

REQUIRED TO RIP
 3,000 Pounds of Cat
 + 600 Horsepower = SPEED!
 Words and Photography by John Tiger Jr.



Cougar's offering in the 23-foot class of tunnel hulls is the explosive 23-foot MTR. After spending the day at the helm of this svelte beast, we can say with conviction that this rocket ride is not for the timid or faint of heart. Armed with two new Mercury Racing Pro Max 300x outboards, the 23 MTR is a formidable top-end and acceleration warrior suitable for just about any large lake or bay chop you throw at it. We tested on South Carolina's beautiful Lake Keowee, where the water conditions ranged from a slight 3-inch wind chop to foot-high rollers with a variety of pleasure-boat wakes mixed in for good measure. While these weren't the toughest of conditions, the Cougar handled them with ease and then some, indicating that it can handle rougher waters as well. Weather conditions were just right for testing; 70-degree air temps with 32 percent humidity and a 10-knot wind all contributed to a great test session. With the able help of Tim Spear of nearby Atlanta, Georgia's Pro-Boat custom shop, we set off on a sunny, cloudless day of high-speed testing.



Each Cougar is built to order, and ours was being delivered to Phil and Shirley Griffith, who were settling into their gorgeous new lakeside home near the town of Seneca. The Cougar was waiting for L'S on its custom lakeside hoist, and it had only a few hours on it since Phil had taken delivery a couple of days prior to our arrival. Phil and Shirley are "typical Cougar customers in a distinct way; newly retired, Phil had recently sold his custom performance parts distributorship (Applied Technologies & Research, a Buick Grand National hop-up specialist company), and his background in high performance led him directly to the Cougar. His appreciation for fine craftsmanship and penchant for the latest in technology' carried over in his selection of the 23-foot MTR. AS Phil noted, "I researched for months before deciding on this package, as I wanted the latest in hull technology' and the most powerful production outboards available."



However, Phil and Shirley depart from "typical" Cougar owners in one way: They're not necessarily interested in obtaining the utmost in top speed from their rig. They're more interested in acceleration, fast cruising and towing their family on skis and tubes. For this reason, their 23 was equipped with a pair of "little 14-1/2x32-inch Mercury Racing Lightning ET propellers, which produced a speed of 107 mph on our Garmin GPS (106.7 mph on Stalker radar) at 6,700 rpm. Even with these props, more speed was there for the taking. However, conditions (too many pleasure boats and jet skis) prohibited us from squeaking out the last few mph. We're certain that even with these props, 110-plus is easily attainable. With a set of 34-inch-pitch race cleavers, speeds into the mid-teens are well within reach.

Chest-Thumping Acceleration

The Griffiths got their wish where acceleration is concerned. With the 32-inch wheels, this Cougar simply rips—there's no other way to describe it from a standing start, it reached plane in an (average of 4.2 seconds with the trim tucked in. The boat has trim tabs, but they are not electrically adjustable. As such, the pickleforks rise to obstruct forward vision for a few seconds while the boat comes on plane. Minimum plane speed is 22.5 mph, which might make slow tubing, wakeboarding and trick skiing a bit tough. The wakes at these speeds are high and sharp. Zero-to-30-mph passes were ripped off in 5.3 seconds, which is very quick for a boat equipped with 1.62 gears and 32-inch props. Zero-to-40 took 7.6 seconds, while 0-50 was achieved in 9.6 seconds. Sixty mph came up in a 10.9-second rush. Mid-range punch is where the 23-foot MTR really shined, however; we cranked from 40 to 60 mph in a scant 3.7 seconds, and stormed from 50 to 70 in 4.2 seconds. The feel was spine-pinching. At a 40-mph cruise, the throttle stomping leaves you pushed back in the plush Cougar bucket seats.

