

COUGAR

22' MTR/MERCURY 3-LITER 300 PRO-MAX/SPORTMASTER

New Tooling, More Fresh Air

Cougar has put its own particular spin on the family lake tunnel with the introduction of their latest original tooling effort, the 22MTR. A stylishly cut action ride with an exceptionally large cockpit and a well-grounded running platform, the newest custom to emerge from Cougar's accomplished production ranks balances a heightened, exhilarating feel with turnkey reliability and functionality that continue to define the Cougar driving experience.

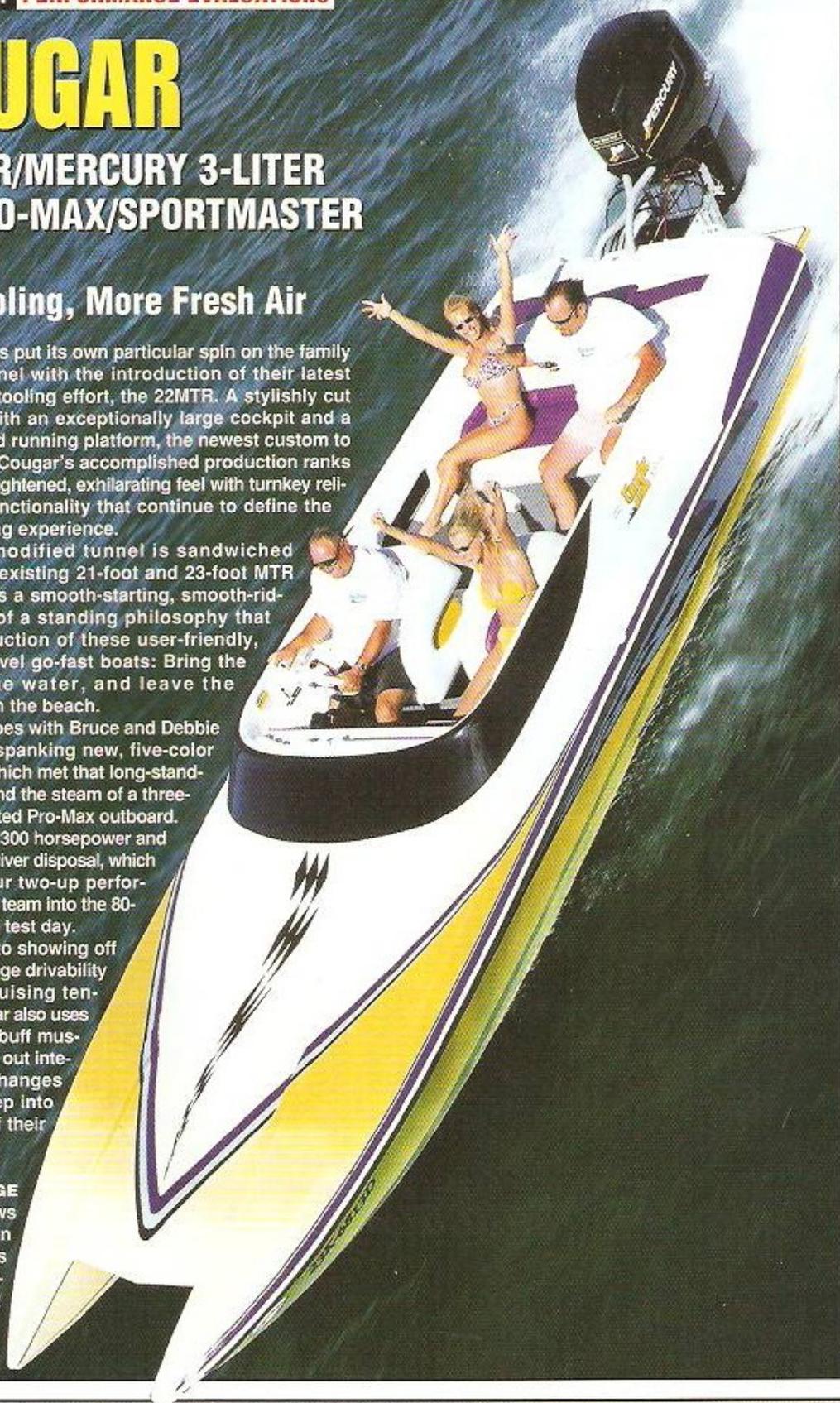
The new modified tunnel is sandwiched between the existing 21-foot and 23-foot MTR models and is a smooth-starting, smooth-riding conduit of a standing philosophy that guides production of these user-friendly, enthusiast-level go-fast boats: Bring the thrills to the water, and leave the headaches on the beach.

