



ON THE MONEY

FOR ITS FIRST OFFSHORE EFFORT, HOWARD CUSTOM BOATS STAYED TRUE TO ITS HERITAGE WITH THE NEW 36 BULLET—A QUALITY OFFERING THAT RUNS LIKE THE WIND.

When it comes to building boats for the lake or river, Howard Custom Boats has created some impressive models in its Valencia, Calif., shop. With boats such as the 28 Bullet and the 28 Sport Deck, Howard manufactures some of the fastest and best-built boats for the money—in fact, both models have earned “Boat of the Year” honors from *Powerboat* in the past.

Now the father-and-son team of Gene and Mike Willen, who have spent many years boating in the Pacific Ocean, is going beyond its comfort zone. Showcasing a new 36-foot V-bottom, Howard Custom Boats declared that its 36 Bullet is an offshore-capable model.

“I know it’s a different world, but this boat is built ready to handle (the open ocean),” said Mike Willen, who designed the 36-footer as well as the 25 and 28 Bullets. “We know the ocean and know what it takes ... this thing is stout.”

PERFORMANCE

While the *Powerboat* Test Team couldn’t rate the boat’s offshore capabilities, the 36 Bullet was unfazed during our test runs on Arizona’s Lake Havasu no matter what wakes or wind chop it encountered. The twin-step V-bottom tracked seamlessly and

executed turns at cruising and full speed with ease.

In the words of test driver John Tomlinson, the boat felt “nice and solid” and “stable and predictable.” Although he said he wasn’t sure where to sit while driving because sitting in the bolster was a bit low and standing wasn’t too comfortable.

Lead test driver Bob Teague agreed, calling the seats, “a little wrong.” Both test drivers said that could be fixed or adjusted easily on future models.

The boat was pretty quick for the power. Equipped with a pair of Mercury Racing HP525EFI engines, the 36 Bullet reached 92.4 mph at 5,400 rpm. The propulsion package was completed with lab-finished, 30"-pitch five-blade Mercury Maximus propellers hooked up to Bravo One XR drives with 1.5:1 gear ratios.

The acceleration was respectable for a hull that weighs 8,500 pounds dry. The 36-footer reached 43 mph in 10 seconds from a standing start and was running 76 mph after 20 seconds. In the midrange, the boat needed just 5.1 seconds to run from 40 to 60 mph and 8.9 seconds in the 40-to-70-mph drill.

Time to plane was better with the Mercury 280S K-Planes down, as the boat took 5.7 seconds to break on to plane. When the boat stuck its nose in the air, we lost some visibility for a couple of seconds, but it’s nothing to cause concern.

FROM TOP RIGHT: The upholstery in the V-bottom’s well-appointed cabin was quite impressive. Along with a tilting helm, the driver’s dash featured a Garmin GPSMAP 4208 monitor surrounded by the essential Livorsi Marine gauges. The 36 Bullet reached 92.4 mph with twin 525-hp engines under the hatch. Designed with room for a second row of bolster seats, the cockpit was spacious.

WORKMANSHIP

We’ve come to count on expert craftsmanship from Willen and company, but we weren’t quite sure what to expect since this boat was a much larger offering. Remarkably, the crew at Howard didn’t miss a beat. The overall quality of construction was a 10.

The 36 Bullet’s forward deck was a giant white canvas, and we couldn’t find a ripple or dimple on it. That’s not easy to pull off on a 28-footer, let alone a boat that is 36 feet.

Laid up with 100 percent vinylester resin and Knytex-knitted bi- and tridirectional fiberglass fabric, the builder utilized a four-week mold cure time to ensure proper curing and strength without distortion.

The outcome was a rattle-free boat with impeccable fit and finish. From the hatches and hinges on the deck to the clear, distortion-free, acrylic wraparound windshield from Aero Marine, the tooling was picture perfect.

With a subtle blue and gray color scheme, the boat’s gelcoat graphics received the highest marks. Howard installed a rubrail with an aluminum extrusion to protect the hullsides. The graphics carried over onto the integrated swim platform around the white nonskid section.



