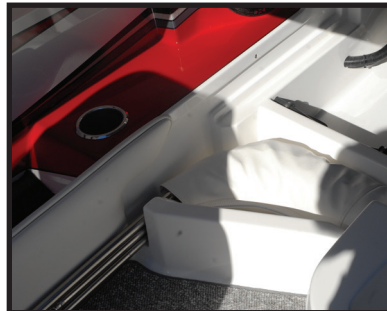


In providing one of Howard's 288 Sportdecks for our initial RDP boat test evaluations, Gene was unnecessarily apologetic for having to bring a customer owned boat rather than a showroom fresh brand new model to our Parker, Arizona test site. Knowing that our evaluation team was going to scrutinize down to the most minute detail, Gene was worried that unavoidable use-flaws might lower his overall rating. Yes, there were a couple of very inconsequential flaws noted, but in no way did it detract from a deckboat that could only be described as close to a perfect

"ten" as possible.

Over the past 25 years, I've had the opportunity to drive/test at least one or more performance deckboat models from every manufacturer (over 35 boats and more than 15 different brands in total). All were variations of the basic center pod air-entrapment type. Some were underpowered, some were over-powered and a few were just right. This Howard 288 with Mercury Racing 600SCi was one of those "just right".

It's not "all about" just top speed, which the Howard has plenty of (88.6 mph on radar with a two-passenger 460 pound load and a half tank of fuel onboard). Most deckboats are going to spend way less than 5% of their time at WOT, especially when there's a half dozen or more people onboard. Still, having that kind of performance just a push of the throttle stick away is always comforting.



Okay, so the Howard 288 is fast, but that's just scratching the surface. It's the feel of the boat that really sets it apart. First, trim it down and it comes up on plane with minimal bow rise – one of the flatter take-offs in the 15 to 25 mph range that I have experienced. Having good line of sight is always important. If a boat labors getting on-plane at 20 mph, it can travel over 250 feet in less than seven seconds.

Generally speaking, air-entrapment hulls tend to be a little lazy



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## SPECIFICATIONS

Manufacturer: Howard Custom Boats  
Model: 288 Sport Deck  
Hull type: Air-entrainment  
Length (centerline w/swim platform): 28' 8"  
Beam: 102"  
Deadrise at transom: N/A  
Weight (approx. total as tested): 4,800 lbs  
Fuel capacity: 120 gal  
Price (base suggested retail, excluding trailer): \$130,000  
Price (as tested): \$160,000

## PERTINENT STANDARD EQUIPMENT

100% composite construction, no wood used in hull. Transom and stringers are 'Corsa Board', high density foam re-enforced with fiberglass. 7 color gelcoat graphics, electric fuel switch/selector valve, all stainless steel hardware and fasteners, Livorsi instrumentation w/Vantage View, dual electric engine hatch lift rams, Gibson mufflers, LED interior and navigation lights, hidden bimini top, snap-in carpet kit, electric bow wind deflector. Aqua step aft boarding ladder, Mercury 8.2 Mag ECT/HO stern drive package w/Bravo One Drive.

## OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT AS TESTED

Full IMCO hydraulic steering, dual rams, up-graded stereo w/Sony head (satellite ready), 2 amps, 2 subwoofers, 8 speakers, 3 remotes, a Lab-finished Mercury propeller, bow and stern hull capping (no hull/deck seam).

