

## BOWRIDER 2000

# COUGAR

## 20.5 SPORT SKIER/454 MAGNUM MPI/BRAVO ONE

If you like that low, sleek, fast, sports car feel from the boat you drive, this would be a good time to slide behind the wheel of Cougar's 20.5 Sport Skier. First debuted back in 1994, this slender vee-bottom bowrider rocket still sits at the top of its class as one of the most impressive performance family boats, built with true custom craftsmanship.

Let's assume for a minute that most of your family boating activities take place in the 30- to 50-mph speed range. Would you be impressed to know you could cruise all day long like that in the 20.5 Sport Skier and only be at less than half throttle? That's a fact. The 20.5 Sport Skier runs so efficiently that it only takes a tachometer reading of 3,000 rpm to achieve 47 miles an hour. Easily the best speed-to-rpm ratio of any boat at this year's bowrider evaluations.

So, what's the secret behind this package? Cougar starts with a fairly conventional 15-degree deadrise vee-bottom, with three strakes per side and a slight reverse chine on the outside edge. The fully rigged boat weighs in at approximately 2,650 pounds, with an optional 454 Magnum MPI (385 propshaft horsepower) Bravo One MerCruiser in the engine compartment. The drive unit gearing is a standard 1.5:1 ratio, and the propeller of choice is a 26 pitch, Bravo One four-blade. During our extensive full-throttle exams, the fun-to-drive Cougar registered a solid 71.6 mph on radar with a two person onboard load. This was recorded at 4,800 rpm, which suggested to us that you might also try a 24-inch-pitch prop, if you were willing to give up one or two miles per hour on the top end, to gain even quicker out-of-the-hole acceleration, and more punch with a boat full of passengers.

**The Boat** Driving the 20.5 Sport Skier is a little like taking a test ride in a Corvette. Once you're in it, you may never want to get out. When you want, things can happen in a big hurry. The Sport Skier delivers almost instantaneous response to changes in steering direction and throttle position. It takes less than five

placement. Although the bow does not have a sharply veed entry, the Sport Skier still delivers a comfortable ride for passengers, even in choppy water. About its only negative factor would be a slight tendency to sprinkle down the passengers in the bowrider section if the wind happens to be blowing the spray in an unfavorable direction.

In order to crack the 70-mph mark with the 454 Magnum MPI package, the 20.5 Sport Skier requires liberal use of the up part of the available trim range. This loosens up the ride, leaving very little of the hull still in contact with the water. Stability remains good, but it's a good idea not to get too over-confident, since an unex-



seconds to go from 30 miles an hour to 50. And if you like the sensation of sports car-like handling, the Sport Skier will not disappoint. It will carve wide or tight turning arcs with ease, and without the worry of propeller ventilation, as long as you remember to trim the drive unit into a reasonable position.

For the most part, the 20.5 is an easy boat to drive. In the moderate-cruise speed range (30 to 50 mph), the hull tends to ride flat and clean, with a near neutral drive trim

pected large wave or swell requires some backing off of the throttle. Without question, however, the 20.5 Sport Skier is among the quickest and fastest in its class with the optional 385 HP Bravo One package.

In its base configuration, equipped with a stock 5.7L Alpha One MerCruiser engine, the 20.5 Sport Skier has a suggested retail price of \$36,827, which puts it right in line with the major players in the custom family-bowrider market. Where the Cougar really

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## SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Moderate  
Centerline: 26 feet, six inches  
Beam: 94 inches  
Bottom: 15-degree deadrise with six full-length lifting strakes and reverse chine on outside edge  
Engine/Drive: 454 Magnum EFI/Bravo One  
HP @ Prop: 385  
Ratio: 1.5:1  
Prop: 26-inch, four-blade Bravo  
Overall Weight: 2,655 lbs.  
Base Price: \$36,627 (includes trailer)  
Standard Features: Navigation lights, bilge pump, all-billet hardware, built-in swim steps, Gaffrig gauges, angled gauge bezels, custom steering wheel, AM/FM cassette stereo, ski locker, billet tournament ski post with storage bag, 180-degree reversible front seats, bowrails, flush-fit plexiglass windshield, 54-gallon fuel tank, custom gelcoat graphics and five-color gel, stainless-steel prop, RB billet vents with grab handles, 5.7L Alpha One Merc, mooring tarp, multiple storage compartments and pop-up cleats.  
Options on Test Boat: 454 Magnum with Bravo One (\$11,215), hour meter (\$115), depth gauge (\$425) and one extra color (\$349).  
Price as Tested: \$48,925  
Top Speed, Radar: 71.6 mph  
0-30: 9.17 seconds  
0-40: 10.24 seconds  
0-50: 13.30 seconds  
0-60: 17.66 seconds  
Speed at 3,000 rpm: 47.1 mph  
Speed at 4,000 rpm: 51.7 mph

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## HOWARD

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carpet and a first class grade of naughty material for the upholstery. Components like Gaffrig gauges and controls, stainless-steel pop-up deck cleats, custom powdercoated bezels and grab handles, and a Dino-style steering wheel also help to keep the quality momentum going.

While other boat manufacturers of the popular air-entrapment cat style have mostly opted to present their open bow version as a cuddly/bowrider (without the walk-thru), Howard should be commended for taking the walk-thru approach. Not only does the moderate freeboard of the Howard 26 dictate that type of design, but it also makes more sense to have that improved passenger access to the bow, rather than create a much too small cuddly cabin. As the boat is presently configured, it can easily accommodate eight to nine passengers, which is a little like owning a new Ford Excursion.

