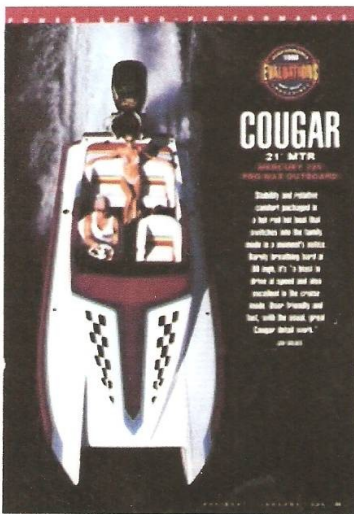


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HOT BOAT MAGAZINE REVIEW

January 1998 - Hot Boat
COUGAR 21 MTR



Stability and relative comfort packaged in a hot-rod boat that switches into the family mode in a moment's notice. Barely breathing hard at 80 mph, it's "a blast to drive at speed and also excellent in the cruise mode. User-friendly and fast, with the usual, great Cougar detail work." *James Wilkes*

It has become a ritual, this annual confirmation of Cougar Custom Boats lavish workmanship and exquisite, detailed rigging. **HOT BOAT'S** unbridled praise for Cougar's time-intensive construction, smile-inducing cosmetics and efficient bottom technology has become traditional winter fodder for these pages. It's no wonder that our test drivers look forward to their annual ride in the Cougar of the moment.

This year's designated feline, the 21-foot MTR, leaped upon us from unsuspected quarters the past. A timeless and popular cohabitant of the Cougar den since 1983, this low-slung modified tunnel continues to thrive at a steady rate. Seems that predictable, abundant speed woven with elegant, custom artistry never goes out of style, and reports of big-horse outboard-powered

MTR's hitting triple digits probably hasn't hurt sales either.

Still, we couldn't help wondering, as we eased the sleek picklefork off the beach and sent the lower unit of its 225-horse Mercury Pro-Max outboard into forward gear: How would a 14-year-old design, even when executed with cougar's inimitable style, compare to the new breed of cougar custom we've come to appreciate in the last half-decade or so?

THE PACKAGE

To date, there is still no more efficient source of fun over 80 mph than the properly appointed, outboard-powered tunnel boat. We offer up further, compelling evidence to this claim, in the form of one highly civilized cougar MTR, a liquid-bound street rod that delegated the 225 horsepower of Mercury's new performance 2.5 liter Pro-Max with maximum effect.

The Pro-Max swung a stout 26-inch, three-blade Mercury chopper and used it all - note the scant, 8.8-second ET from 0 to 60 - to go along with a smooth and glued 81.0 mile-per-hour pass down our test course (with more seat time, there probably would have been more). The source of all of this manageable, free-flowing power rested on beefy, black, powdercoated aluminum brackets (fabricated by Cougar) and trimmed to the command of a fast-action bob's Machine hydraulic lift. In a nice accent to all of this outstanding rigging and matching, powdercoated aluminum hardware, the lift's pump is mounted inside the hatch, away from water's harm, with hoses running through the hull to a cylinder outside the boat. Details like this one abound in the cougar installation.

Trim was operated by color-coded buttons on a stationary Land & Sea pedal and a comfy, Lightning billet foot throttle was mounted down in the sponson, within nice flexing range of the driver's knee. A toggle switch on the side of the gunnel operated the powdercoated jack plate. Smoothly adjusting motor height while under way took some getting used to, as the forward position of the trick Rex billet shifter interfered a bit; otherwise, the controls were all easy to operate and positioned well. SeaStar hydraulic steering by Teleflex civilized the feel of 6,500 rpm, neutralizing the majority of the package's inherent torque.

A full array of white-faced Gaffrigs were easily visible inside angled, Altizer bezels. A billet steering extension housed a custom wheel with an engraved hub. Nearly every piece of exposed metal was peace.

Cougar's signature floor work graced the tunnel-shaped MTR cockpit, with flow-coated balsa inlaid flooring and exposed, glassed hardwood stringers setting the tone for its rich, vintage tone. Each Cougar is turned upside down in the building process, for flow-coating the underside of the deck. A few builders are in Cougar's league in this customized, signature step, but not many.

The raised center section of the tunnel is carpeted. Two wood-framed bucket seats offered good comfort, up-front, though they're placed less than a foot apart in the Cougar, whose beam measures 86 inches. They felt snug and secure at speed, and - along with their snappy graphic accents - attest to the competence of cougar's in-house interior shop. A rear bench, roomy enough for three in a pinch, is through-bolted atop the two stringers. Grab handles were not included in the stock boat, an omission we noted at 80-plus mph.

