

Magazine Articles Testing Summaries

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Armed with MerCruiser's production blower motor, this latest muscleboat from the north country may be Cougar's most impressive release yet.



The artistry and functional excellence of the Cougar Custom Boats line is well documented and is supported by a string of HOT BOAT awards that includes Ski Boat of the Year, Tunnel of the Year and a myriad other declarations of superiority. A consistent string of five-star, custom releases has ensured Cougar's rightful position among family performance boating's manufacturing elite—pretty impressive, given the company's diminutive size (seven employees), remote address (Salmon Arm, British Columbia, Canada) and self-contained independence (trailers, upholstery, hardware and everything else is made at Cougar).

Cougar's 23-foot muscleboat tunnel is the latest in a hull series designed to maintain civil, family performance while running large doses of power through the outdrives. In many ways, this splendid newcomer, combining Cougar's usual exquisite workmanship with spectacular handling and performance, is the most impressive of Cougar's award-winning line of air-trapper hulls. At least, that was the case with a copy of MerCruiser's factory-supercharged 525SC buried in its wide, thoroughly detailed engine well.

Though our all-day test aboard copy number one was conducted in horrible water conditions, we bounced a respectable 90.3-mph radar beam off its bow on the only radar pass water and weather would allow. The blown motor and the Cougar made an instant love connection and made the most of this hull's evident gift for interpreting horsepower. We've driven only a handful of tunnels that handle in the same league as this latest Cougar, which blew impressively through each of our driving maneuvers. Whether easing around the dock at idle or packing maximum air velocity in its undersides, this amazing 23-footer was crisp, smooth and predictable.

Cougar also successfully addresses one of the primary raps on tunnel boating by working considerable storage space and undeniable comfort for five into its impressive interior motif. The new package comes together atop Cougar's usual foundation of exquisite tooling and fiberglass work.

THE PACKAGE



The Cougar is unusually roomy for a tunnel boat. Its cockpit, from the base of the dash to the expansive rear seat, measures five feet in length and 77 inches across.

Front passengers nestle firmly into firm, stout captain's buckets, which are mounted onto carpeted, six-inch square wood bases with six 5/8-inch stainless-steel bolts per seat. Foam in the front and rear benches was comfortable, firm and completely immune to bottom-out--even in despicable conditions. Cougar's detail work was in full bloom here. All holes drilled in the wooden cushion bases were routed to diffuse rough edges, and framework edges were contoured and resined. All wood is glassed-in in the corners, rounded and finished. Seat cushion bases are equipped with weepage holes.

Front seats swivel and lock, which makes for convenient ski observing or conversing. Four adults can sit completely comfortably, and very securely, in the wide, beautifully stitched rear bench. In naturally aspirated applications, the motor hatch makes an accommodating sunning area if the cavernous bench isn't enough.

There's legroom aplenty. All upholstery lines, pleats and beading were straight, tight and perfectly matched. Materials used were top-of-the-line, and all workmanship was flawless. Impressive detail work, like the logo tastefully stitched into the seat backs, dresses the entire interior. Inspired by necessity, Cougar has developed its own in-house upholstery and carpeting operations, and it's one of the best in custom boating today.

Passenger comfort is enhanced by the intelligent use of stainless-steel railing throughout the rear of the cockpit and with a passenger grab handle.

The 23-footer makes excellent use of the carpeted, finished area below deck, which measures 26 inches high, 62 inches wide and 88 inches long. It's unquestionably suited for duty as an overnight sleeper berth as well as for deluxe storage of considerable payload. Additional gunnel storage (21 inches by 42 inches on each side), and plenty of secure, rear storage space beneath the bench contributed to this layout's practical excellence.

That theme continued in the driver's field of vision, where Gaffrig gauges and controls were perfectly placed - although our speedometer quit early on in our shakedown. Position of the wheel and placement of the shifter mechanism were optimum. Fitting with the supercharged armor, the installation included a foot throttle.

Gauge bezels (which framed dials that were neatly dressed with Cougar's logo), switches, a grab handle, interior dash trim molding and the Memo wheel were whited out, as were the trick, rear boarding handles/breather vents.

Gauge wiring, as well as the rest of the boat's harness work, was outstanding in detail and cleanliness. The loom work was supported with a fuse block at the motor; all wire ends were good and tight and clamped and secured very well.

The dash also houses three recessed drink holders and a standard smoked windshield that smartly accents the hull lines. The sturdy, two-piece fairing on our boat fit perfectly and was securely mounted. It was integrated flawlessly to the boat's lines, and the stepped cockpit perimeter made the roomy cockpit even deeper--a quality best appreciated at 90 mph with family aboard.

