

HOWARD

26-foot Cat, MerCruiser HP500/Bravo One

Heir apparent to a Howard muscleboat tradition

Company owner Gene Willen had no idea what to expect when Howard Custom Boats unveiled the first copy of its 26-foot cat at last year's Los Angeles Boat Show. He certainly didn't foresee the best-selling status the boat would go on to achieve. After just one year, it accounts for a third of Howard's total sales, although some would say that signs of such potential were there for the looking, or, for those with even better fortune, for the driving!

The new 26 has settled into its unexpected role as the contemporary version of the fabled Howard lake rod, taking its rightful place beside the V-drive flatbottoms and blown daycruisers that have defined Howard's high-performance heritage throughout the years. Howard's savvy rigging and glass teams have focused all of their long-standing, impressive boat-building

skills on the creation of this tight, fast, driver-friendly stern-drive machine, and the result commands attention when stacked up against the emerging fleet of new performance sport cats in this size range.

The approach on our test boat (which we intercepted on its way to a customer delivery) was to build a fam-

ily machine that could shift modes at a moment's notice, from a lake demon to a lazy, luxurious lake cruiser with six aboard. Howard found that delicate balance in the imposing form of MerCruiser's warrantied, carbureted, 470-horse HP500, which seemed to be perfectly suited to the hull.

This \$13,750 upgrade (over

the base boat's unthinkable 7.4L) represented an investment in satisfying, manageable power that sent a boat full of passengers into a smooth, stable, 80-mile-an-hour ride. At this level, you pay for your fun: A lot of money buys a lot of boat. The Howard bases at \$49,900, and that's before you put respectable power into it; the

base 7.4 isn't enough to properly make the most of this bottom's performance potential. With the additional 160 horsepower and a \$1,600 sound system upgrade, we stickered out at \$64,545.

Our test boat's stock Bravo One box was propped with a 28-inch Merc four-blade, run through 1.5:1 gearing. We hit the maximum 5,200 rpm with this setup. Thru-transom exhaust with stainless tips and a Gaffrig mechanical trim indicator (a nice touch, especially at speed) are included in the cost of the upgrade.

The resulting package prompted a rare, unanimous pick for our drivers' unofficial "best boats" list, a standing that was bolstered by the way the boat was built and finished off.



1999 HOT BOAT PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS



Onboard

In the same manner that our test Howard was designed to deliver clean, trouble-free performance at up to 80 miles an hour (on 470 prop horses at 5,150 rpm), it followed a similar, sanitary cosmetic creed. The hull began with a deep, rich red, which faded and smoldered into brilliant oranges separated by neat, clean, dark blue pinlines. Blue, anodized trim with a blue rubber insert creased the hot, orange fade, and the pinlines that accented the gelcoat were also deep blue. The effect was sanitary, understated, elegant and hot; it went a long way on three colors. (Howard will spray up to seven on a standard boat.)

"Absolutely gorgeous," wrote one test driver. "Unbelievable tooling. Perfect gelcoat. Just beautiful!"

Indeed, this boat makes a mean dent in the wind, especially with the hard, fiberglass rear deck lid covering the growling HP mill, the minimalist approach to exterior hardware and the Howard's naturally low stance. There are times when it pays not to cave in to conveniences, and style definitely took proper precedence this time out, with the omission of any bowrailing or hatch padding. Four Eddie Marine cleats lay low to the glass—two flush with the sponson tops, two in the sides aft—until popped. Red, fiberglass swim steps flanked the Bravo; with the help of the two grab-rail/engine-vent pieces just above, the motivated boarder could manage over the deck lid without too much trouble. A matching ski tow was also standard, and matching fuel fills were flush-mounted.

Much has been made of Howard's long cure time (stringers, bulkheads, floors and fuel tanks are installed while the hull is still in the mold) and traditional boat-building methodology, but in truth, it has embraced and even pioneered the use of contemporary techniques and materials.