Indeed, there's no mistaking this boat's intended use as a fast, reliable lake burner, but it does make any number of overtures in the name of family comfort. To its credit, the Cougar is no stripped-down race rendition - it hits the mark for the hard-core, performance oriented family without skipping a beat. Indeed, many MTR owners carry spare props in their anchor lockers and throw on a more civilized wheel when the day's agenda calls for a full slate of family skiing.

Typically, the sport tunnel can be low on storage - not so in the design of the outboard Cougar setup. The polished-looking bow underside offers secure, sectioned storage and supercedes the need for a floor-mounted ski locker. A finished, rear hatch provides lots of covered, secure storage, roomy enough to bring an ice chest on board and store plenty of gear. Between the bow and stern areas, total storage area rivals that of the typical 21-foot bowrider.

There is, however, one of the nicest standard-issue sound systems going, a marine grade Clarion high-power CD system and a solid, two-inch ski pylon.

Cougar continues to expand the range of its gelcoat work, once more with outstanding results. Seven colors were woven into our test boat's skin in an appealing mixture of creativity and precision. Likewise the fiberglass work on our tester was as good as any you'll find in today's talented, California/Arizona talent pool. Exterior trim and hardware included pull-up cleats with flush-mounted fills and black anodized trim molding with a matching rubber insert. There was no swim step



PERFORMANCE

How does the Cougar's time-tested design measure up in the scheme of things today? We got our perspective from two places, both of them convincing: our driving team's impression of the boat's manners and handling, and the numbers posted by this low-slung hot rod. One impressive statistic: Of 25 boats tested, the Cougar was the only boat we ran (out of 25) that hit an 80-mile-per-hour clip and sold (as-tested) for less than forty grand (\$38,827.00).

Indeed, the Cougar posted impressive numbers on all fronts. It rocketed from a standing start to 40 mph in a breezy 8.80 seconds, posting one of the quickest ETs of everything tested. It pulled hard throughout the rangy, 6,500 rpm rev cycle of the 2.5-litre Pro-Max and found an easy, 50-mph spring in 12.02 seconds - fifth of all boats tested. Likewise, the Cougar laid down a 17.15 -second run from 0 to 60, ranking fourth quickest. All of this from a completely stock, utterly turnkey and highly reliable combination.

This outboard tunnel setup proved exceptional in its versatility and its safe, controlled dispersal of thrills on command. Its sensible ergonomics (easy-to-read gauges, comfortable seating and optimum placement of controls) were indeed part of this boat's charm, but its real strength was rooted in its underside.

Its easy-driving nature surfaces almost from the instant you button down the motor and idle out. The cougar's low-speed maneuverability drew top marks and it backed and wriggled easily in an out of tight quarters. The 26-inch Chopper took a nice, firm bite at around 2,000 rpm and launched off the line with smooth, controlled quickness. Fed more throttle, the MTR reacted with similar grace and responded instantly to trim on its way into its most comfortable, post-60 mph zone.

Nailing the throttle called into play the physics of a long-proven modified tunnel bottom, which flanks a center sponson with outside sponsons cut with 12-degrees deadrise. Off the line, this setup would eat up most everything on the lake, though it doesn't feel violent or uncontrolled. Its response to trim was steady, instant bow lift, and we enjoyed the Cougar's ability to tune its ride to suit water conditions. It seemed to hover on a track above afternoon lake chop finding its airborne stance and locking it in, responding instantly to prompts of the wheel without compromising its controlled, sticky glide. Trim it over or under optimum and the bottom let you know.

The MTR maintained its consistent ride while loping through sweepers and executing turns in both direction without blowout. It was quite resistant to hop or porpoise at any speed. At a steady, easy, 5,000 hum (our maximum was 6,500), the cougar had a relaxed, 65-mile-per-hour cruise going and could stay there all day long without gravitating obsessively to the gas docks.

The Cougar's hydraulic steering - designed, strangely enough, by a Teleflex engineer first for his own cougar,

<http://www.cougarboats.com/rev-07.htm>

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later for production - did a great job of quashing torque at high rpm and telegraphed a very safe, steady, secure feel at speed. Time prohibited us from airing the cougar all the way out, as is common in specialty, 80-plus-mph sprinters. More seat time would in all likelihood breed bigger numbers. As for our 80-mph run, it inspired nothing but confidence from all aboard.

When the water grew truly rough, the Cougar held its own and showed blatant signs of its solid, rugged workmanship. Driven skillfully, it threaded through, though it took an occasional misty refresher over its hunkered bow. Overall, it thrived in nearly all conditions we encountered and proved much more versatile than one might think - in spite of its rakish appearance.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The ongoing success of this fun, fast, solid, obedient sport boat is no mystery. Cougar's well-chronicled custom workmanship carries this efficient mod tunnel seamlessly into today's spectre of high-impact, high-voltage customs. The MTR carries the hot-rodder, or the performance-oriented family squarely into the realm of real world mustle-boating, packaging the experience in a cost-effective, reliable combination.
