

COUGAR

Cougar 23 MTR Tunnel/twin Mercury 300 Pro-Max outboards

A hard-core lake boat shows off its driving manners

There are any number of routes you can take to achieve certifiable, radar-verified, 100-mile-an-hour speeds, which may well be considered recreational hot-boating's equivalent of the Holy Grail. The last five years have endowed a technological boon to boaters seeking that ever elusive, triple-digit status, and the emergence of the air-entrapment hull as a legitimate recreational platform has made hitting 100 truly attainable.

But at what cost? As with any mystical journey, getting there is only half the point. Check the beaches and launch ramps of any popular, high-performance waterway in the twilight of the weekend, and it's almost certain to be cluttered with the broken and battered mechanical remains (and egos) of hot-boat extremists in pursuit of that major-league high.

"Have a good weekend, Ralph?"

"Yeah, sure did—right up until the motor went *POP!*"

Even a good portion of those who claim reasonable reliability with their hundred-mile-an-hour screamers admit to a certain level of awkwardness and impracticality when posed with situations encountered daily in boating's real world. How many

blower boats, or even tweaked-out, big-inch, multi-outboard setups, have you seen that can't shift from forward to reverse without having their engines shut down first? That have to be started in gear to guard against tearing up drive components? That refuse to idle through an extended no-wake zone without loading up or stiffening the temp-gauge needle? Or that would

self-implode if forced to suffer the indignities of running pump gas through its fuel system?

Boating's fast lane does not necessarily have to be fraught with such concerns. Cougar's stunning 23 MTR tunnel, a center-sponson lake rod with a true family cockpit and all the amenities of a full-sized cruiser, may well be the antidote to the blower boater's blues. Matched with

a set of Mercury's fully warranted, three-litre Black Max outboards and the 600 horsepower they yield, the MTR we tested left us convinced that the reliable, user-friendly, hundred-mile-an-hour executive boat (101.2 mph on radar) is alive and well at Cougar Custom Boats.

Onboard

Cougar's workmanship is now legendary in the custom marine industry, and it has pulled out every imaginable stop with its MTR. En route, it has kept the focus on the needs and comfort of the boating family, creating a sumptuous interior environment that embraces the high-end feel we've come to expect from one of boating's most accomplished builders. Within the framework of the MTR's 23-foot centerline and 96-inch



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beam, Cougar's designers have integrated extreme comfort, gorgeous styling, incredible detail work and a rip-roaring time behind the steering wheel.

They've also assured a cockpit atmosphere that's very secure while at speed—firstly, by absorbing a decent amount of freeboard into the MTR's long, lean lines and, secondly, with unusually thick, high-density padded upholstery, stitched in-house at Cougar. Two offshore-styled buckets are mounted on powdercoated pedestal-type bases, which are through-bolted into stainless steel backing plates beneath the Cougar's neat, carpeted wood flooring. A deep, comfortable rear bench creates seating for three more, and a raised lip on its edge gives passengers a bit more grip. There's an incredible amount of passenger room on this boat. The rear-deck lid and side panels are finished with the same dense, pleat-style padding as the seating.

Cougar's stylists integrate progressive, highly detailed tooling with a strong sense of driver ergonomics in the MTR's dash design, which neatly frames two banks of legible, white Gaffrig dials with matching bezels by Art Altizer. All of the gauges are clustered in front of the driver, making them easily visible. Key dials drew priority placement, including the Tattletale tach and speedometers and two water-pressure gauges. A warning-light system is also tied into a buzzer, which sounds in the event of overheating or low oil.

Dual-lever Gaffrig shifters and throttles are tucked neatly into the padded driver's armrest, along with a depth gauge (\$315) and GPS system (\$740). They are positioned for fatigue-free use, enabling the big outboard package to shift smoothly and easily. It took very little time behind the wheel—perhaps an hour—to become comfortable with the placement of the throttles, gauges, and trim and motor adjustment switches.

