

# WORTH THE WAIT

In development for three years, Howard's 36 Bullet is a first-rate, full-size performance boat.

STORY  
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PHOTOS  
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Featuring an open bow, the new 36 Bullet from Howard Custom Boats had outstanding handling just like the other Bullets within the Howard lineup.

A few seasons back I visited Howard Custom Boats in Valencia, Calif. The boatbuilder is next door to Teague Custom Marine, where I had stopped by to take my semi-annual dose of abuse from my colleague and longtime friend, Bob Teague. (Teague has never quite forgiven me for moving to Northern California.) So I was able to kill two birds with one stone, if you will.

During my tour of the Howard outfit, Gene Willen, its owner, stopped in front of a mess of plywood that—at least to me—looked vaguely like a boat.

"See this?" he said. "This is the plug for the 36 Bullet. It's almost done."

I nodded politely. It sure didn't look almost done. And in truth—it wasn't almost done.

But the 36 Bullet is done now, and in all regards it's a stunner. We got our hands on the first model, which was laid out with a midcabin and an open bow (boat No. 2 will have a closed bow), on a scorching-hot, 115-degree day on Arizona's Lake Havasu. The two-step 36-footer did not fail to impress.

"This is one of the nicest new products that's come on the market in a while," said Teague, after driving the boat to 105.5 mph in sticky-glass conditions. "It's a great handling, efficient V-bottom that's really solid, especially for the first one."





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Howard equipped its debut 36 Bullet with a pair of side-by-side-installed Mercury Racing HP700SCi engines, 1.5:1-gear-ratio NXT<sup>1</sup> drives and Mercury CNC 37"-pitch five-blade propellers.

“It could use aerators on the drives to get rolling faster (time to plane was 13 seconds with the Dana Marine trim tabs down), but what is really cool about this boat is that it cruises at 92 mph at 4,500 rpm,” Teague said. “I like that a lot.”

The 36 Bullet is Howard’s first twin-engine

offering, which in part explains why it took three years to complete. It joins the award-winning Bullet series that includes 25- and 28-foot V-bottom models.

“Part of the reason it took so long is that we run all of our plugs before we build the molds, because once you make the mold it is what it is,” Willen said. “So we run the plug, make changes, run it again, make changes, and keep doing that until we get it right. For the 36 Bullet, our on-water testing of the plug was extensive.”

The actual design of the boat was handled by Willen’s son, Mike, who also designed the 25 and 28 Bullets. The similarities between the smaller boats and the 36-footer end with the clean, flat-deck style that they all share.

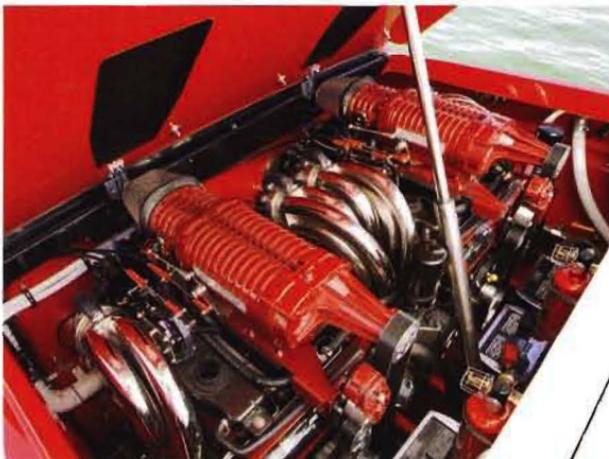
“The step placement on the 36 Bullet is in proportion, percentage-wise, to that of the 25 and 28 Bullets,” Mike Willen said. “That’s a formula we developed based on the weight and weight distribution of those boats. But the angle of attack is totally different because of the twin-engine setup. The placement **continued ▶**

**Clockwise from top left:**

To power its new 36 Bullet, Howard Custom Boats went with a pair of color-matched Mercury Racing HP700SCi engines. In the midcabin of the 36-footer, the builder included facing lounges, a flat-screen TV and a molded galley with a freshwater sink.

Livorsi Marine gauges were appropriately installed around the Garmin GPS monitor and the IMCO Marine tilt helm.

The boat's integrated swim platform covered the NXT<sup>1</sup> drives from Mercury Racing.



of the second step was tricky. Keeping the boat 'glued to the water' but 'slippery' was challenging. I had a lot of sleepless nights thinking about changing an angle here and there.

"We are now running the same speeds with our side-by-side engine setup as our competitors are with a staggered setup," he added. "The 36 Bullet also had to have the stability of the 28 Bullet. A boat without stability is useless. Those were our goals, and we're extremely happy with the result."

In terms of construction quality and attention to detail, the 36 Bullet was every bit the finished product we've come to expect from Howard. The mold work on the hull and deck were flawless—the quality of Howard's tooling matches that of any custom boatbuilder in the country. Though the engine compartment in the boat was tight, the rigging within was logical, clean and properly supported in every area.

In terms of layout, one of the more notable features of the 36 Bullet was its cockpit. It had enough space for four electric dropout-bottom bolsters on billet stands and a four-person rear bench. So when the water gets rough, at least four people in the boat can ride in comfort.

Thanks to a David Clark intercom system, they'll also be able to communicate with one another when the boat's at speed.



Livorsi Marine gauges with dark carbon-fiber-style faces were arranged logically around the tilt helm. Also from Livorsi, the boat's controls were within a comfortable reach for the driver.

Space in the midcabin, which featured two facing lounges, was ample. Cabin amenities included a deck hatch for light and ventilation, a molded galley with Corian-style countertops and a sink, a flat-screen television, and a head. The space for the lounges in the deep open bow was more than adequate.

To add a little dockside flair at night, the 36 Bullet was equipped with underwater LED lights. Navigation lights also were of the LED variety, as were the running lights on the underside of the bow. More standard hardware included six retractable cleats, a powder-painted rail around

the open bow and billet pewter grab handles.

More often than not, good things take time. To its credit, Howard didn't rush the 36 Bullet to market. Surely the closed-deck offering won't be rushed either.

"With the open bow and midcabin on the first model, we did everything to make our lives difficult, but that's what the owner wanted and it turned out great," Mike Willen said. "But I'm really looking forward to the closed-deck version."

So are we. And we're reasonably sure we won't have to wait another three years for it. **P**

— Matt Trulio is a freelance writer for Powerboat.

#### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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