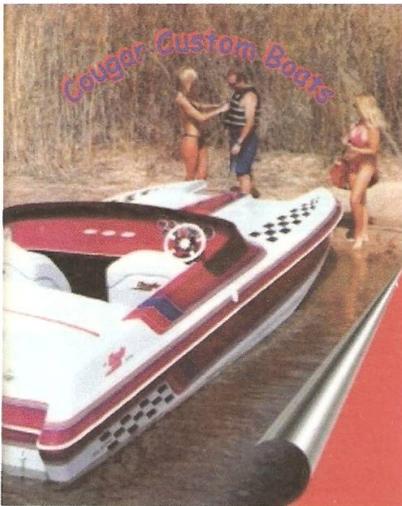


Magazine Articles Testing Summaries

COUGAR 23 MTR REVIEW HOT BOAT MAGAZINE - MAY 1997



The day of the safe, reliable 85 mile-an-hour family performance I/O package is upon us, brought forth by an ongoing evolution of the family tunnel boat. It wasn't so long ago that performance at this level meant a blower whine for background music; today's version runs all day on pump gas and gives its family occupants a secure, comfortable vantage point from which to enjoy the speed.

Somehow it's not surprising that one of the best of this new breed is not a product of the fertile Southern California/Arizona performance-boating hotbed but, rather, a missile projected from due North. Cougar Custom Boats continues to shape its heritage as one of the performance-boating's glamour builders, cementing the status into this season with the release of the 23 foot MTR (Modified Tunnel Runner).

This latest air-trapper blends Cougar's familiar upscale workmanship with a newly massaged bottom design, tooled for the challenge of rougher water. It's a bridge boat in the Cougar line, sandwiched between the 21 and 25 MTRs, and incorporates a wrinkle or two picked up during the past few years of Cougar's tunnel-boat production.

THE PACKAGE

The majority of full-sized MTRs (23s and 25s) roll away with hand-built engines from Mercury Hi-Performance (the 502 - derivative HP500 or the 525SC blower-motor), but ours was rigged with the 502 EFI production motor in the interest of good starting point for an ongoing project. It was absolutely stock, rigged with thru-hull MerCruiser exhaust and IMCO mufflers. Experimentation with different wheels is ongoing and our boat spun a 25-inch Mirage Plus three-blade prop.

Cougar takes the term stock to its virtual limit, luxuriously rigging all of their boats with every imaginable custom part and piece. All mounting hardware is powder-coated to perfectly match its nine-color gelcoat and designed specifically for cougar by Art Alltizer.

Exterior hardware pieces were flush-mounted and integrated in the MTR's shapely lines and included trick motor vents, rear-boarding handles, gas filler and pop-up mooring cleats. Also standard were the powder-coated billet wheel extension (with engraved logo and Formulating wheel, of course) and gauge bezels, which framed standard Gaffrig dials in perfect view of the driver.

The engine compartment is, as per Cougar tradition, something to behold. Its set off by a flow-coated sheen and set apart from lesser boats with absolutely sanitary mounting and hardware installation. Custom power-coated L-Brackets provide stout mounting of the engine to the stringers, and all fasteners (washers, etc.) are color-keyed. Wiring and hoses were neatly routed and loomed, in one of the cleanest installations done in custom boating today.

A dash-mounted grab handle is standard and is within convenient reach of the front passenger who sits on a stainless-rail powder-coated seat pedestal installed with matching angle brackets. The front and rear seats were amazingly comfortable and absolutely supportive and smacked of the quality that won cougar awards year and year at our HOT BOAT PERFORMANCE TRIALS. Best available upholstery and high-density padding combined for just the right degree of support and comfort, and the rear bench offered excellent roominess and plenty of stretch space. The satin-stitched Cougar logo accented the interior graphics, which were perfectly matched to the gelcoat.



A number of smallish storage pockets are integrated into the interior design, along with an array of drink holders, but the MTR's most prominent cargo area is its nicely finished under-deck. Padding there is standard, and though it's probably not suitable for comfortable overnighting, it's plenty comfortable for kids getting out into the elements.

The Cougar may be only two feet longer than many of the market's 21-foot tunnels, but it feels a great deal larger because of its considerable cockpit depth and substantial freeboard.

Cougar redesigned their wrap-around two-piece windshield to incorporate a look and fit more integrated to the MTR's shape, and the blend did indeed appear seamless.

We were very impressed with the way the Cougar moved around the docks and slips. It responded much the same as any vee-bottom at idle and low rpm and backed and steered crisply in every direction.

Off the line, the Cougar felt instantly responsive to throttle and trim and showed nothing but a gentle, predictable nature that endeared this boat to our multi driver test team. Hit 30 miles an hour and you can thread the MTR through the tightest of buoy strings. Tuck the drive in and the cougar showed no sign of lean, grab, roll or slide midrange, with the cougar responding instantly to wheel play. It handled beautifully at ski speeds.

Running in a straight line at 30 to 35 mph the MTR showed a slight rhythmic bob, but introducing more throttle into its train flattened out its attitude instantly. Once past 40 it began to glide as if on a firmly tethered carpet and clearly gave the sensation of riding on air. Its acceleration capabilities seemed to overdrive there, and the cougar felt extremely responsive to throttle at 40-plus. This is a design that craves power, harnesses it and rewards it with a smooth, satisfying ride. At 50 and above, it transforms into a true cruiser - its design making best possible use of available power. At an easy-breathing 4000 rpm we skated along at 60-plus miles an hour.

Wall the throttle and you get the same flawless, predictable handling and ride that Cougar's been doling out

since they hung their boat building shingle in 1972. We screamed across the lake an an exhilarating, but routine, 77 miles an hour at 4,900 rpm, and cougar's underside proved immune to the eight-inch chop that covered the lake during our high-speed run.

We had the opportunity to put the cougar's open-water capabilities to the test, as a nasty chop enveloped the back of our protected course. Venturing into the windswept section of the lake, we guided the cougar's sleek bow at three-quarter angle into two-to three-foot swells and came away dry and unaffected - signs that the deep-entry angle pays dividends. We were able to guide the MTR into a smooth 50-mph gait through these nasty conditions and came away impressed with the design's ability to deliver consistent, soft reentry.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Cougar spares no resource in its ongoing quest to build a truly special family custom, and they've once more hit the mark with the fabulous, new 23-foot MTR. As set up, with the 502 EFI upgrade, the Cougar sticker tipped \$50,000.00. It is saying something that we still consider it a bargain.