Four thousand rpm produces 53 mph, a nice "slow" cruise. At 4,500 rpm, the MTR is flashing along at a very comfortable 65 mph, which is a great cruise speed for fast lake and river travel. At this point, if you want to go any faster, the Bob's Machine Shop hydraulic jacks must be raised right to the limit to keep things steady. Too much gear case and propeller in the water at this speed really makes the Cougar hull want to sponson-walk to the point of uncontrollability. Jacking the engines to the limit makes it handle like a kid's toy, and with that, the throttles can be pushed forward even farther. With the Pro Maxes turning a leisurely 5,000-rpm, speed jumps to 82 mph, and things start coming at you in a rush. Now it's time to really buckle I down, because at 5,500 rpm (1,500 shy of the redline!) the Cougar is wailing along at 91 mph, with throttle and trim to spare. At 6,000, we're screaming across the lake at 102 mph, but the Pro Maxes are pleasantly quiet. Remember that with ~traditional high-performance (Mercury Racing 2.5 outboards, we'd be deaf from listening to 7,000-plus-rpm howling. For a boat with 115-mph capability, the Cougar is well mannered adjust about any speed.

At mid-range cruise speeds, turning is very predictable, with no hops or skips. The trim and jacks should be lowered a bit to accomplish tight turns, but even at higher cruise speeds (60 to 70 mph) the sponsons bite and turn with a smooth arc. In the rough, the hull's light lay-up emits a race-staccato chatter, but it feels like a solid assembly, not a potato chip. Nothing rattles or chirps, giving a very reassuring feel as the rear sections of the sponsons stutter over foot-high chop at 80 mph. The 22-degree deadrise and multiple lift strakes make for an effective combo.

Around the docks, the Cougar is pretty easy to run and maneuver thanks to the docile manners of the twin 300 Pro Maxes. These engines are really refined for hot-rod outboards—they idle and shift like old fishing motors, yet

snarl without a stutter when the Gaffrig throttles are hammered. And, man, are they quiet We like the wail of an unmuffled two-stroke as much as anyone, but it's a thankful respite-and almost eerie-to have these 300s make so much power so quietly.

Built Right, As Always



Cougar doesn't change much in the Lay-up-and-build schedule, whether the model in question is the 21-footer, 22-footer, 23-footer or even the 27-footer. These boats are built right-there's no sense even trying to debate that the 23-footer starts with a meticulously waxed mold. From there, the custom gelcoat color scheme is sprayed in. The Griffiths' boat featured a blinding white base with a beautiful deep-red-to-magenta fade on the aft end, complemented by yellow and two shades of teal striping and capped off with a tough-looking checkered flag spread out over the side of the hull. The overall effect is tasteful without being obnoxious-it says ~high performance rig without screaming it. The skin coat is next, using hand-laid 1-oz. cloth. All the lifting strakes are filled with Polybond before the layup begins. The hull is then cored with end-grain balsa and sealed. Coremat is used on the hull and deck for strength and to prevent print-through, and full-length kiln-dried stringers provide rigidity for the tunnels. The deck and hull are put together using a butt fit and then completely glassed all the way around the boat This is much more rigid than a 'shoebox' fit used by most other builders, and allows for few mistakes, so the design and mold must be as perfect as possible to ~t a proper fit. After the boat is assembled, the gelcoat is wetsanded and hand-buffed. Our test 23-footer was crisp and clean; the gel looked like a mirror and there were no stripe jigs or jags to criticize.



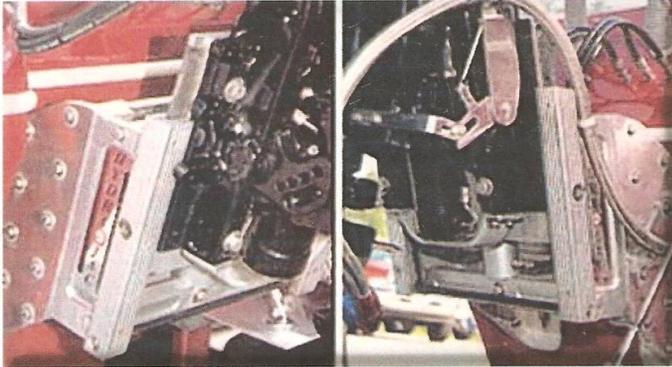
Cougar's in-house upholstery department is truly on the ball. The seats are supportive and rigid, which is the way we like 'em for rough-water, high-speed action. The stitch work is well executed and clean. All the underneath-exposed wood is coated with a nice sheen of fiberglass resin to keep the seat bases fresh for years. Cougar uses a lot of direct embroidery to customize the vinyl, and does a good job putting the logo on the seatbacks combined with checkered-flag designs to add a racy touch. Seat construction appears to be extremely tough and durable for the long haul. Very nicely executed side coaming pads feature handy passenger storage cubbies complete with retaining nets to keep sunglasses and other sundries in during the ride. The vinyl work is top-notch, with no sags or ripples noted anywhere.

