

THE FAMILY BOWRIDER AS ART

COUGAR 20.5 SPORT SKIER

When you think about it, the 21-foot bowrider is the perfect vehicle for Cougar to show-case the exquisite custom workmanship that has made it one of performance boating's 5 blue-chip companies. The open-bow family ski custom is, by design, a waterbound RV that commands excellence under a variety of conditions and circumstances.

The old dockside axiom that no boat does it all may be time-tested and true, but the stunning Cougar 20.5 Sport Skier's versatility certainly gives us pause to consider its merit as one of hot-boating's most accomplished all-around platforms.

Possessed of a great all-around underside that excelled in test conditions ranging from glass to foot-high chop, the Sport Skier - actually 20 feet, six inches at the centerline, and 22 including the integrated, fiberglass swim step - has a performance skier's pedigree, but also earned driver raves as a family bowrider in a recent day-long romp around Lake Havasu.

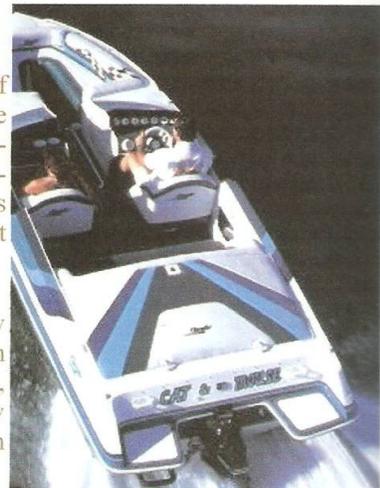
Named HOT BOAT's Ski Boat of the Year in 1994 in an upset over a stout field that included a handful of pro-level, direct-drive tournament boats, the stern-drive-powered Sport Skier has found its sales stride as a do-everything, go-anywhere, open-bow performance custom.

Tack on a proven performance resume that includes a legit 62-mph top end and crisp out-of-the-hole pulling power behind the muscle of MerCruiser's tight, 300-horse, small-block, fuel-injected Magnum/Bravo package, and you get a sense of the Skier's universal appeal.

ONBOARD

Our Cougar was rigged with MerCruiser's 350 MPI and Bravo One setup, a pair of upgrades that added 40 horsepower and improved drive durability and resale value over the standard 260-horse, 5.7L package. The MPI setup (\$1,354) and Bravo step-up (\$699, including a 22-inch, four-blade stainless wheel) combined for a cost-effective upgrade, adding \$2,053 to the base of \$35,079. The bottom line on this well appointed 21-footer, which included an extra gelcoat color (\$312), a white-out package (\$351) and depth gauge with bezel (\$398), was \$38,188.

Cougar sets the Skier's high-end tone early with its unflinching eye toward quality and its impeccable finish work-both of which are consistently among the best in performance boating. By completing every stage of the production process in-house, including building the upholstery and trailer, Cougar keeps a handle on its quality control. This has been the key to this progressive company's consistent growth through the years.



The interior wraps its passengers in deep, luxurious and well-padded seating that includes an expansive bow section (for a 21-foot boat), two sumptuous buckets and a deep rear bench. The seats are double-stitched, and the interior is dressed in a five-color accent (customer's choice).

<http://www.cougarboats.com/rev-13.htm>

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Our test boat's elaborate checkerboard ensemble of greens and purples dressed with the embroidered Cougar logo was in perfect sync with its five gelcoat colors.

The front seats are mounted on beefy, powdercoated seat pedestals, which swivel 180 degrees for easy skier observation and conversation with rear passengers. There's abundant legroom between the front passengers and the dash, which prominently displays an easily legible cluster of Gaffrig gauges (standard), with angled, powdercoated bezels. Dials are arranged in front of the driver, rather than being separated in the split-dash layout common to the family bowrider breed. A wraparound windshield lines the front perimeter of the cockpit and is mated perfectly to the glass, lending a seamless, polished accent to the Skier's smooth, progressive lines.

Rear passengers sink into the comfort of a luxurious bench. Deep passenger positioning creates commendable freeboard for a boat of this size; our boatload gave the Cougar top marks for comfort and visibility, and lauded its smooth feel and absolutely dry ride. Storage bins are carved into the seat caverns, part of a network of beautifully finished stowage that extends from beneath the bow seating and helms into carpeted segments beneath the engine hatch. Cockpit side panels are also loaded with pockets and drink holders (there are eight in all).