And so it goes with Bruce and Debbie Bumstead's spanking new, five-color lake rocker, which met that long-standing edict behind the steam of a three-liter, fuel-injected Pro-Max outboard. The setup put 300 horsepower and 6,200 rpm at driver disposal, which catapulted our two-up performance driving team into the 80-mph range on test day.

In addition to showing off strong midrange drivability and clean cruising tendencies, Cougar also uses their newest, buff muscleboat to trot out interior styling changes that may creep into some or all of their other boats.

THE PACKAGE

Cougar draws on the proven effectiveness of its MTR air-entrapment bottom, which carries the



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hull on stepped outer sponsons cut with a 12-degree vee and a slightly elevated center sponson that's stepped twice.

The 22-footer sets up very nicely beneath the single 300 Pro-Max outboard. Hanging the Sportmaster package (\$4,038 over the base-issue, 280-hp 2.5) off the hydraulic Bob's Machine billet rack pushed an already spacious cockpit layout into a different size class altogether, and the power allotment was sufficiently stout to run the 1,700-pound setup nice and hard.

The Pro-Max is rigged with a standard, remote low-water pickup with stainless hose, keeping things cool as you trim more speed into your drive. The power was efficiently channeled with the help of a beautifully fabricated, heavy-duty, hydraulic billet setback bracket from Bob's Machine, which showed off quick, precise action. We ran a Mercury 26-inch four-blade stainless prop (standard with this motor) and Teleflex hydraulic steering.

The ride at our 78.9-mph top-end nadir—a number that was no doubt beat down somewhat by a relatively heavy passenger and fuel load—was supremely stable and very comfortably absorbed throughout the cockpit. And that was a key point in putting this particular lake rod together: It was engineered to start every time, idle in nearly fume- and smoke-free comfort without fouling, proffer a nice ride at low cruise and peel off a full day of hot lapping around 80. Put it away, do it another day.

In true Cougar tradition, the MTR looked very well doing it. Our tester was distinctively wrapped in a sleek, five-color graphic assault that is destined to be a serial neck snapper this summer. A close look presented a neatly done, subtle yellow fade. The over-the-top color work elicited a \$2,500 premium from Cougar and was tastefully integrated into the hull's clean shape. Black gelcoat defines the MTR's rakish dash area, which wraps stylishly cut, stepped dash tooling.

A single, arced tier of backlit Gaffrig gauges, dressed with Cougar's logo and tastefully trimmed in matched, white Altizer bezels, is absorbed into an elevated dash space that arcs neatly around the driver. Our cluster included a liquid-filled Gaffrig speedo, a \$112 upgrade. Air and water temperature are dutifully, digitally relayed on a Gaffrig digital unit.