Rigging Par Excellence



Under the electrically lifted rear sun hatch, the flow-coated) balsa-cored floor is worthy of best of show" honors. If it were carpeted, it would only get wet and smelly with battery acid, trim fluid, oil and fuel. The flow-coated floor makes for easy cleanup and is absolutely stunning at the same time. The rigging back here is typical Cougar fare: clean, straight and true, with every connection right and all wires and hoses routed with Adel clamps and covered ~with split

loom. Cougar riggers mounted the Bob's Machine Shop jackplane pumps by bolting them to the transom. The Mercury trim pumps and starting batteries were cleanly mounted to the transom and stringers. Fuel capacity is 74 gallons, using twin saddle tanks hidden behind the coaming panels.



This Cougar used twin Bob's hydraulic plates for engine lifts, as Cougar has been using the excellent Bob's units for the past few years as standard fare. A Teleflex Pro-Trim steering column switch controlled both jacks simultaneously, but they also were independently adjustable via rocker switches on the dash, as were the 300x trim units. A single switch on the port Gaffrig throttle lever worked both trim units together, but each engine could also be fine-tuned. The new Bob's LED dash indicators for these lifts are incredibly accurate. The whiteout package (a \$781 option) was employed during the rigging, using white-faced Gaffrig gauges set in white bezels. Twin tachs, a 4-inch liquid-filled speedometer, fuel gauge,

hour meter, twin water pressure and temp gauges, a voltmeter, digital depth gauge and the aforementioned Bob's lift gauges rounded out the dash. New for the 300x Mercs is the standard SmartCraft digital engine monitor gauges, and these were mounted right in view. These are trick units; the driver can obtain valuable engine information by toggling through to see fuel used, gallons per hour, trim position, water temperature, hours used and tachometer revs. Twin Gaffrig mechanical trim gauges worked flawlessly and accurately during our test day. Steering is accomplished with a high-performance Char-Lynn helm and Marine Machine race lines and cylinders, with stainless tiebar between the engines to keep them aligned. A standard Formuling wheel provides a sure grip.

Merc's new 300x outboards are manna from the skies for outboarders who like big boats. They start without fiddling, idle quietly, shift effortlessly and pour on the torque-mountains of it, from 2,000 rpm up to their max of 7,000. The new redline is much better than the old 6,400-rpm limit, as it allows the setup to be propped for a great combination of low-end and mid-range punch without running into the rev-limit wall due to low-pitched props.

Good to the Last MPH

We spent a great day on the waters of Lake Keowee with Cougar's 23-foot MTR, and it was time well spent in a well-built outboard ripper. Our gripes were minimal: a glitch in the rigging put the fuel selector valve and delivery line right under the ski-pole port, blocking it off. The dress-up tubes covering the engine cables and hoses appeared to be a bit flimsy, as they kinked and crushed in places as the engines were tilted and turned. For appearance sake, the rubrail is small and stylish, but it won't do much to protect the beautiful Cougar gel if we hit the dock. Under the foredeck, the lockable hatch opened upward, with nothing to keep the door from banging our heads were we to load items into the storage area. Finally, at slow speeds the rig needed a bit more bow tuck, as it tended to porpoise until we hit 30 mph. After our test, Pro-Boat's Tim Spear trailered the rig to his shop, where he installed a set of Bob's Machine transom wedges to keep the bow down at slow speeds. He also fixed the fuel line routing so the ski pole could be installed. Owner Phil Griffith reported that the fixes worked like a charm, and the boat is a pleasure to drive at its slowest on-plane speed-great for tubing and wakeboarding.

Cougars are top-shelf packages. Rigged as is, our test boat would pull \$106,664 from your bankbook. That's big bucks for a 23-foot cat, but consider the explosive personality, unsurpassed construction and performance capability: It boils down to a grand a mile. You can back the package down to about \$90k with a set of 280s and no options, but after spending 90 large, what's 16 more?