TEST RESULTS

TEST CONDITIONS

Temperature/humidity	93 degrees/21 percent
Wind speed/water conditions	3 to 5 mph/1' chop

HULL INFORMATION

Deadrise at transom	23 degrees
Centerline/beam	36'4"/8'6"
Hull weight	8,500 pounds

PRICING INFORMATION

Base retail with twin MerCruiser 502 Mag MPI engines	\$289,000
Price as tested	\$342,000

ENGINE & PROPELLER

Engine	(2) Mercury Racing HP525EFI
Cylinder type	V-8
Cubic-inch displacement/horsepower	502/525
Lower-unit gear ratio	1.5:1
Propeller	Lab-finished Mercury Maximus 15 1/4" x 30"

OPTIONS ON TEST BOAT

Upgrade to Mercury Racing HP525EFI engines and Bravo One XR drives with Integrated Transom System (\$38,000), stereo system (\$4,000), Ultraleather interior (\$3,000), color Garmin GPSMAP 4208 chartplotter (\$2,800), 110-volt shore power (\$2,500), lab-finished props (\$1,800) and Mercury SmartCraft system (\$900).

ACCELERATION

5 seconds	23 mph
10 seconds	43 mph
15 seconds	61 mph
20 seconds	76 mph

MIDRANGE ACCELERATION

30-50 mph	4.7 seconds
40-60 mph	5.1 seconds
40-70 mph	8.9 seconds

RPM VS. MPH

1000	NA
1500	NA
2000	16 mph
2500	28 mph
3000	42 mph
3500	53 mph
4000	61 mph
4500	71 mph
5000	83 mph

TOP SPEED AT RPM

Stalker Radar	92.4 mph at 5,400
Livorsi Marine GPS	92 mph

PLANING

Time to plane	5.7 seconds
Minimum planing speed	18 mph

FUEL ECONOMY

40 mph	NA
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FUEL CAPACITY

	180 gallons
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TEST LOCATION (ELEVATION)

Lake Havasu City, Ariz. (480 feet)

MANUFACTURER

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In the engine compartment, Howard continued with the excellent attention to detail. Installed in a side-by-side manner, the 525-hp engines were mounted on Mercury race mounts with L-angles through-bolted to the stringers. The hatch, which served as a sun pad, lifted on an electric screw jack. All of the wiring was hidden and the pumps and filters were secured to the firewall and transom.

INTERIOR

The side-by-side engine installation provided an extraordinary amount of space in the cockpit of the 36 Bullet. The electric dropout bolster seats up front were mounted on billet stands and the deep, three-person rear bench featured stowage space under the cushions. Howard offers an optional second row of bolsters since the space is available.

The upgraded Ultraleather upholstery with simulated carbon-fiber inserts throughout the boat's cockpit and cabin was neat and tidy. The marine-grade, snap-in carpet also was nicely done.

For its first boat with a sizable cabin, the builder nailed the interior. Access to the space was via an electric door and two steps. Well-padded white upholstery covered the gunwales and the ceiling, which was complemented by two sets of gray valance strips with LED can lights above the U-shape lounge and V-berth.

There was plenty of headroom in the cabin, as well as creature comforts. A hidden portable toilet was located inside a fiberglass-molded compartment to starboard. To port was a black Corian countertop with a stainless freshwater sink and a 36-gallon ice chest below that drains out the side of the boat.

From lockers under the V-berth to spacious gunwale cutouts in the cockpit, stowage throughout the 36 Bullet was abundant.

A full complement of Livorsi Marine gauges in platinum bezels were lined across the dash to starboard. Centered above the IMCO Marine tilt helm and below the three oversize gauges (for the dual tachometers and GPS speedometer) was a Garmin GPSMAP 4208 chartplotter. A set of Livorsi throttles and shifters were mounted to the right, on an extension from the gunwale.

OVERALL

It's obvious the Willen family—and everyone at Howard—is proud of the 36 Bullet, and it's easy to see why. The two-plus years of blood, sweat and tears that went into the model were not wasted.

Next up for Howard is to build the 36-footer with a pair of 700-hp engines in a staggered configuration, and we can't wait. We also can't wait to take the boat for a run offshore. **P**

WHAT WE LIKED: The 36-foot V-bottom's quickness with twin Mercury Racing HP525EFI engines, not to mention the builder's ability to execute top-notch fit and finish throughout the new model.

WHAT WE'D LIKE TO SEE: A better bolster seating arrangement up front that makes both sitting and standing a little more comfortable—that will help significantly when taking the 36 Bullet offshore.

