

Magazine Articles Testing Summaries

Cougar 2300 Executive 1997 Performance Evaluation Hot Boat Magazine



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While there are any number of good performance boats available for today's custom shopper, there are relatively few great ones. We've taken more than a passive interest through recent seasons as Cougar Custom Boats has emerged as one of the industry's pre-eminent builders of custom lake boats--an evolution that has coincided with unimpeded, straight-out rave reviews following in the wake of our annual performance tests.

Cougar has refined their production process to a fine sheen, undertaking even the most routine and ordinary steps with a zeal that's clearly evident in the finished product. The operation's top-heavy ratio of man-hours invested per boat built warrants at least partial credit for Cougar's emerging status, and few builders measure up to the company's brilliant finish work and scrutinising detail. At the core of Cougar's growth, which has remained steady since its inception in 1972, is a string of solid releases from 18 to 25 feet--nearly all of which perform at the top of their respective class curves.

Last year's demise of HOT Boat's award selection process has not dissuaded individual test-team members from proclaiming their week-long favorites, and the newly released Executive was a prominent entry on nearly all of our short lists. Flawless custom execution, velvet handling and the incomparable feel of controlled power--lots of it--filled the Executive driving experience and made it memorable. This boat is not only one of the best new releases of '97, but it's also among the most appropriately named.

THE PACKAGE

The Executive's stretched, 23-foot centerline and generous freeboard are indicative of its intended natural element: open water. Its armour includes a sharply chiselled vee platform (22 degrees deadrise at the transom, 38-degree entry) with wide, deeply cut double strakes. Cougar's endeavor to aerate more lift into the boat at high rpm rides on a moderate, but obviously effective, 1/2-inch step--the first such bottom terrace to find its way onto a Cougar vee's underside.

Cougar's superior workmanship was in full blossom throughout the creation of our test boat, which was slammed with every conceivable convenience and amenity needed to fulfill the needs of the family boater--most of which were included in the standard, base-priced boat. Top-drawer hardware, gauges and upholstery establish the upscale tone of an installation that resonates with quality at every turn.

A five-color gelcoat paint job is standard on the Executive, and our test boat was sprayed with an additional color (\$337) and accented with consistent, subtle fades (\$489). Cougar's paint artist was, as usual, on the mark with an elegant execution that featured a neatly taped, progressively sized series of accent lines and dramatic use

o' three yellow variations and brilliant, fade-enhanced blues. Anything less than perfection from Cougar's fiberglass booth would warrant the equivalent of first-page news, and the Executive's tooling, curling and detailing were flawless.



A predominant, defining characteristic of the Executive is its deep, spacious cockpit; Cougar has scooped, impressive depth and considerable freeboard into its lines, without allowing them to appear clunky. The Executive's styling--inside and out--bears strong Euro influences and a noticeable scarcity of hard angles and abrupt edges. Note, for example, the seamless integration and flow of the flush-mounted, two-piece windshield.

This was evident in the Cougar from end-to-end, down to the curvy sectional, integrated swim platform. In spite of its non-skid texture, the two-piece platform was still quite slippery. Boarding was made easier, however, with a standard fold-down ladder and with a transom-mounted trim button that positioned the

drive to suit while afloat.

Cougar spiced our test boat with their optional Blizzard White-Out appearance package (\$332), which entailed powdercoating of all exterior hardware (including bow eye, light housings, deck cleats, bow railing, fuel bills, billet rear-boarding handles, gauge bezels, etc.) and a stark, white interior with dramatic color swishes. A durable, white plastic rubrail further contributed to the look and seamlessly dressed the flush-lit marriage of the hull and deck components. The overall effect was striking, and the incredible detail and feel of the French-stitched interior made it even more so.

