

Magazine Articles Testing Summaries

HOT BOAT MAGAZINE 1995 BEST VALUE OF THE YEAR



When Cougar Boats made the long tow back to Canada last year with Hot Boat's Ski boat of the Year award safely secured in the bow of its barely wet 20.5 Sport Skier, more than a few raised eyes were left peering at its wake. A bowrider for Ski Boat of the Year? A stern-drive bowrider named the planet's top towboat? A Canadian stern-driven bowrider, of all things? Do they even make custom boats in Canada?

Yes, yes, yes and absolutely yes! Our test team was thoroughly and openly enamored with this highly obedient little semi-vee last year, applauding Cougar for the custom workmanship that seems to grow more polished by the year. And the MerCruiser-powered tow wonder was nothing less than incredible around the buoys, prompting an unmatched rating of 34 points (of a possible 35) from our pro ski team. Its designation as Ski Boat of the Year was interchangeable with a number of other titles, and no boat in our test fleet was nominated for awards in more categories than the '94 Cougar.

Cougar returned this year with a hard-deck version of the same hull that soundly clubbed the last test's directive tournament contingent. The 20.5 foot HD Sport Skier, tipping the scales at 2,620 pounds, is one of the best-sellers in cougar's impressive array of performance models.

Cougar is banking on better sales still. Growing numbers of mid-engine flat-bottom tournament boats are being pounded to the beach by water that becomes less hospitable with each season's wave of newly launched family boats, and the sensible move is toward more versatile transportation. Even if you've never in your life donned a slalom ski, it seems impossible to remain unimpressed by the Cougar's clean handling, solid workmanship, superb acceleration and 60-mph top end.

GETTING AQUAINTED

Cougar has evolved into one of the premier builders of high-performance customs. Few builders pack their product with more man-hours per boat, and those that do tend to price their boats accordingly. By contrast, the Cougar remains one of boating's rare five-star values, and the Sport Skier is a shining example. Lavishly appointed and solidly built, this standout 20.5 outperformed a cove full of boats costing thousands more. The finish and detail work was as fine as you'll find anywhere, the price notwithstanding. Packaged with MerCruiser's standard 7.4 Bravo power package, the cougar backed down the ramp on a trailer for less than \$32,000.00.



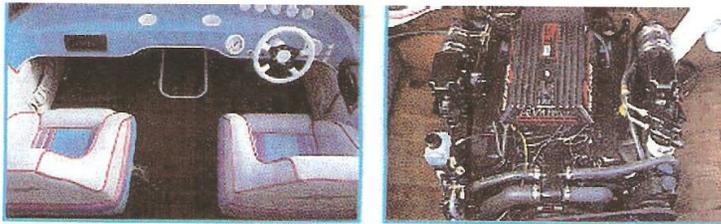
The Sport Skier is custom to its core and every copy is laid up

using bi- and tridirectional glass. Hulls are completely cored, using end-grain balsa, and deck coring is constructed of balsa and core mat. At its core is a set of four full length stringers and the construction is unitized with the fiberglass bonding of hull and deck. Hull and deck are butt-fitted and the execution on our tester was smooth and trimmed with attractive color-keyed molding that was securely and cleanly riveted into place.

Cougar is proof that mastery of the art of gelcoat is not confined to the Southwest or even within our national borders. Six colors were expertly taped and sprayed on the glistening white base of our test machine (five are standard), and a crisp teal fade finished it off in dazzling style. The boat's glass and color work drew superior ratings and its color work was wet-sanded to a mirror-like finish.

Contemporary graphics accentuated the boat's randy deck and, together with the low-slung silhouette, contributed to the illusion that the boat is much larger than 20 feet. Despite its low profile there is generous freeboard carved into the boat's design.

A stylish, cured two-piece windshield formed of quarter-inch Plexiglas and blended seamlessly into the deck's molded fairing was a deft styling touch, but the absence of any supporting hardware left it feeling a little flimsy. Standard exterior hardware included billet aluminum motor vents, grab handles, a flush-mounted fuel fill and spring-loaded deck cleats. All were powder-coated, mounted with stainless-steel fasteners and flush-mounted in a very sanitary installation. Also standard was a solid, removable two-inch ski pylon that mounted neatly into a cut-out in the motor box. A large gelcoated boarding platform is molded into the transom and is roughly textured for maximum grip. Its finish, in fact, was a bit too rough and left at least one member of our ski team with sandpaper knees.



Cougar is one of the few high-end custom shops to build its interiors in-house. The interior on our test boat was blind-stitched with a combination of light gray top-quality yachting cloth and vinyl inserts and piping. The workmanship was flawless. Top-grade fabric covered dense, supportive half-inch foam, and the seams were double stitched. The wood-base seat frames were resin-coated with Fiberglas-reinforced corners. Front buckets were mounted on powder-coated pedestal bases, which swivelled 180 degrees. Mounting was tight and solid. All seating was exceptionally comfortable.