## PERFORMANCE

Behind the wheel, Howard's 26 bowrider cat is a fun boat to drive. Imagine that. Teague's big 509 motor is easy starting, and has a well-mannered lope at idle. No problem with stalling when shifting into gear. Although it was equipped with a stock, 30-pitch, four-blade Bravo One prop and 1.36:1 gears, the extra muscle of a low-end supercharged engine was evident. Zero to 30 mph was comfortably achieved in just seven seconds. And in another seven seconds, the 4,400 pound Howard was whistling along at 60 mph.

Unlike many of the pleasure tunnels designed ten years ago that had problems in the moderate-cruise speed range (30 to 55 mph), the Howard 26 has eliminated those bad habits—absolutely no tendency to porpoise at any speed. And although a bowrider version often shifts a little extra weight forward, the Howard handled the slight difference like it didn't exist. There was no bow-heavy feel, and the hull tracked straight and true.

Cats have never been known for their nimble turning characteristics. Maybe the Howard will start a new trend. The 26 was remarkably un-cat-like when cornering. Instead of leaning to the outside in a turn, the Howard actually banked ever-so-slightly to the inside, a little like a vee-bottom, when making circles to either the right or left.

As the throttle was advanced a little farther, you could feel the hull get increasingly more efficient. At 3,000 rpm, our radar gun showed 47 mph. Adding another thousand rpms sent the digits up to a solid 70 mph. Finding a long stretch of uncrowded water, we unleashed the 700-plus horsepower assault. In a matter of seconds, we accelerated to 95-96 mph. With the throttle wide open, and

lightly adjusting the trim a little farther out, the Howard slowly continued to gain rpms and speed. After nearly running out of lake, the digital display finally blinked an impressive 102 mph at 5,500 rpm, and it was solid like a rock, riding like it was on rails.

That's plenty for us. But here's a tip that might help with the wife and kids, in case you're in the market to buy one of these magnificent machines. Maybe that 102-mph stuff should just be your little secret. ■

## COUGAR

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begins to shine as an extra attractive value package is when you start to consider adding optional equipment. With the 20.5 Sport Skier, there really isn't that much more left to add, since its standard equipment list is so lengthy and complete. Unlike some manufacturers who like to optionalize their models to death, the Cougar is really an all-inclusive type of boat. In the base price, even the custom tandem-axle trailer is included, plus a really deluxe stereo cassette player, a two-piece mooring tarp, a special billet tournament ski pylon, five-color gelcoat hull graphics and all top-of-the-line instruments and hardware.

## THE BOAT

On the inside, the 20.5 Sport Skier is a nicely proportioned boat. The bowrider area is not immense, but it is plenty roomy enough to accommodate at least a couple of adults and a child. The main cockpit section has traditional twin-forward bucket seats and a full-width rear bench, providing easy seating for another five to six passengers. The aft engine hatch is flat and fully upholstered, so it truly functions as a comfortable sun lounge. Storage is only slightly above average, but the in-floor ski locker is very large. We would, however, suggest some way to secure the ski locker lid, since it did pop out of place from time to time when we were making some full-speed passes. The quality upholstery displayed some new, more colorful use of accent graphics, which nicely complemented the stunning multi-color gelcoat.

One final note, and something not to be overlooked, is the fact that Cougar is a relatively low-volume producer, very intent on keeping its quality standards as high as possible. In order to maintain maximum quality control, Cougar rigs every one of its boats in-house according to strict factory tolerances and procedures. The attention to detail is evident. Checking the out-of-the-way nooks and crannies behind the dash panel and in the engine compartment was a pleasure. Cougar builds a quality product and gives its customers a lot for their money. ■

## ESSEX

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side. MerCruiser controls were anchored off to the side, with trim in the handle.

Essex continues to produce inspired results from the gelcoat spray booth, and this Monarch used five fade-enhanced colors (red, orange, yellow, purple and black) in a tantalizing weave that accentuated the boat's handsome lines. Likewise, the glass and detailed finish-work drew best-possible marks from our team evaluators.

A large, continuous boarding platform with a hinged center (above the drive) can be color matched, and boarding is simplified with well-placed, vented handles, and a small, lip of a step that's tooled into the transom.

The hull and deck perimeter seam is trimmed with black anodized molding and matched rub railing insert. Bow railing lays low to the glass, and stainless fuel fills, pop up cleats (with powder coated bezels), and pop up bow running lights are standard. If there's a better way to build it or finish it, Essex embraces it.

## PERFORMANCE

Essex's reputation for state-of-the-art quality extends beyond the production line and into the water, where this hull continues to deliver superior all-around results. The Monarch introduces the Essex's smooth drivability and controlled feel in a larger format—one that is even more amenable to rough-water play than Essex's durable Sterling and 22-foot Vortex, both of which have earned strong ratings of their own in that regard.

Though the Monarch won't match the Sterling's almost uncanny acceleration ability (it consistently ranks near the top in post-test ET charts), it holds its own off the line. The three-drive produced controlled low-rpm handling in all directions, though it tends to produce a slightly quicker idle than a Bravo One. Planing was fluid and smooth.

The hull showed no hint of porpoise at any speed, and threw off a clean, dry ride through the midrange. It held a flat, consistent line through the turns, and carved precisely when you picked up rpm.

We were especially impressed with the Monarch's 60 mph cruiseability (actually, 59.3 on the gun) at a mere 4,000 rpm. Pushed to wide-open throttle, the Monarch was stable, secure and controlled. We hit a 64.7-mph peak under the Stalker gun, and did so even as we banged the rev limiter.

The Monarch's performance in rough water makes it a great candidate for family duty at big lakes like Havasu, Mead and Powell. "A very dry boat," wrote one of our