



HOT BOAT MAGAZINE REVIEW
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Cougar 20.5 Sport Skier
MerCruiser 7.4L/Bravo One



The open-bow performance boat has emerged as custom boating's do-everything machine and the properly appointed family bowrider is expected to excel on a variety of fronts. Cougar's 20.5 Sport Skier has evolved as one of the best of this versatile breed. After spending hours aboard, it doesn't seem quite enough to say that it's one of the most appealing family bowriders than can be had for around \$30,000.00

In fact, the 20.5 makes a compelling candidate as one of the best open bows on the water - at any price.

Cougar's notoriously detailed custom workmanship, its unique procession of production steps and the 20.5's sound hydrodynamics conspire to create one of performance boating's most satisfying recreational experiences. Factor in the favorable Canadian exchange rate-an advantage that enables Cougar to offer MerCruiser's base 7.4L big block (and its allotted 310 horsepower) and still trailer out at a shade over 30 grand - and Cougar's status as a value leader, and there is an inescapable conclusion.

Speaking of numbers, our 205 tester reeled off an impressive set. It was quickest among the seven I/O's tested from idle to 40, 50 and 60 miles an hour, and it was the fastest, at a very impressive 66.4 mph. Before you attribute Cougar's distinct performance edge to its lone status as the eight-boat test fleet's only big-block stern drive, remember that two others claimed comparable horsepower with their small-block 350 Magnums.

THE PACKAGE

While the 205 is far from a specialty boat and stands in stark contrast to the single-dimensional nature of designated tournament towboats, it is put together with an vigilant eye toward the specific needs of the demanding recreational wakeboard and slalom enthusiast. The Skier's terrific low-end response (it seemed perfectly propped with Mercury's four-blade 24-inch Bravo) and sweet, responsive handling contribute to its status as a start towboat. In past tests, our ski team has validated the 20.5's credentials from the business end of the towline. And the screw-and-pin, billet ski pylon, which is incorporated into the oversized reardeck lid, is standard.



However, you won't find cougar's expansive role of detailed, custom features on any production direct-drive, nor its luxurious, intricately stiched seating. Deep, thick, densely padded buckets wrapped its occupants, and the observer's seat was swivel-mounted. An equally comfortable rear bench provided deep seating for four. The Cougar's stance is lower than some of today's bowriders, and consequently, its front passenger section is not as deep. It is, however, very comfortable and secure for a passenger or two. We loved the lines of the interior and the smooth, softly sculpted design of the seats. Cougar also made great use of interior color, and its engraved logo stitching dressed it nicely.



Overall, interior comfort drew top marks, partially owing to its open, roomy design.

There's plenty of room aboard for gear, both in the walk-through areas, and integrated areas such as the huge floor locker (plenty roomy for wakeboards), cooler, beneath the seats, in the gunnels, and in a series of pouches and stash spaces. Also standard: a nice brand stereo, six cup holders and a 3/8-inch stoutly mounted split wind fairing.

Bow seating was lined with powdercoated railing; like the four pop-up cleats, it came standard. Powdercoated rear grab handles were integrated into the engine vents, enhancing the ease of boarding the textured swim steps.

Raising the engine hatch revealed Cougar's trademark flow-coated balsa woodwork, a stunning backdrop for more fastidious rigging and clean, detail-oriented workmanship. It also showed off even more opportunity for storage in finished side compartments.

MerCruiser throttle/shifter controls placed the trim in the handle and were easily accessible. A twin-tiered, starboard gauge layout showed off angled black bezels and black-faced Gaffrig gauges, which matched the billet steering hub.

PERFORMANCE

The harmonious marriage of this 17-degree hull and big-block Bravo train was indicated in its unusually well-rounded performance profile, which showcased a razor-sharp bottom end to go with the Skier's strong 66.4-mph radar romp.



Off the line, there was no ventilation or slip, and it came on top immediately. Under the influence of more throttle, she showed off the obedient handling manners that have defined Cougar's heritage throughout the years.

The Skier docked and backed crisply and surely, tracked well at low rpm and sprinted into full-on performance mode instantly and without hesitation. It responded instantly to trim and made the most of it, without falling into a porpoise. As the Chev's revs climbed, the 20.5 ride continued to be clean, and it peaked with a nice, high, steady stance. When called upon, it also tucked into hard chop, and its underside did a good job of cutting through it.

It may be priced right with the entry-level pack, but as it was set up, this Cougar is fit for consumption for anyone from the basic, first-time boater to the experienced, performance-oriented family boater. Its easy drivability and consistent smooth ride is balanced with an exhilaration brought on by the Cougar's ability to slice morning dew from the buoys and carve corners with anything in its class. It stayed utterly dry, even during high-demand maneuvers. Trimmed all the way out, the Cougar served up more of the same controlled characteristics and maintained its flat, smooth, stable attitude. We found it nearly as fun to drive as it was functional, another combination that's not easy to find.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Our most recent encounter with Cougar's 20.5 Sport Skier was the latest in an ongoing chain of evidence of Cougar's considerable boatbuilding skills and dedication to hot-boat finery. An outstanding boat in every area worth considering, this open-bow beauty is floating proof that you don't have to bust the bank on your way to performance boating bliss.