Mechanical trim indicators helped dial in the positioning of the powdercoated Bob's Ma-

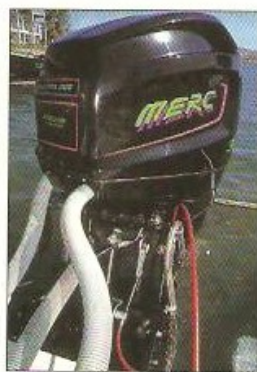
chine motor lifts as well as the drives, either synchro-style or individually. The motor lifts were operated with a trick rapid-action lever placed next to the Grant steering wheel, positioned off a billet extension and engraved hub. Rocker-style trim

A manually raised hatch revealed rigging and finish work that made custom industry standards seem sloppy and archaic by comparison. The dual batteries, power-steering reservoirs, hour meter and wiring were fastidiously mounted,



switches were mounted just above. Switch panels, indicators, bezels, throttle-assembly housing and all other dash hardware were part of a very appealing cockpit white-out package, a worthwhile \$598 option.

A flush-fit windshield wrapped neatly around the cockpit and melded seamlessly into the boat's lines, though it did little to fend off the facing wind at 100-plus speeds. A finished storage compartment with a locking hasp is built into the bow section. A day cushion softens the area below, and was made to offer day protection from the elements. We were delighted to find a scad of neat, finished cargo area beneath the engine hatch. Segmented storage cutouts line the gunnels, along with powdercoated grab handles, both high and low. Four drink holders are integrated into the boarding step, with two up front.



Brackets and such were bolted through the gorgeous, flow-coated, balsa wood flooring; anodized purple hardware and purple gelcoat established the clean tone of the installation. Wiring was neatly routed and loomed, in line with top industry standards.

Along the inside of the gunnel, a fiberglass step made getting out of the boat easy. Hull

and deck hardware was limited to flush-mount, pull-up cleats and white rubrailing and trim. The purple interior blitz matched the gelcoat beautifully, and was accented with the same checkered pattern that wrapped the hind flanks, swiped across the deck and, finally, across the dash. All was done with gelcoat, except the lime-green Cougar emblem. The effect was striking, and very effectively integrated the bold interior and exterior graphics.

Some among us may have felt a purple overdose (we couldn't imagine it on an extremely hot Havasu day), but there was no such dissension when it came to grading the hull's tooling and fiberglass finish work, which were up to usual Cougar standards—in other words, beyond reproach. "The fiberglass and gelcoat work were up to par with anything you'll find by the California boys," wrote one of our team's evaluators. "Nobody was in a rush here."

The Cougar's rigging was beautiful in its simplicity. This is the way they roll out of Cougar's factory—dialed in and ready to run. The twin-300 package is gaining popularity, and with good reason. Aside from its complete turnkey reliability and one-year warranty, Mercury develops its allotted 300 ponies at a very conservative 6,100 rpm, unlike the 2.5 motor, which will wind out forever. The Black Max engine is equipped with an internal rev limiter. Cougar caps off the set-up with a pair of stainless, 15" x 34" Merc four-blade cleaver props, which turn through Sportmaster 1.67:1 gearing.

Remote, transom-mounted water pickups kept things running cool, and were plumbed directly to the water pump through stainless steel hoses. Cougar also built the heavy-duty setback brackets. External Mayfair SS steering is standard, and is key in developing the Cougar's smooth, easy driveability at speed. There is

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room between the big outboards to make some use of the textured, fiberglass boarding platform.

Turn the Key

Understanding full well that the Cougar was set up for hot-rod duty, we were slightly apprehensive about how it would perform on more mundane tasks, like moving around the marina or backing into cramped dock space. Our concerns proved unfounded. The Cougar started easily, shifted into gear seamlessly and maneuvered crisply at low rpm. The motors never stalled, didn't smoke and shifted easily in and out of both gears. We ran them extensively at low rpm while cruising through no-wake territory on the way to the fuel docks, and they operated with the same smooth, controlled efficiency you'll find in a stock-production, stem-drive train.