Operating a self-contained production facility, including their own upholstery shop, has obviously enabled Cougar to keep a tight rein on quality--a benefit that's evident in their interior work. The Executive's standard seating arrangement incorporates a wraparound rear bench that stylishly and comfortably supports three rear passengers and a solid set of front buckets. Our drivers gave the front seats strong marks, also providing an effective balance of comfort and support. They were anchored for life, owing to stainless thru-bolting to box bases that were glassed into the layup. The all-wood seat framework was resin-coated, as was every square inch of exposed wood in the boat, and the seat bases were cleanly carpeted. Their positioning was ideal, providing excellent visibility, plenty of driver and shotgun-passenger leg room and convenient access to gauges.

Wherever it counts, Cougar goes the extra mile in its production and rigging obligations, and a good example is their standard use of white-faced Gaffrig instrumentation (speedometer and tach). Dials were all back-lit. A MerCruiser throttle/shifter unit, with trim in the handle, was conveniently placed, along with dash-mounted Bennett tabs and a corresponding LED readout (an \$1,155 system option) and a standard, electric hatch-activator switch. Stock gear also included a booming Jensen AM/FM system with four speakers, eight beverage holders blended into the cockpit arrangement and a roomy, floor-mounted ski locker large enough to stow a wakeboard and a ski or three. A pop-up, stern-mounted ski tow was also standard, and a removable ice chest was integrated into the rear seat framing. More storage was available in partitioned gunnel pockets and in deep pouches that lined the sides of the walk-through area.

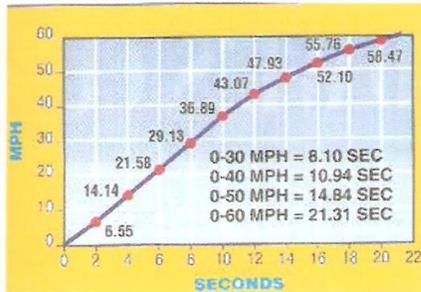
A sleek, low-slung and very solid, stainless bow lines the molded front passenger section, and powder-coated, popup deck and stem cleats showed similarly sanitary mounting.

As per proven company practice, the glossy, flow-coated engine-well in our test Executive was finished to the same degree as the rest of the boat. All hardware and wiring were sensibly mounted and routed, and the MerCruiser 454 MPI, tucked between the Cougar's stringers, struck a formidable presence. The 385horse (prop-rated), multiport, fuel-injected, big-block carbureted 7.4U Bravo is a \$4,816 upgrade over the base. It spun

a 24-inch MerCruiser stainless four-blade wheel. Gearing was stock 1.5:1 through Brave guts, and stock MerCruiser exhaust was cut through the transom.

PERFORMANCE

Once more, we're inspired to tip our neon HOT BOAT caps to Cougar for their production of yet another performance boating specimen that defines the safe, satisfying potential of high-impact, recreational sportboating. The Executive is fast (68 miles an hour on Stalker radar), luxurious, comfortable and nothing less than amazing in choppy water.



Without exception, our drivers made note of the Executive's crisp, hard leave off the line--a curious development given this boat's rather ordinary timed acceleration numbers. It pulled a 200-plus pound skier from deep water in four seconds flat--just a slight beat off the time of the low-g geared, direct-drive, tournament towboats and more quickly than about three-fourths of the boats we tested that were powered by stem drive. Still, the Cougar required 8.10 seconds to hit a 30-mph clip and 10.94 seconds to find 40. Our drivers' seat-of-the-pants reaction to the pace? To quote some of their notes: "Accelerates out of the hole extremely well...Clean, instant acceleration...Once on plane, it's a rocket' and so on. Go figure.

Low-speed tracking was average for a deep-vee, meaning the Executive has the usual tendency to wander through no-wake zones and the like, requiring constant correction. Once planed, however, we found the Executive to be extremely responsive to trim and throttle. It showed the most minimal bowrise before settling into a smooth, controlled set-its natural stance in virtually every condition we encountered. Low-speed handling was tight and precise, with no sloppiness or hesitation. Executing sweeping, low- and mid-speed turns issued no challenge to the Cougar's bottom, which drew ongoing praise for its all around excellence and clean manners. Pushing it harder resulted in more of the same, and the Executive's steering remained instantaneous and torque-free, even as we aggressively sliced the edges of our crimson buoys. It was possible to elicit blowout during hard, power cornering but not before our driving tactics bordered on the ridiculous.