All instrumentation was easily visible from the driver's position, and visuals were enhanced by angled, powder-coated bezels. Gauges were a combination of Gaffrigns (tach and speedometer) and Farias. Wiring under the dash was neat and accessible.

One of boating's biggest ski lockers, with a capacity for perhaps eight slalom mounts, extends from beneath the deck and is neatly carpeted and finished. Also standard in the Cougar's roomy cockpit are conveniently placed drink holders, powder-coated aluminum grab handles fabricated of billet and a 60-watt shock-resistant stereo. A rich Formulating wheel offering up a nice grip. There's plenty of available storage penned into the Cougar's design, including a nicely detailed compartmentalized area in the engine. The area under the dash was also sectioned and nicely carpeted, with only one minor problem--an unsightly seam at the entrance. There was

sufficient room there, however, for a pair of high-capacity coolers.

The sanitary rigging of this boat and Cougar's abundant use of powder-coated mounts and brackets sets its concealed areas apart from nearly everything else in its price and size range. The standard issue 7.4 was thru-bolted to the stringers using heavy-duty, angled aluminum mounts fabricated by Cougar. The L mounts were powder-coated to match the rest of the boat's hardware and secured with color-matched washers, as were the pump mount, battery box, hinge hatches, speedometer pickup and drain plug. All wiring and hoses were routed and loomed to the transom. The ensemble was as cosmetically effective as it was functional, and the Cougar's finely detailed rigging was clearly one of the boat's strengths.

PERFORMANCE

The key to this boat's smooth feel and well-rounded nature is its multistraked 20-degree bottom. A sharp front entry softens as the configuration moves to the transom, and its rounded shape is cut with two sets of lifting strakes. Two strakes run three-quarters the length of the underside, and two travel its entire expanse.

As was the case last year, the Cougar paced most everything in its class on our acceleration drills. It screamed to 30 mph in 6.07 seconds and found a 40-mph trot in just 7.60 seconds. Its wicked acceleration balanced a very impressive 61.6-mph radar pass.

Getting there was half the fun. Trimmed in, the Cougar gave up hardly any bowrise off the line and found a quick, flat set. It responded immediately to trim tuning, and we simply could not blow it out during brutally hard cornering. Loping, lazy turns were cut with fingertip ease. Clearly one of the best-handling boats we tested, the Sport Skier was the favorite boat shorter than 25 feet of at least three of our six test drivers. At 4,000 rpm, it settled into a smooth, controlled 55-mph gallop, and its handling continued to impress. Its ride remained solid as we bumped the throttle. At 60 mph, the Cougar's hydrodynamics remained unchallenged, and we're inclined to believe it could have handled an additional 20 mph with little problem.

When the late afternoon winds swept Arizona's Lake Havasu into a swirling mess, we hunkered down the Cougar's expansive bow and hammered the throttle. Its ride was easily tuned to suit the nasty conditions, and it proved an exhilarating and predictable experience. After graduating to some truly nasty water, we broke the boat completely loose and throttled off a series of crests into a soft, predictable reentry. While we'd not recommend that maneuver for most semi-vees, the Cougar thrived on it.

BOTTOM LINE

Southern California may be the hallowed birthing ground of custom workmanship, but it no longer has a monopoly on the community. Cougar has blossomed into one of the very best family performance builders, and the Sport Skier is compelling evidence of the company's arrival. Combine its brilliant cosmetics with sound workmanship and a bottom that performs as advertised and you've got one of the year's best boats. At less than \$32,000 on a suitable fully custom tandem trailer, it's also a five-star stunner on the value scale.

Specifications

- 20.5 HD Sport Skier
- Length: 20 feet, 5 inches
 - Beam: 87 inches
 - Bottom: Semi-vee
- Weight (as tested 2,620 pounds)
- Base Retail Price (with trailer): N/A

- Price (as tested): N/A

Standard Features .

Five-color gelcoat, Plexiglas windshield, , internal/external lighting package, angled gauge bezels, custom hub with Formuling wheel, Gaffrig tach/speedo, Jensen marine stereo, billet tournament ski pylon mooring tarp, flush-mounted pop-up cleats, drink holders, powder-coated hardware, 7.4L Brave One, stainless-steel Mirage prop, carpeted ski locker.

Options on Test Boat

- White-out package (\$285),
- extra gelcoat color (\$220)

Power/Drive

- MerCruiser 7:4C Brave (330 hp)

Prop/Ratio

- 23-pitch Mirage three-blade/1:5: 1:.

Performance

- Top Speed (radar) 61.6 mph .
 - Maximum rpm: 4,800
- Planing time: 3:02 seconds
 - 0-30: 6.07 seconds
 - 0-40: 7.60 seconds
 - 0-50: 9.88 seconds
 - 0-60: 17.00 seconds
 - 0-61.6: 22.17 seconds
- speed at 3,000 rpm: 41 mph
- speed at 4,000 rpm: 55mph

Cougar web-note: Prices and some details may have been changed and/or adjusted from the time this article was written.