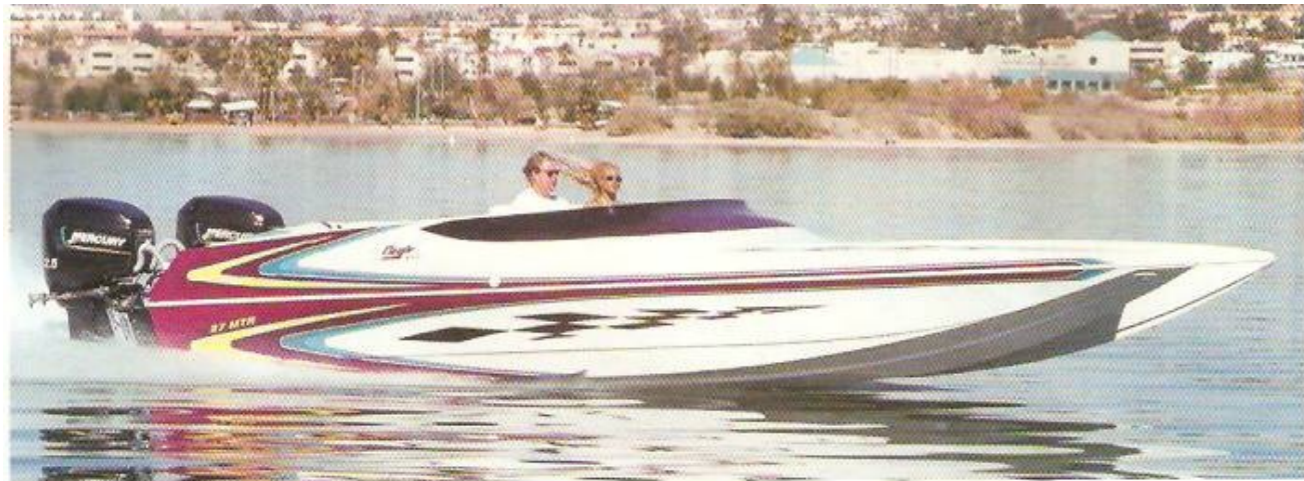




**A**s Cougar Boats nears its 30th anniversary of building boats next year, the magic number nonetheless appears to be 27. That's the length of the company's newest step-tunnel, the largest-ever cat in its line and the first to offer a triple-engine option. Cougar's MTR series, which starts with a 21-footer and stops at 22, 23 and 25, routinely wins awards for its superior tooling and styling (HOT BOAT named the 25 its Cat of the Year in 1988). Two years ago, company honchos Wayne Booth and Tom Reynolds saw a need to give owners of their 23- and 25-foot MTRs a model to trade up to, and the idea of designing a 27-footer was conceived. The result, which debuted at this year's Los Angeles Boat Show, is a stunning continuation of Cougar's deft design and bottom work. "We listen to our customers," Booth says candidly. "They told us a 27-footer was where they wanted to be, and we just didn't have it." Cougar has built boats larger than 27 before—including a 30-foot vee-bottom—but the 27-footer is its largest tunnel boat to date. (The builder continues to offer two vees: a 20.5 Skier and 2300 Executive, with no plans to introduce more.) Booth dismisses the idea that any single tunnel sells better than the rest, saying that it's spread pretty ►



much across the group. Cougar's Tom Reynolds did all of the design work, taking pains to ensure that the 27 could accommodate triple outboards for those customers who opt for three 300Xs (for a total 1,000 hp). Standard power on the 27-footer will be a pair of 2.5s, with an anticipated top speed of 100 mph. With a single HP500EFI and Whipple Charger setup, triple digits are anticipated. At press time, Cougar had already sold three 27s with dual outboard configurations; that's the setup they plan to bring to HOT BOAT's next Performance Evaluations (to be reviewed in early 2002). Impressively outfitted with a pair of 300s, Cougar's 23-foot and 27-foot models are said to register only a few mph difference.

The new 27-footer offers bigger fuel tanks than most of the competition, with a 150-gallon capacity. Balsa core is standard, where many other builders charge extra for that feature. Booth is fiercely proud of the new offering and is candid about how he wishes potential customers to view the line: While I/Os are available, "We're the outboard dudes," he says. "We do like the stern drives, and we do sell them, but what we're really into is the outboard thing. We're not the new kid on the block—we want people to understand that our customers are buying experience." (Tom Reynolds started building outboard tunnels in 1979.) The bottom of the boat has been totally redesigned.