A Formulating wheel sprung off

a billet extension in the dash panel below, and it was flanked by a vertical bank of rocker switches, which controlled onboard functions, and a Stainless Marine mechanical trim indicator (\$722). Both were framed in white, backlit switch panels. The up-down lever for the transom jack angled off the wheel like a turn-signal lever, convenient placement that soon became familiar. Our drivers gave familiar kudos to Cougar's relative placement of dials, levers and seats. A

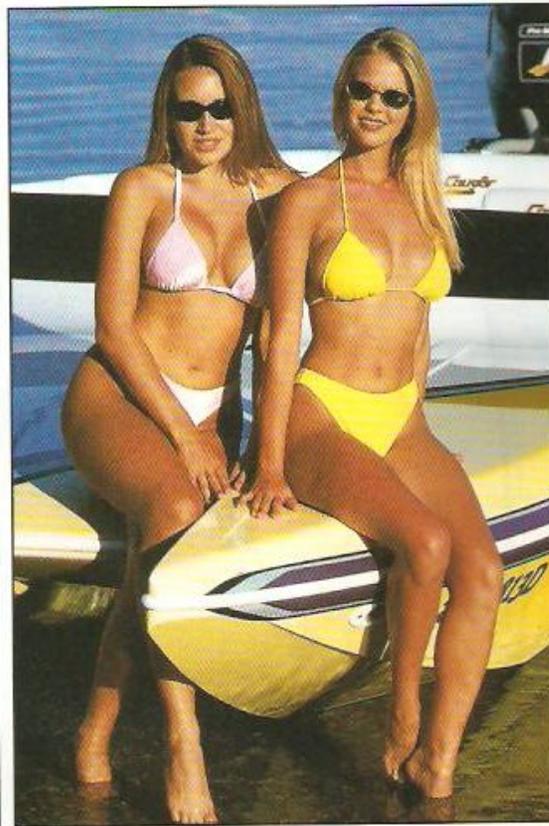
Kenwood stereo lay seamlessly into the passenger-facing dash area. On the backside, dash wiring was clean and crisp, in keeping with the sanitary look of the entire installation. Cougar takes evident time and care with their rigging and finish work, and the effort pays dividends in the final product. Indeed, our effort to find fault with the rigging was reduced to quibbling about the mix of various head styles on the fasteners used in the stern area and the omission of battery cable covers.

