

Interview: Michael Willen

HOWARD 28' BULLET MERCUISER 525EFI/BRAVO XR

boats ever created. So advanced was its design, that ten years after Mike Willen tooled it, the Bullet remains one of family performance boating's landmark bottoms.

If you show up at Howard Custom Boats some day and see trucks in the parking lot, and obvious signs of life inside, but no one answers the door when you bang on it, don't call 911, and don't call Howard Custom Boats. Gene Willen, the company's mouthpiece and sales force, is probably out. Mike Willen, his son, is in—but you can knock as long and as loud as you like. He's not going to pay you any attention.

Not that he's arrogant—the opposite is true, when you sit down with him—but Mike Willen, who quite by accident became one of performance boat building's most accomplished hull designers, is focused. "The only part I don't like about the business," he says, "is the business."

His talents obviously lie with fiberglass and the physics that occur with its contact with water, a revelation that occurred relatively late in the father-son Howard saga. "I waited until he went on vacation," says Mike. "Then I started building the Bullet. He would have been up my ass from every

direction if he had been around."

By the time Gene returned, the damage was done: the Bullet was now a running plug, a floating, functional, and very crude amalgamation of fiberglass, wood, and bondo. No foam models or garage-sized wall drawings for Mike—he builds all his new models as works in progress, and runs them from the beginning. That way, the development time is spent in the water, not in the shop.

The 28' became Howard's best seller of all time, and it's the fastest recreational stern drive vee lake boat in creation. Our own staff member, Gary Taylor, owns the fastest one on record—it went 122.0 mph.

Mike enlightened us on the process, his perspective, and

our test team. Your thoughts?

Well, it's really fun to drive, and I believe that's why it's popular. There are boats out there that are really fast, but they're boring. There is stuff that only runs 70, but is borderline out of control—fun, but not ideal. We've harnessed both of those in the Bullet. It works with a variety of power. It would get

on plane with a four-banger, but it's a great drive with big power. And there's the cabin, too.

It's also become a very popular size class.

The 28' is almost the standard day cruiser size any more. That's what everyone wants. That seems to be the average boat size we see now, on the weekends.

other matters Howard.

The Bullet is one of Howard's best-received boats ever, and a favorite of



in the water, and gives it the stability. It's like skipping a rock. You get more surface, but the surface is actually going across the top, instead of digging a hole through the water.

What goes into tooling up an original bottom that works so well?

Getting the steps in the right spot, and getting the angles behind the step in line with the angle of the drive. When that all comes together, you have something special. If you can get the bottom parallel to the water, and run your drive 90 degrees off that, then you have unlimited speed. You're not pushing up or pushing down against the water. It's pretty simple.

We've noticed the steps on your design are a little further forward than most other builders.

True. It actually puts a little more boat

What did your dad think?

I didn't tell him. I waited until he was on vacation.

Is he a believer?

He still questions everything I do with every new boat, and wonders if it will work. Nothing's changed.

Every tooler works differently. What's your process like?

I like to start with fiberglass pieces, instead of building a model, or something out of wood. I start with a shell, and build around the shell, almost like a room addition on a house. That way I can run it as I go. It's fiberglass and wood and bondo, but strong enough to put a motor in it. I get to run the plug and make changes before it goes into production. There were a lot of changes on the original Bullet before it went into production.

What was it like the first time you ran the plug?

Exciting. We took photos and video, and I spent all night watching the video. A



couple of things caught my eye. I ended up running the steps further forward, and changing the angle of the bottom, relative to the water and drive. All of it clicked when I watched the video.

Were you sure it was a success that first time out?

Not at all. I had doubts, but I had an idea of what I wanted.

Where did the first one go?

It was my boat. I didn't keep it for long, though. We ran behind on production last summer, and someone came in the shop and had to have it. I didn't want to sell it, but I really had no choice.

What's your favorite power combination?

I like the big power in the 28'. But that boat runs extremely well with the Merc 600. That's an amazing package.

Have you run an Ilmor V-10 yet?

Funny you should ask—we're building one right now. I can't wait to finish it.

What's your biggest nightmare in the business?

(Long pause) I'll be nice and say that the labor side of it is great—that part of it doesn't get any better. PB

