

## 2004 Evaluations **Cougar 22' MTR**

**A**nyone with even the most basic motor skills and a credit score over 600 can walk into a Chevrolet dealership, take the keys to one of Chevrolet's Corvette Z06s for the first time and, with the most rudimentary guidance and proper conditions, engage in safe, high performance motor play with comparatively little risk.

Within the select realm of custom-built, high performance powerboating, there is a parallel universe of individual boat models that deliver a proven, turnkey 90-mile-an-hour baseline and follow Detroit's model in projecting the same level of unwavering consistency for Everyman that one reflexively expects while occupying the perforated leather of a virgin 'Vette or any other production sports car.

It is our ongoing experience that Cougar's outstanding MTR tunnel series, one and all—the roll call includes the 22-footer featured at this year's performance trials, in addition to a 21-, 23-, 25- and 27-footer—is a charter member of this sparsely populated industry subset. Distinguished by that rare running surface that is equal parts aggressive and protective, the Cougar is a turnkey ticket to performance potential accessible to a fraction of the hot-boat traffic encountered on the lake.

The 22-footer was introduced in 2001 and now jockeys back and forth with the 27-footer as the line's best-selling Cat. With the exception of the 21-footer, it is the naturally fastest hull in the lineup; unlike the smaller boat, the 22-footer offers the convenience of a flat floor, to go along with its more contemporary styling and fit. Lately, nearly every one





built has gone out the door with a big outboard.

Overall, about half of the tunnel boats that Cougar builds are outboard powered, and although the hull makes a very nice IO, driving one for a while makes it difficult to imagine the setup with anything other than one of Mercury's big mixers and its related handling components. By our count, measuring bang for the buck and value for the dollar, this test boat reflected the ultimate Cougar setup in the 22-footer: Mercury Racing's reigning outboard heavyweight, the three-liter Pro-Max 300X. Stationed off a Cougar factory-built setback bracket, trimmed with a rapid-action Bob's Machine lift, the three-liter, six-cylinder outboard unleashed an impressive wave of 300 horsepower to the shorty Sportmaster drive and Mercury prop, in our case a 28-inch four-blade. This setup brushed the entry gate of Mercury's 6,100- to 6,800-peak range and powered us all over Havasu, much of our seat time spent engaged in sustained periods of stable, effortless 90-mile-an-hour flight.

Cougar, are standard—they're a throwback to Cougar's neighboring, Canadian waterways, which are absolutely brutal at times. We didn't engage them.

At the heart of this boat's splendid driving personality is its dual-step, center-pod tunnel platform. Cougar covers the basic driver-data needs with standard Gaffrig instrumentation; this boat was augmented with optional depth gauge (\$464), hour meter (\$122) and GPS speedometer (\$369)—the Gaffrig pedigree is complete with dual-lever throttle and shift controls.

Cost options on this boat included dual fiberglass swim steps with vented grab handles (\$816), fold-down ladder (\$325) and dual, adjustable wind flaps (\$292). Including an impressive outlay of premium billet pieces from Art Altizer and Eddie

mile-an-hour family bowrider can routinely run \$45,000, the V-6-powered MTR qualifies as one of high performance boating's most value-intensive driving experiences.

**ON BOARD**

The throttle pedal is the more common choice throughout the Cougar tunnel line, and we've become accustomed to it; once we settled into the rarely produced hand-throttled outboard, we were impressed with it as well. Trim is on the wheel, and an actuator stick sticks conveniently off the steering column, controlling the lift of the jack plate. A Bob's Machine electric indicator flashes its position—trim position was digitally measured through Mercury's Smart-Craft technology, which broke up the uniform look of the twin-bezeled Gaffrig dials—the electronics on the 300X requires it.