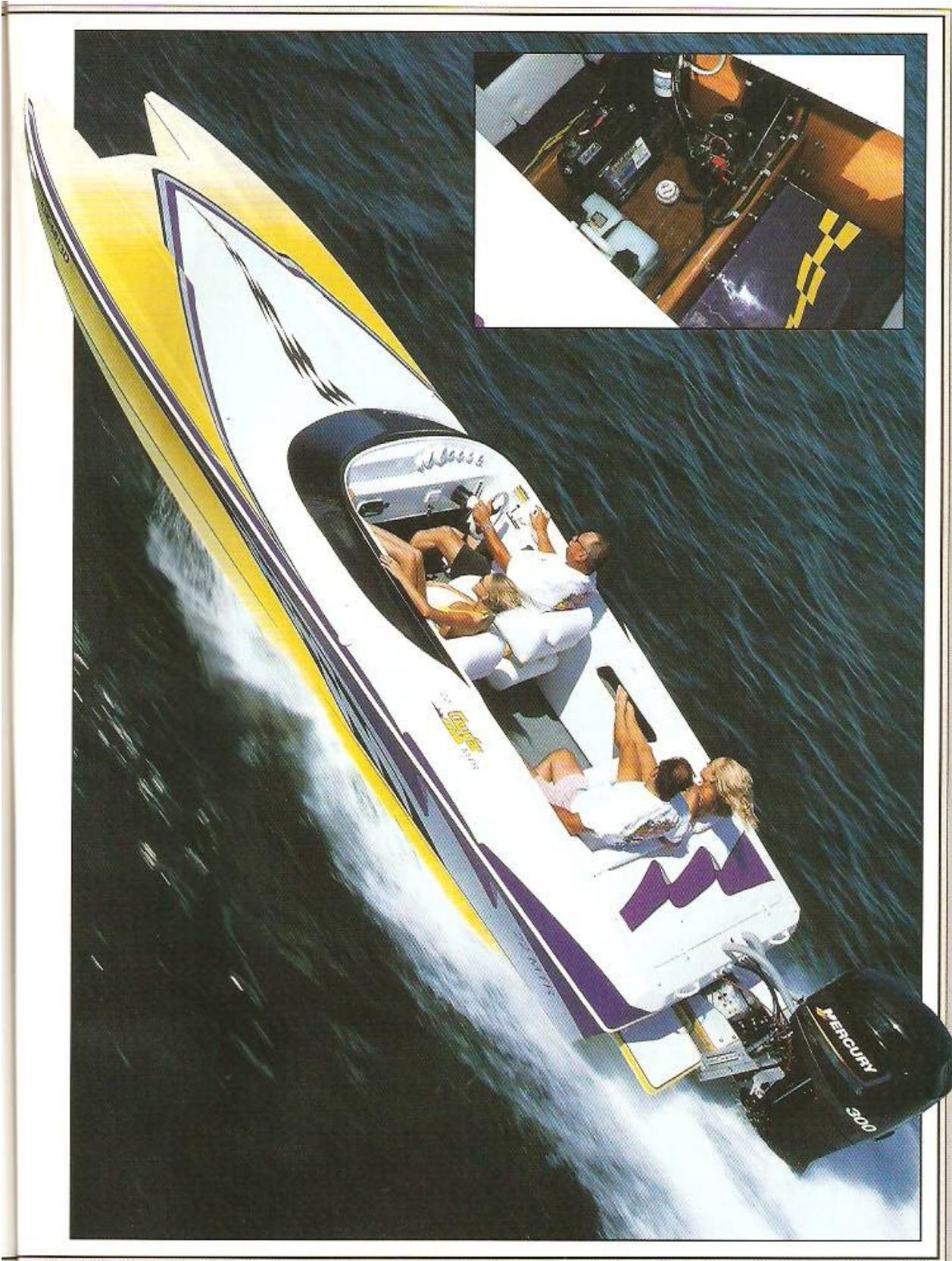
A padded armrest extends from the soft contour of the starboard gunnel, home to standard-issue, offshore-style Gaffrig throttle and shifter sticks. Cup holders are set into gunnel access panels and also into padded panels that line cavities that are neatly carved into the backs of the pedestal seats.

The MTR can seat five in open comfort, and its passengers enjoy exceptional legroom. Uniquely styled, three-piece modular-style front seats were sectioned and nicely padded for maximum lumbar support. They're swivel-mounted on resin-coated wood pedestals, although there's not enough room for them to fully swivel before stopping against the gunnels. The movement afforded by the seat mounting brought a bit of rattle at speed.

The Cougar is one of the few tunnels in this size range with a standard-issue floor ski locker, though wakeboards are more easily stored up front in a large cargo area forward of the bulkhead. Cougar's extensive array of standard interior amenities also includes a removable billet ski pylon, a 12-volt in-dash power plug, mooring tarp and powdercoated grab handles (one up front, two in the rear). Interior and exterior molding is color keyed to the individual boat—in this case white on white, in keeping with the boat's snow-blind theme.

One of the installation's highlights was revealed beneath the hinged rear deck lid, where Cougar's trademark, flow-coated balsa floor was beautifully accented with brilliant purple and





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yellow gelcoat patterns. The two-inch fir transom is bolstered with neatly integrated, polished T-6 aluminum inside knee bracing, and the area is ideal for storing gear. There's more storage cut into the rear seat base, although removing it from a very determined Velcro grasp can be a test of strength.

Dual fiberglass swim steps (a \$761 option) were done in matched gelcoat and were textured in nonskid. The Merc motor cowls were touched up in vinyl to match (\$205). Gas fills, pull-up cleats and other exterior hardware pieces were scooped seamlessly into the hull's surface.

PERFORMANCE

The big-inch outboard-powered Cougar passed muster as a comfortable-driving, family hot rod. It started and idled easily and was surprisingly smoke-free even during the course of a quarter-mile idle. The hand throttles (with handle-loaded trim) and jack "up" lever smoothed out the path to 80 very nicely, and virtually anyone can drive this boat. The Cougar's movements quickly become an extension of the driver's. The MTR shifted, backed and maneuvered crisply at slow speed.

