

Cougar

Over the past few years, the performance expectation bar has been raised. In the early-1990s, 80 mph was the target top speed for ultimate respectability. Then, in the mid-1990s, it went to 90. And when the new millennium came along, the magic number readily escalated to 100 mph.

But as the bar gets higher, so does the cost to play in this rarefied company. If you want to get the triple-digit job done with a sterndrive, the dollars are going to be well into the six-figure range. You're definitely stepping into the big time, both in terms of money invested and the sophistication of the equipment.

That's why we were so favorably impressed by Cougar's 27 MTR Tunnel package that showed up at our annual Lake Havasu late-summer test site. After scanning the manufacturer's provided information sheet, the fact that Cougar expected a 100-mile-per-hour top end was hard to ignore. It was equally noticeable that the info sheet also said that the sale price as we were testing was only \$99,475. Granted, that's not a whole bunch under the six-figure mark, but it's a good \$30-\$50K less than you'd expect to see for a similar-sized big-block inboard 100-mph rocket.

Obviously, although a Canadian-based custom performance boatbuilder, Cougar isn't in the habit of grossly underpricing its finely crafted products here in the States. What they did do, however, is opt for a pair of stock Mercury 300 X Pro-Max outboards instead of an exotic single Detroit V-8 as their power choice for the sleek 27 MTR. ▶



2003 PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS: Cougar 27' MTR



And, true to their word, the rock-solid tunnel hovered a straight-as-string 100-mile-an-hour top speed pass without sucking a deep breath.

For those who are regular HOT BOAT readers, you're aware that the Cougar brand name ranks right alongside the best of the high-performance boatbuilders from the West Coast. Cougar is a low-volume (manufacturing about 40 custom boats a year) operation that prides itself on exceptional quality and first-rate performance. The 27 MTR Tunnel is its largest air-entrapment model, initially introduced during the 2001 model year. It measures a full 26 feet ten inches down the centerline and has a wide 101-inch beam. Approximate weight as tested was 4,210 pounds. As you might expect, the 27 MTR is also available with stern-drive power options. Cougar builds approximately ten to 12 of these beauties each year.

During our extensive dry-land inspection portion of the test, Cougar quality was evident everywhere we looked. The mold work and gelcoat exterior were outstanding, although it was relatively conservative with its three-color (white, red and blue) graphics. The hull was definitely a hard-body. Not a wiggle or jiggle from the deck or dash panel bulkhead at any speed,

thanks to fully balsa-cored construction with core-matted hull sides, hefty full-length clear fir stringers and a thick 2¼-inch transom. The hardware (grab handles, gauge bezels fuel fills, interior and exterior moldings, etc.) is color matched (powdercoated), and the cleats are of the pop-up stainless-steel variety. Excellent placement and mounting throughout. The driver's helm is as uncomplicated as a twin-outboard setup can be. In fact, it shouldn't intimidate even a relative hot-boat novice. The steering wheel is a great-looking Formling with a custom engraved hub. The billet-aluminum accessory switch panel is also engraved. Unlike some performance outboards that opt for a split-foot throttle, Cougar stayed more conventional with a set of dual Gaffrig offshore controls with a thumb-actuated trim switch on the throttle stick. Engine trim setting was monitored by an easy-to-read mechanical indicator located just forward of the controls.

Spread across the remainder of the dash panel was a full complement of Gaffrig gauges, plus a pair of Mercury SmartCraft monitors that electronically tell you everything you need or want to know about your engine's performance, along with a lot of additional onboard information (fuel level, mileage, water depth, water temp, etc.). If you want, the SmartCraft system is more than capable of completely replacing all normal engine gauges; however, it takes a little getting used to seeing a high-performance piece of equipment sans conventional instrumentation with only a lonely computer screen to keep you company.

The 27 MTR cockpit is large, both length and width. Lots of wide-open spaces between the back of the two forward-facing buckets and the full-width rear bench. The floor is completely flat and covered with plush 40-ounce marine carpet. Cougar gets ▶



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extra points for including a center-pod in-floor ski storage locker. The upholstery is also top quality and nicely color coordinated, but its styling could be a little more imaginative. The aft hatch has three contoured clamshell scoops integrated into the upholstery, which adds some eye appeal, but might be a bit of an obstacle for sunbathers. Under the hatch is where Cougar's craftsmanship really shines. The bilge floor is glossy flow-coated to see the balsa core and is color accented to match the exterior. A really nice touch. Rigging is just what you'd expect from Cougar, sanitary and functional.

On the business end, the 27 MTR has a pair of wicked-looking Mercury 300X Pro-Max outboards, the biggest two-stroke V-6 in the Race department's line at 185 cubic inches, rated at 300 propshaft horsepower in the 6,100- to 6,800-rpm range. The engine is EFI, so it starts and idles great. And like all of the high-performance engines in Mercury's stable, you run it on premium 92-octane pump gas, and it does have automatic oil injection.

Cougar mounted the 300s on aluminum transom brackets with Bob's Marine and Machine electric/hydraulic transom jacks and those great LED vertical-lift gauges that Bob's came out with a couple of years ago. In order to make the actuation of the jack plates simple, Cougar mounted a lift switch to the side of the steering-wheel column. And any time you're shooting for 100, it's a good idea not to skimp on the steering system. In this application, Cougar chose an external hydraulic-steering setup from Marine Machine with a heavy-duty stainless-steel tie bar. A very clean system that delivered a smooth, positive steering feel, even at high speed.