Climbing through the rev range toward our high-speed passes, the Cougar radiated more of the same, easy predictable driveability and remained unfailingly stable. Flexing its performance potential required no more effort to driving ability than aiming the wheel, guiding the throttle and getting the drive up. Normally, our six to eight timed radar passes might vary as much as three to five miles an hour. In the case of the Cougar, the range was more like a mile an hour - a difference indicative of this boat's almost non-existent learning curve. Its user-friendly nature makes the Cougar a great first-boat candidate, but only a veteran hot-boater can fully appreciate its wonderful workmanship and handling.

Some vee-bottom designs can carry their occupants into quick trouble when their performance aspirations begin to exceed driving ability, design limitations or a combination thereof. It was almost impossible to trim the Cougar into trouble, even in significantly rough water. We pushed the Executive into a ten-minute assault run through confused, one- to two-foot chop with and against the wind at steadily held speed increments ranging from 50 to 62 miles an hour. Even without our tapping the Bennetts (we found them unnecessary in the roughest water we could find at Havasu), the Executive simply drove through everything we threw at it with the same stability it showed at 68 miles an hour on glass. It refused to rock or wobble and was as easy to control at speed in rough water as anything else we drove during the week in its size range. Even when you loosened its grip on the rough stuff with indiscriminate trim, the Executive retained its smooth, controlled strut.

As for any weaknesses in its performance resume, we're at a loss to share anything of a significant nature. Aside

from noting a fairly substantial wind stream that blew through the walk-through area--by our estimation, an inescapable by-product of any deeply carved performance bowrider that runs close to 70 mph--our test team spared the Executive even the slightest tint of red ink.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There are various extremes at which big-league, custom hot-boat building techniques are put into practice, ranging from surface overtures to art form. Cougar has established its position on the high end of that scale with consistently excellent execution and soundness in design. The 23-foot Executive bowrider is the latest Cougar to fuse those brand traits. The \$2,000-plus-per-foot invoice on our test boat (\$48,581, as tested on a tandem trailer) may make you gasp, but if you're into sport-boating for the way it makes you feel, the Executive is just as likely to take your breath away.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Centerline length: 23' Beam: 90"
- Bottom: Deep-vee w/step Engine/drive: MerCruiser 454
 - MPI/Bravo 1
 - Horsepower @ prop: 385
 - Drive ratio: 1.5:1
 - Prop: MerCruiser 24" four blade
- Base retail price, includes trailer: \$41,452

Standard features:

- MerCruiser 7.4 EFI/Bravo 1,
 - tonneau tarp,
 - pop-up cleats,
- low profile bow railing,
 - ski locker,
- Jensen stereo system,
 - eight drink holders,
- back-lit instrumentation,
- Gaffrig speedometer & tach,
 - tilt wheel,
 - electric hatch,
 - swim steps,
- billet grabhandles,
- five gelcoat colors,
- pop-up ski tow,
- stainless prop.
- 12V power/outlet

Options on test boat:

- Extra gelcoat color/face (\$826),
- Blizzard White-Out package (\$332),
- MerCruiser 454 MPI upgrade (\$4,816),

- **Bennett Sport tabs w/LED readout (\$1,155)**
 - **Price as tested: \$48,581**

Performance

- **Top speed, radar: 68.0 mph**
- **Builder's estimated top speeding optimum conditions: 73 mph Maximum rpm: 4,900**
 - **0-30: 8.10 seconds**
 - **0-40: 10.94 seconds**
 - **0-50: 14.94 seconds**
 - **0-60: 21.31 seconds**
- **Speed at 3,000 rpm: 40.7 mph**
- **Speed at 4,000 rpm: 54.2 mph**

Cougar web-note: Prices and some details may have been changed and/or adjusted from the time this article was written.