## ENGINE/PROPULSION

Manufacturer (engine): Mercury Racing 600 SCi  
Number of engines: one  
Cylinder type: V-8  
Cubic inch displacement: 502 c.i.  
Max rated PSHP @ RPM: 600 HP @5250rpm  
Propulsion type: Mercury Stern Drive Bravo XR  
Gear ratio: 1.50:1  
Propeller make: Mercury Bravo Labbed  
Propeller blades: four  
Propeller diameter x pitch: 15.5" x 30"

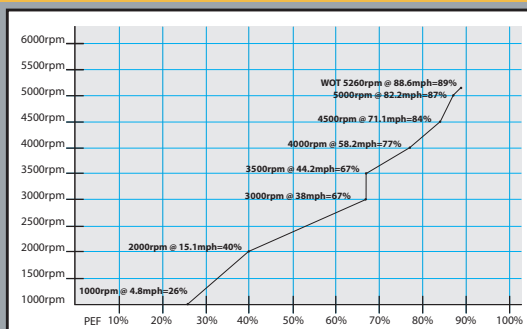
## PERFORMANCE:

Top speed @ Max RPM (radar): 88.6mph @ 5260rpm  
Top speed @ Max RPM (GPS): 88.4mph @ 5260rpm

## ACCELERATION:

0-30 mph: 7.13 sec.  
30-50mph: 6.53 sec.  
50- WOT: 17.72 sec.

## RPM @ Speed and PEF (propeller efficiency factor)



in the lower on-plane speed range (25 mph to upper 30s). It's the nature of the design. They ride flat because there's very little aerodynamic or hydrodynamic advantage in play due to the relatively slow speed resulting in lots of wetted bottom friction. One way you can measure this is by calculating propeller efficiency. We've worked the numbers for you, and the 288 has an efficiency factor in the 65 to 70% range which is quite impressive for an air-entrainment hull under 40 mph (2600 to 3200 rpm). Once it gets into the 50+ mph range, tunnel hull design advantages become evident and the Howard really becomes fun to drive. Propeller efficiency correspondingly elevates into the 80+% range around 60 mph and this is a straight tracking highly responsive hull with plenty of power left in reserve.

A testament to the brute torque of Mercury's 600SCi package is the fact that the 288 was comfortable pulling a Labbed 30 pitch four-blade Bravo One prop at the sweet-spot 5260 rpm. In fact, in the full throttle/fully trimmed mode, we were bumping the rev limiter. At 4,800 pounds (without fuel or passengers) the 288 accelerated from zero to 30 mph in just a fraction over 7 seconds which in my book is quick. The 30 to 50 mph mid-range was also swift taking just 6.53 seconds. We timed the 50 mph to full speed at 17.72

seconds, only 8 seconds was needed to reach 80 mph and the climb from there to 88.6 mph was slightly over 9 seconds.

We consistently ran in the 88 to 88.6 mph for a top end number banging the rev limiter. That's an 89% propeller efficiency factor which is outstanding by any measure, even for a pure bred race boat let alone a deckboat. Trimming is confined to a relatively narrow window. The drive unit fully tucked under





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for getting on plane is best, then hit the upside of the trim switch to level off with a neutral drive angle for mid-cruise (30 to 45 mph) running works best. Once you've gone past the 50 mph mark, the 288 likes a little more positive trim angle (but not much) and you're ready to roll up to 80 mph whenever you want. The over 80 mph optimum trim placement is an exercise of finesse – don't be in a hurry, just lightly flick the up-button and keep your eye on the GPS speedometer (remember, accurate GPS readings are usually slightly delayed so give the numbers a few extra seconds to catch-up with the real speed over ground).

For those acquainted with the characteristics of performance style air-entrapment hulls, you are familiar with a tendency commonly referred to as high speed transitional "hop" or "porpoise". Depending on hull configuration, weight distribution, CG (center of gravity), engine/horsepower/torque, propeller style, drive height, etc., etc. some tunnel hulls begin to "hop" or "porpoise" as they transition through a specific speed range (usually occurring between 60 and 90 mph). Most of the time, you can drive through-it, and the hull gently settles down once it passes that transitional speed window. Rarely have I found a hull that does not transition, but the Howard 288 is impressively void of that common characteristic.



Likewise, I couldn't find a fault with the 288 Sportdeck's turning capability. It corners flat (no outside lean) and there's no hint of a chine tug or grab as you're going through a complete 180 degree maneuver left or right. Several slalom maneuvers at various speeds demonstrated equal agility both to the left and right.