We found this year's Cougar much like nearly every other one of their tunnel boats we've driven, in one critical respect: It was spectacular in its routine delivery of true, extreme-level performance. That should be a central part in any fast tunnel's appeal, but its delivery is seldom without compromise: The Cougar is an exception. As with all of the better family performance tunnels, the Cougar's high-speed snarl is couched within a family-friendly, smooth-riding framework. Indulging in the full potential of Cougar's obvious, extensive setup tuning feels

and conveyed positive, real-time, reactive motion and no discernable torque feedback. Tabs, fabricated by

Marine and one of the industry's true premium-level rigging executions, this turnkey water roadster tows away on a Cougar trailer at under \$59,000. In a world where a base-level, 60-

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even better when you know that you're playing beneath the protective canopy of a full-year, dealer-honored warranty. You can even extend it for four years, at a no-brainer \$1,600. This is one exception to the oft-repeated rule of the extended warranty being a great deal only for the intermediary offering it.

For comparison's sake, it's also very possible to run 90-95 in an MTR powered by a truck motor and stern drive, a feat that will require nothing less than an HP500. By the time you factor in the upgrade for steering, the cost is some \$15-\$20,000 higher than the Pro-Max.

In the tradition of pure sport boating, the Cougar's interior is sleek and clean and attentive to the primary considerations: comfortable seating for two on thickly padded, stylishly cut forward buckets on fiberglass bases and an equally fanny-friendly back bench. Our boat's upholstery, fabricated at Cougar's factory, used a two-tone vinyl graphic mix to complement its clean, understated gelcoat. It was a very effective look, and it lengthened the 22-footer.

Cougar's white and blue gelcoat fit this boat extremely well and earned our team's strongest approval following the traditional, close-range walkaround. Its look was clean and understated and very dramatic and picked up strong cosmetic accents with its nonreflective deck crown and wind flaps on black, powder-coated mounting. Beneath the surface beauty was the unmistakable feel of solidly built fiberglass, flawless in its execution.

The onboard feel of this boat is larger than that of a typical 22-footer, owing to several factors—its fairly substantial freeboard, for one. Despite its low profile, the Cougar actually puts quite a bit of distance between passengers and the water line—again, that may have something to do with the often harsh water conditions that often prevail in the Pacific Northwest. You won't find any air-entrapment boat in its size class that can hang any bet-

ter than this exuberant Cougar.

There is also an impressive amount of practical passenger space and dedicated, protective storage built into the design of the 22 MTR. The dash is very practical and straightforward, and it elevates the Gaffrig faces into unobstructed view. The shifter and throttle levers arise from a padded panel, and the positioning felt perfect. Placement of the jack-plate wand on the column promotes two-listed

wheel play, always a good thing. The dash wiring was exceptionally clean, far neater than you'll see on most performance customs. So too was the rigging and beauty work aft of the rear bench, from the color-matched, flow-coated rear storage compartment—a cool bit of distinctive cosmetics that reflects Cougar's notoriously time-intensive production schedule—and the bulkhead-style fittings for trim, jack plate and hydraulic-

steering lines. "A superior job of it," one of our evaluators wrote, sharing a consensus view of the Cougar's wiring.

A ski locker is absorbed into the center of the cockpit, and there's more incidental storage in the gunnels. The under deck is neatly finished and suitable for full-scale gear storage.

Reassuring grip handles are anchored within the natural grasping range of everyone aboard, and the billet pieces were part of a high-intensity display of powdercoated, Eddie Marine billet, an overlay that trimmed the Cougar in elegance. The interior is well lit, both on the kick panels and below deck. Curiously, there is no integrated ice chest. The interior trim is highly detailed.

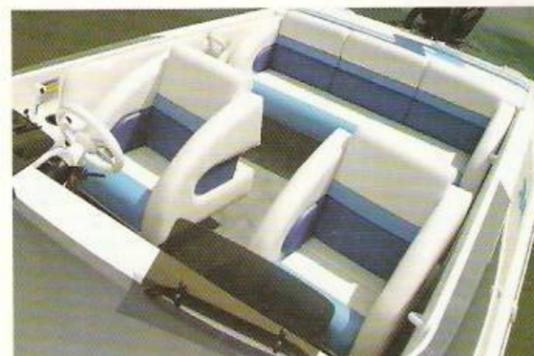
This Cougar's polished appearance picked up an assist from its prolific, powdercoated billet trim. Its rubrailing, bow and stern-lighting hardware, tow and transom tie-down eyes, fuel fills, setback brackets and knee brackets and four pop-up cleats were whited out. Inside, the switch panels, control handles, drink holders, interior grab handles, bezels, battery-box brackets and steering-wheel extension were also white billet. A 12-volt power plug and Formulating wheel are standard; a CD system is not.

