

RETURN OF A COUGAR



by Bob Brown

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB BROWN

Cougar Custom Boats is a familiar name to most HOT BOAT readers. This Canadian based company was a staple at nearly all our performance evaluations for more than a decade and a half. Each year, one of the principles of the company would make the arduous 20-plus-hour drive to our Lake Havasu test site with one of their finely crafted air-entrapment tunnels or vee-bottom runabouts in tow. And almost without exception, what they brought us was nothing short of outstanding, and

easily on a par with the competition from stateside-built custom boats.

About 18 months ago, Cougar ownership decided to sell their company. And not too surprising, a U.S. buyer stepped up and acquired the assets along with the brand name. After a short period of transition while establishing a new manufacturing base here in the U.S., Cougar Custom Boats were once again available.

Our first opportunity to see what the new "Americanized" version of Cougar would be presented itself in the form of

their 21-foot open-bow runabout vee-bottom model. We've tested the Cougar 21 before on several different occasions, but always with stern-drive power. Without fail, we've consistently given the 21 enthusiastic thumbs-up reviews for being a nimble-handling, solidly built and quality-assembled product.

This time, however, Cougar tossed us a curve, bringing not a stern drive-powered model for our scrutiny, but a jet. Not a bad way to give us something new to consider. And not to keep you in sus-

pense, we liked what we saw and drove.

The first thing you need to know is this Cougar nicely fits into the far-too-neglected spectrum of "entry-level" family performance boats. The basic configuration of the 21 definitely puts it into the spacious category when it comes to interior roominess. You immediately are drawn to the bowrider section which feels wider and more inviting when compared to other 21-footers. What helps is the fact that the seat cushions have more width. This limits the amount of available leg space for

passengers up forward, but the trade-off is a good one. Not only does the bowrider offer up comfortable seating, but thanks to the oversized bottom cushions, it also makes for a usable reclining lounge.

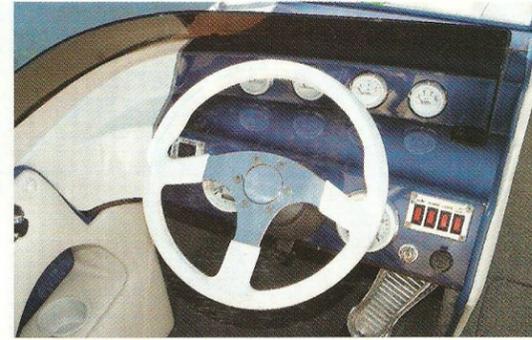
In the main cockpit, Cougar is also on its game. The upholstery styling and quality is superb, far better and more imaginative than one would expect for a boat in this affordable price range. The twin bucket seats for driver and copilot are anything but "cookie-cutter." The wraparound buckets have ventilation backs and a smartly

designed built-in rear padded shelf with two integrated drinkholders per seat. A very convenient and thoughtful feature for passengers in the aft lounge bench.

Available storage space for the 21 is about what you might expect. An in-floor ski locker is handy for stowing larger items like a wakeboard and ski vests while rope, fenders and other miscellaneous gear is likely to find its way under the aft bench and bowrider cushions.

The driver's helm is pretty standard for this style of hull. Steering is located on ▶

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the port side (most jets are) with a relatively limited amount of dash space for instrumentation. Smaller gauges (water temp, oil pressure, volts, fuel) are located above with speedo and tach on either side of the steering wheel. Throttle setting is manipulated by a spring-loaded floor-mounted foot pedal, and the actuation of the jet nozzle diverter gate for forward and reverse thrust is located on the port-side gunnel with a single-lever control. A pretty nonintimidating console for a new or novice driver.

In the engine compartment is a healthy Marine Power Vortec 502 big-block V-8. The jet pump is a Dominator which has been custom fit to the Cougar 21 hull with a cast molded flange. The Marine Power/Dominator combo is a good one for jet lovers. The

engine has excellent bottom-end torque and the Dominator Jet delivers good efficiency in the 3,000- to 4,000-rpm range.

At low off-plane speeds the 21 tracks better than your average jet. Only minor wheel correction is needed to keep the boat headed on a straight course. To plane, it takes approximately 3,500 rpm to achieve a comfortable cruising speed of about 30 miles an hour. Once you're up and running, which takes less than three seconds from a dead-stop, you can throttle back slightly and maintain a planing speed of 25 miles an hour at approximately 3,000 rpm.

The Cougar 21 really gets to be fun to drive at 35 mph and above. Like any good jetboat, there's no steering torque and the hull feels light and responsive.

Turning maneuvers only accentuate its well-designed hull configuration. Just stab the throttle and turn the wheel. If you do, however, be sure your passengers are secure in their seats because the Cougar has the capacity of changing direction in the blink of an eye.

Unlike some jetboats in this size range, the Cougar 21 avoids the tendency to bow-steer in the mid- and upper-speed ranges. This makes driving just that much easier since very little steering wheel correction is needed to keep the hull headed in a straight line. Ride comfort is good to very good in smooth to moderate water conditions, however, expect some body jarring if you venture out on a day with a heavy-wind chop or a lot of large boat wakes.

At full throttle, the on-board tachometer registered a steady 4,700-rpm maximum and the radar gun recorded a top speed of 53.9 mph with a two-passenger load. Respectable numbers for this type of engine and propulsion package combo. What can't be denied is the fact that jets are simply fun to drive. They're responsive, super maneuverable, very dependable and the bottom-line price tag is downright attractive.

The Cougar 21 may not be the ultra custom piece that we are accustomed to seeing from some of the 100+ mph offerings we've seen before, but it is several notches above in quality and performance compared to other similar jet runabouts we've tested in recent years. It's a new beginning for a company with a great past. ■