The selection of Mercury Racing's 600SCi package is ideal for the 288. And even though Mercury now offers four different engine options (three naturally aspirated – 520 – 540 – 565 and one supercharged – 600) between 520 and 600 horsepower, there's just something special about the extra seat-of-the-pants feel you get when there's a supercharger on the business end of the throttle stick. The 600SCi is smooth, reliable and packs a definite punch. It also gladly accepts 87 octane grade fuel which helps a little on the overall cost of operation. It's not hard to understand why it's the senior member of the 2015



Mercury Racing model line-up – it's too good and too popular to go away.

A lot of boat builders like to pound their chest about how they incorporate the most advanced composites and latest technologies in their manufacturing process. Although there's more than one right way to build a boat, it would be hard to imagine that Howard doesn't rank at the very top of the heap when it comes to construction. They are one of only a handful of custom builders who have completely eliminated the use of wood in their hulls and decks, replaced by an impressive array of high quality resins, composite cores and foams plus special bonding adhesives. End result, less overall weight, greater strength and no chance of rotting or deterioration which can sometimes occur with wood especially as it ages in a marine environment.

As would be expected, the Howard 288 is a full inner-liner boat. This means (in Gene's own words), "the inner liner for this model is a one-piece structure, consisting of the engine compartment, cockpit with molded-in front and rear seat bases along with side panels featuring built-in storage and stereo speaker mounting platforms, as well as the entire forward bow section including the bow walk-off." If nothing else, this one-piece liner comes as close to producing a rattle-free boat as I have encountered.

On the exterior, the Howard mold work is flawless and the gelcoat is much the same. This hull is capped (no seam visible between deck and hull done by hand, not in the mold) at the bow and transom which is always a visually impressive enhancement. Getting to the important underside, the 288 has a single step with a notched transom center pod with 22 degrees of deadrise. The pod also hangs 1.75 inches deeper than the outside sponsons.

Inside the 288, Howard's upholstery, although not done in-house, rates with the best in the industry. I personally like the new style of using gelcoat color matched fiberglass insert panels on the backs of the bucket seats. And incorporating lean-back cushions facing the bow for the two forward lounges is also a plus in our book. Howard also offers an interesting jump-seat option behind the passenger bucket. It might not be for everybody, but it does afford one additional place to sit in the main cockpit area which is never a bad idea. For boaters with 'stuff' there's plenty of places to stow it, including a built-in beverage cooler under the aft seat, fiberglass fender pockets in the engine compartment and even a removable dinette table handy that stores in the starboard bulkhead ahead of the driver console.



For some, the helm might seem a little plain, especially for those who are accustomed to row after row of individual gauge faces. Although there's plenty of room to accommodate a full spread of analog instruments if you want (Howard will customize it however you want), this 288 only had a Livorsi Vantage View speedometer and tachometer



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flanking a Mercury Marine Vessel View digital monitor screen with way more information on it than I care to know. The only minor critique here, depending on driver height, the upper rim of the steering wheel tends to bisect viewing the screen. Throttle and shift controls, which are comfortably located on the starboard gunnel pocket, are conventional cable/mechanical driven and effortless in operation.

If you're looking for the 'cool factor', the 288 has a couple of standouts in my book. First is the electrically actuated wind deflector that's located just behind the walk-off bow. What this in-floor deflector does is raise and lower at the touch of a helm switch to block or divert the blast of air coming down the centerline of the cockpit at speed. There's no way around it, deckboats are windy for passengers. By raising the deflector shield to a near upright position, it does an admirable job of cutting down the wind factor inside the cockpit. The second feature is the genuinely hidden bimini top, a stroke of Mike Willen genius. For me, there's no more important piece of equipment or hardware on a boat on a 90+ degree day in summer than a bimini top. But biminis are also a pain because they always seem to be in the way when stowed in the down position, and they don't add to the attractiveness of the boat when in plain sight. Howard's hidden bimini solves both issues. It cleverly fits/reclines into its own slot in the forward part of the engine compartment and is totally invisible when the engine hatch is closed.