A bellowing Clarion sound system, including a shock-resistant tape deck, two speakers and a hidden, digital antenna for improved AM/FM reception, is included in the litany of standard Cougar features. A floor-mounted ski locker will swallow up to eight slalom skis, and its mouth is wide enough to take care of wakeboard storage. An engraved hub dresses the standard Formuling steering wheel, and interior molding is color-keyed to the long list of powdercoated hardware. A two-piece acrylic tarp, color-keyed to match your boat, is also standard.

With the removal of four bolts, the rear seat easily pulls out, enabling full access for engine maintenance.

The flat, padded rear deck lid is ideally suited for sunning and provides an easy transition area for getting in and out of the boat. It raises electrically (another standard). A powdercoated, billet ski pole is standard, and it's pin-mounted on a powdercoated bracket that's anchored between the two stringers, fore of the engine. Pull the pin, and the pole is removed in seconds.

Deep-water boarding is made easy with the integrated swim step, which is balsa-cored, flow-coated and gelcoated to meld beautifully with the exterior colors and interior graphics. Its textured, nonskid surface and billet-aluminum grab handles, powdercoated to match the rest of the hardware, are appreciated by the skier and boarder alike.

One of Cougar's trademark features is its gorgeous engine compartment, which features a glistening, flow-coated balsa floor that's color-matched with the boat. Aside from the obvious aesthetic advantage, Cougar goes this route out of concern for long-term care and maintenance: gas and oil won't penetrate the flowcoating, and cleanup requires only towel or sponge-wipe.



Motors are stringer-mounted using powdercoated, through-bolted L-brackets that have been machined smooth to remove all sharp edges, then powdercoated. Trim pumps and brackets receive the same high-end treatment. You'll be hard-pressed to find a cleaner engine installation in custom boating today.

The exterior hardware is also top-drawer stuff, some of it fabricated by Cougar, some of it from Altheizer. Every piece of it is powdercoated. Stainless bowrailing is through-bolted and anchored nice and low to the glass. Cleats also lie flush to the gelcoat, and pop up on command.

TURN THE KEY

Beyond all else, our driving team was smitten with the Cougar's smooth drive-ability and pinpoint handling. The kick of its throttle response and precise maneuver-ability are qualities that will be appreciated equally by the beginning boater who wants to bypass the traditional, entry-level morass, and by the experienced performance boater who is in tune with the subtle handling differences between hulls.

The Skier is designed for lake use, and Cougar has tooled it appropriately. It uses an 18-degree underside that's carved with six full-length strakes, which breed the hull's excellent overall ride qualities and handling-areas we were to fully explore in the widely varying conditions on Havasu.

Easing the MerCruiser controls forward elicited a crisp, immediate response, and the Cougar found plane without a trace of bowrise. The four-blade took an immediate grip, and we were on top within a few seconds. At an economical 3,000 rpm, we had already found a nice, elevated ride, and swooshed quietly along at 36 miles an hour. The ride continued to clean out as we fed the semi-vee more throttle, and we piled the Skier completely through its rev range without finding any rock, wobble or porpoise. We couldn't find a hole in this hull's personality, try as we might.

We put the Skier through a complete regimen of tow-boat maneuvers, and it reaffirmed its rating as a top-level pulling steed. Its low-speed maneuverability and control at low rpm were nothing short of spectacular, and the punchy 350 provided strong acceleration throughout its power curve. At 4,000 rpm, we were clipping 50 miles an hour, and there was still plenty of pull to be had.

The ride at full throttle was every bit as responsive, consistent and stable as it was at lower rpm. At 60 miles an hour, the Cougar remained controlled and receptive to driver command. We found nothing to indicate that we'd pushed the limits of this hull's performance capabilities, and its smooth driveability and excellent all-around response prompted us to believe that the multiport 350 is the optimum powering package for this hull, although it is offered with the full range of 454 and 502 powering setups.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Cougar's Sport Skier is custom boating bliss: a tight wrap of outstanding workmanship, excellent hull engineering and supremely practical family boating. Jammed with the fuel-injected small block, it packs plenty of performance into the equation and delivers 60-plus miles an hour. It's a great ski boat, shows off some of performance boating's best gelcoat and interior work, and strikes a unique chord with Cougar's signature, flow-coated engine compartment. In a fleet of family bowriders, it's a five-star standout.

MAY 1999 HOT BOAT