So now it's time to go for a ride. The first thing that was evident was that the giant 300Xs were mellow, smoke-

less players idling out of the no-wake zone. A far cry from the old days when race-bred two-strokes got cranky as soon as you dropped below planning speed. In order to maximize the holeshot, we lowered the engines a couple of inches with the jack plates and tucked the engines slightly under.

Spinning a couple of Mercury four-blades (14-1/2 x 32), the big cat took a moment to spool

up and then launched on plane with authority. Zero to 30 mph went by in 8.61 seconds, and 30 to 60 mph happened just seven seconds later. A real push-you-back-in-your-seat feel in the mid-range.

Once on plane, the 27 MTR likes to have the up switch on the jack plates activated. The motors can be raised a good two and a half to three inches

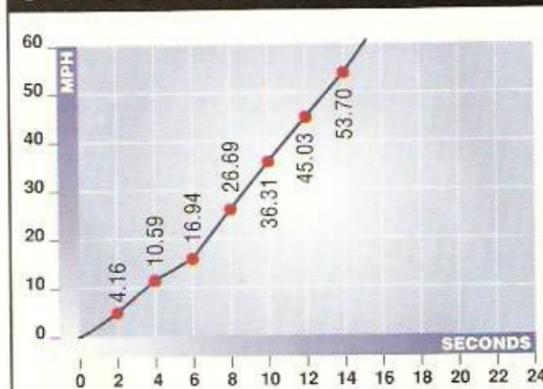
in the cruise mode without any hint of propeller ventilation. At the same time, the engines need to be trimmed out in order to allow the hull to take an efficient ride attitude. While some tunnels tend to act a little lazy at cruise speeds, the Cougar 27 MTR feels responsive, a testament to good hull design and correct setup. We also give the cat high marks for a dry, sprayless ride. This may not sound like a big deal, but if you're the one in the cockpit on a cool autumn day getting misted by ice-cold lake water, it's an issue. At 3,000 rpm (well below half throttle), the radar read 40.4 miles an hour. Then, just an extra 2,000 rpm more unleashes the cat to an attention-grabbing 71.4 mph. An incredible 30-plus-mile-an-hour increase with only a mere 2,000 additional rpms.

Once you're in the 70-mph-and-up speed range, the 27 MTR really begins to become fun. The twin 300X Pro-Maxs enter a mind-blowing torque range from 4,000 to 6,000 rpm, and the Cougar cat is only too willing to oblige. As the throttle sticks edge closer to wide open, it's time to bump the jack-plate switch up again and trim out the motors to gain those last few precious extra miles an hour. Smartly, Cougar opts for separate hull-mounted water pickups rather than relying on gearcase inlets, which can easily run out of water if the jack plate is overused. Nonetheless, it's still a good idea to keep an eye on the water-pressure gauge just to make sure everything is okay. If you don't, you'll likely be sorry.

As we air out the hull to the 100-mile-an-hour mark, the stability factor never changes. It flies straight and level without a bobble. In order to maximize performance, you need to exercise a gentle touch on the trim switch. In this case, more isn't always better. The 27 MTR doesn't require an excessive amount of positive trim to reach its optimum

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SPECIFICATIONS



Test conditions: light breeze, slight chop
Centerline: 26'10"
Beam: 101"
Bottom: 15 degree sponsons
Engine/Drive: twin 300X Pro-Max Mercury outboards
Horsepower: 300 at propshaft/6,100-6,800 rpm
Overall weight: 4,210 pounds
Base price: \$76,250
Standard features: Mercury Lighting ET stainless props, Marine Machine high-performance external steering w/stainless tie bar, Bob's machine electric/hydraulic motor lifts w/dash-mounted LED gauges, hull-mounted water pickups, steering-column-mounted lift switch, engine warning lights, custom gelcoat, complete color-matched interior, fully carpeted (40 oz.), dash-mounted 12V power outlet, dual fuel gauges, custom engraved billet switch panels, power trim w/remote stern switch for power trim/trailer, Gaffrig gauges w/powdercoated bezels, Gaffrig offshore controls with thumb-actuated trim switch, safety lanyard switch, color-keyed inside and outside moldings/powdercoated, Forming custom steering wheel w/engraved hub, flush-

mounted bow lights and transom light holder/powdercoated, high-output bilge pump, pop-up flush-mounted cleats/stainless steel, flush-mounted fuel fills/powdercoated, electric engine hatch opener, flow-coated and color-keyed rear storage compartment
Optional equipment: White-out "Blizzard" package (\$763), Liquid-filled speedo (\$121), Speedo Tattle-Tale (\$99), depth gauge (\$464), single swim step with grab handle (\$408), Twin 300X Pro-Max OB upgrade (\$16,120), Cougar Extreme tri-axle trailer (\$6,250)
Price as tested: \$99,475
Top speed, radar: 100.0 mph
0-30: 8.61 seconds
0-40: 10.88 seconds
0-50: 13.10 seconds
0-60: 16.53 seconds
0-70: 18.77 seconds
30-60 mph: 9.15 seconds
40-60 mph: 7.01 seconds
Speed at 3,000 rpm: 40.4 mph
Speed at 4,000 rpm: 71.4 mph

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