This brings us to the final chapter of this story.....retail price. Although on the surface, the Howard 288 appears to be in the upper range of 28-foot deckboats, you need to compare apples to apples. Gene is quick to point out that they have recently instituted a new pricing policy – rather than start with an artificial low base price and work up with pricey option additions, Howard is now pricing 'all inclusive' except for five equipment categories which are extras: specific engine package choice, hydraulic external steering, upgraded sound systems, Lab propellers, and hull to deck capping. Make no mistake, the Howard 288 Sportdeck is a lot of boat regardless of the price, \$160,000 as tested.



## SCORE CARD

(purely subjective ratings/opinions by test team, 1=least, 10=best)

**LEVEL 1** (rating scale, 1=least, 10=best)

**Hull/mold: 10.0** - if we can't find a flaw, then it's a 10. Love the bow and stern capping.

**Construction: 10.0** - all wood has been eliminated. A completely composite hull and deck. Using Baltec Balsa core, Diab foam from Sweden and Decolite vacuum-bagged balsa core panels and 2-week cure-time in the mold. 100% vinyl-ester resin

**Rigging/installation: 9.0** - clean, neat and functional. Sanitary and purposeful.

**Interior/upholstery: 9.5** - great seating contours - looks custom, feels custom. Jump seat behind passenger bucket might appeal to some.

**Innovations/unique features: 10.0** - a unique electric bow wind deflector and a totally concealed bimini top in the engine compartment made this an easy choice.

**Driveability: 9.5** - if you can afford it, buy it.

**Attitude/set: 9.5** - no "hop" - no "porpoise" - narrow trim range.

**Turning/slalom/handling: 9.5** - maintains a smooth level attitude, fast or slow. Nimble for a 28-footer

**Acceleration (low speed): 9.5** - minimal bow rise when getting on plane.

**Acceleration (mid-range): 9.0** - pulls a 30" pitch prop with ease.

**Acceleration (high end): 8.0** - it pulls hard to 80+ mph, then finesse it to max speed.

**Performance (low speed): 9.0** - well-mannered and maneuverable.

**Performance (mid-range): 9.5** - pick an rpm, set it and enjoy it.

**Performance (high end): 10.0** - no recommendations for improvement, drive it and have fun.

**Suitable purpose/function: 9.0** - caters to the upscale/performance-minded deckboat owner.

**LEVEL 2** (rating scale, 1=least, 5=best)

**Gelcoat/graphics: 4.5** - great graphics, great color scheme, some of the black pins lines could be slightly sharper.

**Helm/instrumentation: 4.0** - too plain for gearheads? Too bad...the digital age is here. Definitely not 'old school'.

**Comfort/ergonomics: 4.5** - no weak points. Like the starboard side aft walk-thru to the swim platform which totally extends over the drive unit. Great safety feature.

**Amenities/storage: 4.5** - if you can't find room on board to stow it, you probably don't need it. Good use of space under seats. More capacity forward than aft.

**Engine serviceability: 5.0** - the hatch opens and virtually the entire engine is accessible, top, bottom and sides.

**Cockpit noise level: 3.5** - surprisingly quiet for an engine package with CMI headers. Thru-transom mufflers do a commendable job.

**Cockpit wind factor: 4.0** - adjustable bow deflector does make a difference.

**Appropriate power: 5.0** - there's nothing not to like about Mercury's 600SCi unless it would be a 700SCi option. This boat can handle it.

**Tracking: 5.0** - point A to point B without deviation.

**Lateral stability: 5.0** - rock steady.

**SCORECARD TALLY: 186.0** out of a possible 200