Cougar's fiberglass work is, day in and day out, as fine as any you'll encounter in the industry. Copy one of the new boat was perfectly straight, with no transfer or imperfections whatsoever, and Cougar's usual production overkill mode was evident. Hull and deck mates are flush-fit and glassed, and tabs overlap every eight inches to provide a doubleply bond. Cougar's railing, a single, hardplastic piece, provides sharp accent to a consistently crisp installation.

Even with our nose against the gloss of the Cougar's intricately detailed skin, we found it impossible to detect the slightest deviation from perfection in the execution of its gelcoat work. Deck letdowns on our test boat were crisply cut in 1-, 3/4-, 1/2-, and 1/8-inch lines, and an under-stated fade added further cosmetic appeal. Cougar

maximizes the impact of a gelcoat job that's typical of its normal production boat. The graphics accentuate the hull's rangy lines, which fully enclose a large, nonskid rear boarding platform.

The Cougar's engineering was on line with its stellar cosmetics, and the installation of the 525SC and Brave drive were flawless. A polished, stainless-steel copy of Mayfair's top-drawer steering system was, in large part, responsible for this hull's superior handling marks.

The Mere muscle motor was installed on custom aluminum mounts, with stainless-steel viberlock bolts. Factory exhaust hardware routed gasses through Gil pipes and upward to thru-hull, stainless-steel tips. The powering effort was fueled via standard, stereo 42-gallon side tanks.

PERFORMANCE

The Cougar wastes no time in assuring its place as one of the year's most exciting production customs, particularly when matched up with an appropriate source of power. Bowrise was ever so slightly off the line, and after the slightest hesitation, the tunnel took an instant set and rocketed into gallop mode. The Cougar's 0 to 40 ET was an unspectacular 7.51 seconds; more indicative of the boat's sense of acceleration was its time from 20 to 50 mph, a scant 5.25 seconds. At an economical 3,500 rpm, the blower motor was in an easy, economical jog, and we were in a very comfortable 48-mph cruise mode. We were exceeding legal freeway speeds at 4,000 rpm, and our top end of 90.3 mph would have been even faster had the weather cooperated.

This bottom design utilizes a reverse chine to the outside of the sponsons and a full-length center pod that ultimately finds a modified step at the rear of the underside. The configuration is particularly communicative with the driver and responds immediately and positively to trim. Hunkered down, the tunnel glided over afternoon chop with ease and softened conditions that would have brutalized vee-bottom boaters. Low-speed tracking was excellent. Fed more throttle and with the drive clicked up a couple of notches, the hull freed up noticeably. Aired out, the hull rises smoothly and predictably into a full-on performance stance but never abandons its forgiving nature. Steering was positive at all rpm ranges, and the ride is completely flat at speed. Handling under power drew best possible marks, with the Cougar proving highly responsive and unfailingly predictable on our high-demand turning course. Never did the sponsons threaten to grab, dig in, slide or skip, and this boat's handling attributes will go a long way in promoting the potential of the family performance tunnel. Only in the tightest imaginable powerturns, and only going left, were we able to break the Cougar's sticky bond. On the big end, it was immune to wander or wobble, and it never yielded an interior quake or rattle.

BOTTOM LINE

Cougar's new tunnel boat is an exquisite mix of enthusiast-level performance, superior custom workmanship and overwhelming family convenience. It's fast, quick, roomy and gorgeous. If you are very lucky, you'll experience family performance boating at this level at some point in your boating lifetime.

Specifications

- Length: 23'
- Beam: 96"
- Bottom: Modified tunnel
- Weight (as tested): 3,000 pounds
- Base retail price (454 Magnum): \$40,665
- Price (as tested): \$62,534

Options on test boat

- Gelcoat upgrade (two extra colors and fade, \$1,060)
 - white-out package (\$287),
- triple-axle trailer with chrome tenders (\$1,600)
 - 525SC upgrade (\$15,600),
 - mechanical trim indicator (\$528),
 - hydrolic steering (\$5,500)
- Engine/Drive: MerCruiser 525SC,
- Brave One Prop: 27-pitch Mirage three-blade
 - Top Speed (radar): 90.3 mph
 - 0-30: 5.60 seconds
 - 0-40: 7.37 seconds
 - 0-50: 9.00 seconds
 - 0-60: 13.33 seconds
 - O-TS:n/a
 - Speed at 2,500 rpm: 32 mph
 - Speed at 3,000 rpm: 40 mph
 - Speed at 3,500 rpm: 48 mph
 - Speed at 4,000 rpm: 57 mph
 - Speed at 4,500 rpm: 68 mph
 - Speed at 5,300 rpm. 90.3 mph

Cougar web-note: Prices and some details may have been changed and/or adjusted from the time this article was written.