### THE PACKAGE

HOT BOAT recently had the opportunity to put the very first two 27s out of the mold to the test in Lake Havasu City, Arizona—the first I/O (HP500EFI with Whin-



**Cougar 27 MTR**  
Standard equipment: MerCruiser 496 Magnum EFI H.O. (425 hp) and Bravo One drive (stern-drive package only), Twin Mercury 2.5 EFIs (280 hp) and Bob's Machine engine lifts (outboard package only), five-color custom gelcoat, complete color-matched interior, full carpeting, drink holders, one-piece acrylic waterproof color-keyed mooring tarp, power steering, power trim w/remote stern switch for power trim/trailer, Gaffrig gauges w/powdercoated gauge bezels, Gaffrig offshore controls with thumb actuated trim switch, color-keyed inside and outside moldings, Formulating custom steering wheel with engraved hub, flush-mounted bow lights and transom light holder, bilge pump and blower, billet aluminum engine vents with built-in grab handles, pop-up flush-mounted cleats, flush-mounted fuel fills, Mercury stainless-steel prop, electric engine hatch opener, flowcoated and

color-keyed engine compartment, heavy-duty through-bolted engine mounts, fully balsa cored hull, core matted hull sides and deck, two-inch laminated transom, tilt steering wheel (except full hydraulic race steering), lockable front storage area. Base price: \$69,629 (stern drive) \$97,157 (twin outboards). Options available include extra colors, custom deck and hull fading, dual batteries, HP500EFI upgrade, race-style hydraulic steering, external single-ram hydraulic steering, memory tach recall, depth gauge, etc.

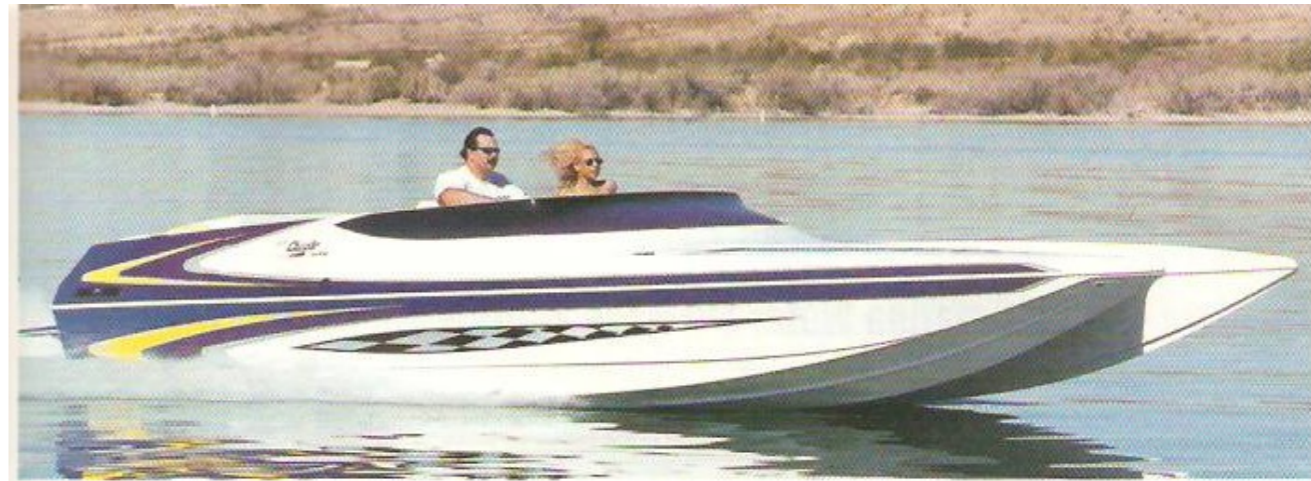
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ple Charger) and first outboard (twin 2.5s). Approaching the two rockets, we took note of the nicely rounded, ergonomically pleasing dash, in which the trim gauge was set in very nicely. The 27s have been loaded with styling—good lines, curves and bends throughout and plenty of steps in the bottom. Predictably, there was more room under the front-deck area than Cougar's smaller boats; a small pad could be installed for sleeping a couple of adults (the boat sports a nice beam of eight feet six inches).