Getting our Cougar properly hooked up was precipitated by a momentary rise of the sponsons, and the Merc wound up a bit before the four-blade bit hard. It then surged steadily off the line and picked up lift with the aggressive introduction of trim. The hull

freed up perceptibly at around 3,500 rpm, and the ride was at its very best at midrange and above, where one can take full advantage of the ensuing lift. At an easy-breathing 4,000 rpm (peak was 6,200), we breezed along at a very efficient 54 miles per hour, and another grand on the tach (to 5,000) sent us just shy of 70.

We found that the hull carried front passenger weight extremely well, and it retained its flat, steady stance from slow speed to the throttle jammed. It didn't porpoise, walk or otherwise vary from its straight, controlled and very flat ride. Its handling was impeccable at speed, and the hull was plainly capable of much, much more.

Our 300-hp reservoir came a long way from fully extending the Cougar's capabilities as we settled into a smooth, 75-mph sprint across foot-high Havasu chop. When the wind really began to howl, we were pleasantly surprised at the hull's resilience to mucky water and its dry, protective ride. Passengers ride fairly low to the water (a good thing where sensation of speed is concerned), but they're also wrapped by plenty of gunnel.

Hot-rodding the Cougar produced the expected degree of wheel torque that you'll produce from any big-inch outboard steering system. If you're not one of the outboard purists who actually enjoys the hard tug of a hydraulic steering in full, high-speed dance, Cougar also expects

SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Calm/moderate chop

Centerline length: 21' 10"

Beam: 92"

Bottom: Modified tunnel

Engine/drive: Mercury 3-liter

300 Pro-Max/Sportmaster

Horsepower @ prop: 300

Ratio: 1.62:1

Prop: Mercury 26-inch four-blade

Overall weight: 1,700 lbs.

Base retail price (incl. trailer): \$47,138

Standard features: Mercury 2.5

outboard (280 hp), hydraulic

motor lift, hydraulic steering,

grab handles, pop-up cleats,

flush fuel fills, swivel seat

mounts, Gaffrig logo gauges,

mooring tarp, billet steering

hub, Formuling wheel, Gaffrig

controls, setback bracket, low-

water pickup w/stainless hose,

color-keyed swim steps, 12-volt power plug, ski locker, interior lighting, drink holders, backlit gauges and switch panel.

Options on test boat: 300 Pro-

Max upgrade (\$4,038), custom

gelcoat (\$2,500), mechanical

trim gauge (\$722), white-out

package (\$389), dual swim

steps (\$761), color-matched

motor cowl (\$205), liquid

speedo (\$112).

Price as tested: \$55,865

Top speed, radar: 77.0 mph

Builder's estimated speed in

optimum conditions: 87 mph

Maximum rpm: 6,200

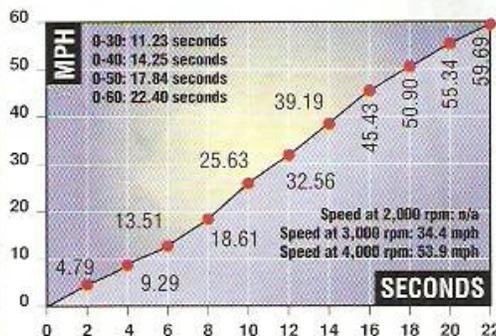
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THE BOTTOM LINE

to build a fair amount of stern-driven 22s—in fact, up to 60% of the total yield may be inboard powered. Handling and wheel feel were fluid through the midrange, and the boat turned responsively and obediently. The feel became more resistant as rpm climbed.

Cougar has once more found the sweet spot with their neatly cut 22-footer. Those who favor it in the roomier outboard armor will find the 300-hp version to be a versatile family machine that can turn lake rod in a Canadian second.

