

Holding Strong

Even with mellow power, the 28 Sport Deck from Howard Custom Boats is one stellar deck boat.



Howard Custom Boats 28 SPORT DECK

BY MATT TRULIO
PHOTOS BY ROBERT BROWN

After evaluating quite a few 28 Sport Deck models from Howard Custom Boats, we've come to expect nothing short of excellence from the 28-footer. And guess what? Even with docile power, the catamaran-based deck boat is still a kick in the pants to drive.

We weren't sure if it would be, as every one of the 28 Sport Decks we've tested in the past had more power than the 425-horsepower MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine supplied in the model Howard brought to Parker, Ariz.

Our test model reached a top speed of 70.8 mph with the engine running 5,000 rpm. Given the high-speed stability of the cat's hull, that kind of top-end is rock solid.

Then why did the Valencia, Calif., boatbuilder choose such light power for a boat that can clearly handle more? To keep the price tag lower, of course. So for just \$120,000 and change you can get one of the finest-built, best-handling deck boats on the market—and one that can run 70 mph.



Left: Howard installed an IMCO Marine tilt helm and a full complement of Livorsi Marine gauges at the driver's station. **Right:** Covered with snap-in carpet, the cockpit of the 28 Sport Deck featured twin bucket seats and an L-shape bench.

The 28 Sport Deck's efficient hull made very good use of the power. It came on plane in 5.2 seconds with minimal bowrise and ran from 0 to 60-plus mph in 20 seconds. Pulling steadily in the midrange, the boat went from 30 to 50 mph in 5.7 seconds and from 40 to 60 mph in 8.4 seconds.

But far and away, the best aspect of the boat's performance was its handling, which certainly was enhanced by dual-ram hydraulic steering from IMCO Marine. At \$5,200, that steering system was the 28 Sport Deck's most expensive option, but we couldn't see ordering one without it. The boat responded perfectly to helm input and turned like a sports car.

As expected, the catamaran was built to the same rigorous standards as a model with a big-horsepower engine. Howard Custom Boats owner Gene Willen and his son, Mike, the company's designer, are meticulous about their products and they leave nothing to chance. The test model's mold work was spot-on, as was the engine compartment rigging, right down to the evenly spaced cushion clamps that secured the wiring and cables.

In the bow were a pair of lounges, gunwales trays, grab handles and several lockers. Like the cockpit's sole, the one in the open bow was covered in high-quality snap-in carpet.

Although the boat had under-cushion and

in-sole lockers, the most useful stowage areas were in the driver and co-pilot consoles, which were easy to access thanks to acrylic doors. The consoles also were supplied with acrylic windscreens on stainless-steel brackets.

Bucket seats were provided for the driver and co-pilot. Aft of the seats was an L-shape lounge to port. Amenities at the port-side co-pilot station included a glove box in the dash and a grab handle on the padded gunwale.

A full array of Livorsi Marine gauges in silver rims was installed in the driver's dash. The command center's IMCO steering wheel was mounted on an IMCO tilt helm, and a molded gunwale extension was home to the Livorsi throttle and shifter. Ahead of those levers were light-up rocker switches for the accessories.

There was a starboard-side walk-through that provided access to the cockpit, and a sun pad covered the engine hatch.

With the 28 Sport Deck, Howard proved that you don't need great power to have great fun. Of course, the boat has to have the goods. This one does. **P**

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