### PERFORMANCE

We brought the Cougar to plane quickly and easily, and, after an abbreviated bit of bow lift, it took a fast set and demonstrated a reflexive agility that permeated its performance from start to finish. Trimmed under, the Cougar planes almost immediately, and it awakens in earnest as you toggle home some lift. The nose begins to carry nice and light, and the hull seems to shift gears.

The Pro-Max-powered MTR cruised effortlessly and bypassed any hint of porpoise as its ride cleaned through the midrange. It turned aggressively and retained a level, flat attitude in so doing. This boat is a lot of fun to drive

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#### Test conditions: Moderate

Centerline: 22'1"

Beam: 92"

Bottom: Cat

Drivetrain: Mercury Pro-Max 300X

HP @ prop: 300

Overall weight: 2,700 lbs.

Base price: \$56,393

Standard features: Mercury Pro-Max 300X, Bob's Machine lift/indicators, set-back bracket, Teleflex hydraulic steering, five gelcoat colors, Gaffrig gauges w/dual bezels, Gaffrig controls, 40-ounce carpet, billet fuel fills, billet steering extension/hub, pop-up deck cleats, 12V power plug, stainless steel transom fittings, locking storage, ski locker, drink holders, grab handles, Eddie Marine switch panels, Formulating wheel,

column mounted engine lift, TA tandem trailer, flush bow lights, interior lighting, flow-coated rear storage, powdercoated rubrailing, HD battery box

Options on test boat: Dual fiberglass swim steps w/grab handles (\$816), depth gauge (\$464), GPS speedometer (\$369), fold-down swim ladder (\$325), dual wig flaps (\$292), hour meter (\$122)

Price as tested: \$58,781

Top speed, radar: 91.0 mph

Mfg. est. speed: 100 mph

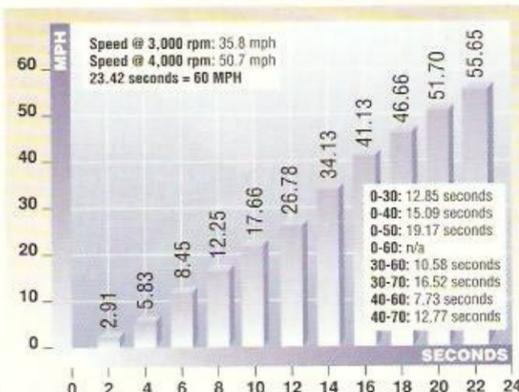
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## COUGAR

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and quickly instills confidence as you put it through its paces. At a conservative 4,000 rpm, the V-6 cruised the Cougar at 50-plus. This setup showed plenty of gumption through the midrange and into its very fulfilling high-speed gears.

At high speed, the Cougar enjoyed a remarkably stable ride and delivered the rarified level of extreme-level drivability that has become a hallmark of the brand. It was absolutely controlled at 90 miles an hour, a real-time demonstration of an optimal marriage of hull and horsepower. A full-fledged hot-rod boat that is firmly anchored in practical, family performance, the Pro-Max-powered Cougar lends a reassuring, comforting spin to true, high-speed thrill boating.

The big-caliber outboard started easily, idled on cue and rumbled patiently through our low-speed maneuvering drills, which posed no challenge to this combination. We also had the fortune to run this boat in some really ragged water, at over 80 miles an hour, and again validated this rugged hull's reputation as a late-afternoon warrior. Especially for its size, the Cougar is surprisingly effective at neutralizing less than optimum surface conditions.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Some of high performance boating's exemplary custom workmanship still comes out of the great North: Cougar's MTR has never fared better in head-to-head comparison with its recreationally based, tunnel-bottomed peers. This is a boat that resonates with quality, revels in an impeccable installation and finish and delivers the goods when the revs climb. Especially by today's pricing standards, the Pro-Max version is a solid best buy. ■