Our Cougar was propped with the biggest available wheels, and the big, stereo Mercs put a lot of weight on the transom; no surprise that off the line, we exchanged our horizon for a few seconds' viewing of the MTR's deck graphics before the big cleavers bit and rolled the hull into business stance. At low rpm plane, you squeeze through a little bit of porpoise while the outside sponsons, with their 38 degrees of deadrise at their entry, seek a suitable running surface. By 2,500 rpm, it's gone. As air builds below and the half-inch,

raised-center sponson begins to find lift, its stepped-V design goes to work. The resulting ride is a flat, powerful surge that carries through the midrange and beyond. At 3,000 rpm, we ran 41 miles an hour, and at 50 mph, the hull really began to come alive beneath us. Its ability to turn improved exponentially at this point. It was somewhat sluggish and skittish through the buoys at low speeds, but the ride really cleaned off at around 3,500 rpm (47 mph).

Through the midrange (a meager 4,000-rpm lope sends the package into a 60-mph cruise mode), the Cougar delivers a soft, firm, responsive ride that breeds more confidence as the Gaffrig needle veers. Picking up speed, passengers are comforted by the deep cockpit feel and firm seats, and as the MTR blows by the 70 mark, it's almost impossible not to feel completely secure. As you adjust the motor height and trim to suit the boat's ride, steering remains responsive and completely controlled. It's responsive to trim, but not overly sensitive, as are some air-bottom designs.

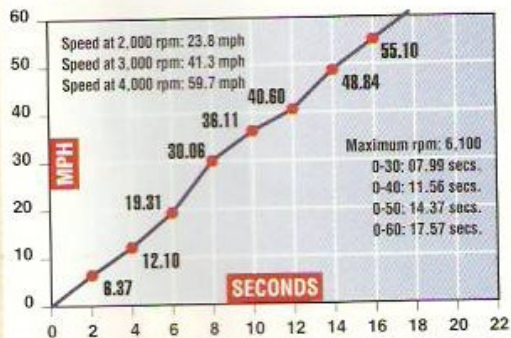
The MTR's driveability is such that after only an hour or so behind the wheel, one feels relatively comfortable barreling across 15-inch chop in excess of 90 miles an hour. "Very fast and forgiving," wrote one of our drivers. "Phenomenal handling at speed." The exquisite handling continued all the way through

QUICK SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: rough chop
Centerline length: 23'1"
Beam: 96"
Bottom: modified tunnel with stepped-V center sponson
Engines/drives: twin Mercury 300 Black Max outboards
Horsepower at prop: 300 ea.
Ratio: 1.67:1
Props: twin Mercury 15" x 34" four-blade cleavers
Overall weight: 3,642 lbs
Base retail price (incl. trailer): \$73,861
Standard features: Mayfair SS hydraulic steering, stainless props, marine tarp, deck cleats, gauge bezels, flush-mount billet fuel fills, Gaffrig gauges with Cougar logos, billet steering extension with engraved hub, Grant wheel, Bob's Machine motor lifts, bow storage, Gaffrig throttle/trim, transom motor trim switch, heavy-duty setback brackets, color-matched motor cowl.

transom-mounted water pickups with stainless hoses, light switches, grab handles, flush-lit windshield.
Options on test boat: dual Pro-Max 300 upgrade (\$13,725), white-out package (\$598), tall ski post with swim step and handle (\$805), mechanical lift and trim gauges (\$1,903), liquid-filled Gaffrig Tattletale speedo (\$115), dual fuel gauges with warning lights (\$103), dual memory tach recalls (\$313), clock/bezel (\$125), depth gauge (\$315), GPS on console (\$730).
Price as tested: \$92,603
Top speed, radar: 101.2 mph
Builder's estimated speed under optimum conditions: 110 mph

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our 6,100 rpm maximum, where we left the Tattletale liquid Gaffrig buried above 100.

The Bottom Line

Cougar has put together an exceptional, extremely high-performance package in the

dual-300 MTR, which emerged from our tests a unanimous favorite among our drivers. Our northern neighbors continue to astound with their custom skills, and the MTR's performance on the course only made this setup sweeter.