Our I/O-powered model offered a beautiful array of colors: purple, grays, yellows and dark checkerboard design—an outstanding job. The fake windshield area was indeed quite racy looking, a formidable match with the overall deck design and graphics. The interior seating is typical of Cougar: bolster-type front chairs lend the boat an offshore feel, and the full bench across the back offers an abundance of room. And rear-seat passengers are in for a comfortable ride: Our test team made a special positive note regarding the density of the foam—not too hard, not too soft. Six people are easily seated in the closed-deck version (Cougar is already tooling an open-bow, which will accommodate more). Upholstery was color matched to the other six gelcoat hues, with the 27 MTR logo smartly embroidered in it in various areas.

Under the hatch, we found a gorgeous HP500EFI with a Whipple Charger, with blue paint and chromed. The floors were flowcoated in Cougar's typical style, with the trademark checkerboard pattern. Carpeting in the boat was very smart, with dazzling colors



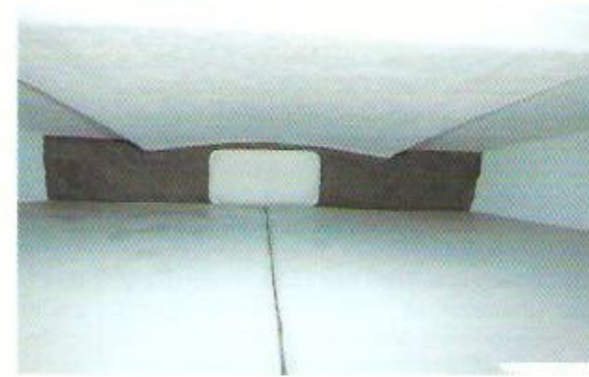
matching the rest of the boat. A ski locker in the center of the floor was very handy. Side gunnels offer additional custom-looking storage, all done in-house at Cougar. (Seat backs provide additional pouch storage for wallets and other smaller items.) The dash has been laid out very nicely and cleanly, with all of the Gaffrig gauges (bearing the Cougar logo and housed in smart-looking bezels) visible at all times. Stainless pop-up cleats (two up front, two in the back) are positioned very well.

### BEHIND THE WHEEL

The 27-footer is a driver-friendly boat that handles exceptionally well. Shifters are in an easily accessible spot, making the boat easy to maneuver. Taking off, there was minimal bowrise (about three seconds), which was commendable for a boat this size. The Cougar also tracks very well, moving in a flawlessly straight line with utterly no wander. Underway, we hit a few three-foot rollers, and re-entry was a soft, bang-free experience—no squirming at the back. Turning at all speeds also won high marks from our team: There was no lean in either direction, which really sets the 27-footer apart from many of its competitors. As one team member put it, "The boat is so forgiving that you could let Grandma drive it, and it would go wherever you wanted it to."

Our 40-45 sweepers were impressive—this is a cat that turns like a flatbottom, with no digging and no obstinance, just a positive feel.

For our top-speed run, we went a little easy on it, this being the first boat out of the mold and a customer's boat to



boot. Cougar reported coaxing 94 mph in their native Canada, and we got within two mph of their speed later in the day (about 70°)—we achieved 92 mph at 5,600 rpm. Even more impressive than the speed was the stability; this is an exceptionally stable ride at speed.

One small performance deficit was a slightly high idle caused by too much boost from the Whipple Charger (the gauge read 9 1/2 pounds), but it's an easy fix.

Next up was a rocket-ship ride in a nearly identical boat, but powered by twin 2.5 Mercury outboards. Styling, colors, interior and rigging mirrored the I/O version, with the obvious benefit of more storage room and rear-passenger legroom with the HP500EFI absent. Instead, rear hatch opens to a bilge area that's roomy and beautiful, with bright colors and a balsa floor—a remarkably custom look. All bolts, hardware and back braces for the outboards were superbly done and nicely polished.

Our dash was nearly identical to the I/O model, with the exception of a few more outboard-related gauges. Bob's Machine Shop contributed a jack plate to this version as well.

Getting underway, we were pleasantly surprised to find the outboards were much quieter than most of the others we've encountered. We wasted no time getting to WOT, where we found the top speed to be 96.7 at 7,300 rpm after three passes with no variation. "I'm not a big outboard fan, but I liked it very well," reported one of our test drivers, while the other chimed in with: "I could become an outboard nut with this one." The feel of the boat was nice and light, even at the top end. Performance through the midrange, including turning, was basically identical to the I/O.

Cougar deserves accolades for its introduction of the 27-footer, in both configurations; we're anxiously awaiting the first full-on Performance Test. Next up, Cougar plans an overhaul of its 25, with a more modern styling facelift and a redesigned bottom. Leave it to Cougar to improve what already seems perfect. ■