This has enabled Howard to maintain its traditional strength quotient with a good, heavy layup—something you don't want to have to think about as your sponsons are creating two-foot chop at 75 miles an hour with your family and closest friends aboard. Howard uses Baltek balsa coring throughout the hull, and it has lightened the package somewhat by replacing much of the traditionally used wood with

age area was integrated not only beneath the deck, but into the recesses of the sponsons, which made great caverns for gear bags. The underdeck area was not designed with cabin dwelling in mind; but, hey, nobody would sleep in the backseat of a Corvette either!

Two large, deeply padded front seats were mounted on glass bases, and our test boat showed off Howard's gor-



fiberglass components. The flooring is all glass, as are the front and rear seat bases and rear deck lid. Still, the package comes in at 3,800 pounds.

Howard has extracted an impressive degree of roominess and comfort from its cockpit layout, and the finish work therein showed the same polished boat-building skills we found on the exterior rigging and in the engine compartment. The entire floor is flat until you find your way below deck, where a carpeted stor-

geous, in-house upholstery workmanship. The seats hugged the front passengers tightly, offered excellent support and refused to compress.

The rear bench also provided a deep, comfortable haven for three or a cozy one for four, and there was abundant stretching room between its base and the front seatbacks. Blue drink holders were integrated into the rear armrests, but we would've liked to see some grab handles as well. The interior sported a

stylish, oversized pleated look, and the white-out upholstery (including the piping) followed the boat's clean theme. Embroidered Howard logos dressed the interior, and the blue carpeting set it off just perfectly. Again, the color mix was pure money!

White padding trimmed the bottom of the red, gelcoated dash and the gunnels, and the Eddie Marine pieces inside and on the dash were eye frosting. Illuminated, white rocker switches were housed in a billet switch panel, and the white Formuling wheel was dressed with a blue hub.

White-faced Gafrig gauges were trimmed with white bezels and spread widely across the dash; they were angled inward, and each found an unimpeded path to the driver's line of sight. The mechanical trim indicator was parked nice and high up on the dash, and the white, powdercoated Gafrig shifter control sat within convenient reach of the driver. At the customer's request, a foot throttle meted out power, a personal preference that divided our drivers' opinions.

A large floor ski locker with a trick blind-hinge design provided more stash space, as did the neatly finished, carpeted gunnel areas. The seatbacks also had small net pouches. Interior lighting was standard, along with an electric engine hatch. Our test boat was also equipped with a nice Sony CD system upgrade with four speakers. Rather than build an ice chest into the rear seat or floor, Howard latched a portable, 28-quart Igloo below the dash, easily accessible from the sponson cavity—just the thing for moving the party from the boat to the beach!

We thought we had seen the best of it all when, with the flick of a rocker, we raised the glass hatch cover to reveal an absolutely pristine installation. The well was lined with a glossy, white fiberglass that was the perfect framework for MerCruiser's nicely dressed HP handiwork. Wiring work

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was exceptionally tidy, and all the support hardware was neatly fixed with stainless hardware and fasteners. "Nicest motor compartment of the meet," wrote one stoked evaluator.

Turn the Key

Our fired-up feline was built to thrill, and we wasted no time in putting power to the hull, which measures a full 26 feet at the centerline and carries a 102-inch bow. Even before we subjected the cat to our usual handling feel-out, we eased it into motion and began to pick up speed. Driving this hull at speed is addictive, particularly when the power is dispensed with the fluid consistency delivered by the HP motor. As we eased onto plane, the cat seemed to find invisible tracks, settling into a fast, flat glide. Power and trim combined to feed air

to the underside, and you could feel the response. The bow never felt light or flighty, even when we trimmed it up and mashed the pedal.

As we took the hull through the midrange, we didn't find any of the midrange porpoise that we've come to expect from some of the air-trappers at cruise speeds in the 40- to 50-mph range. The Howard stayed flat no matter how high above 40 we ran it. Stability does not diminish as it finds speed, a great attribute for the muscleboater carrying the most precious cargo of all. As the Howard moves faster, the wheel response heightens, and by the time you're running 75, the driver's touch is almost telepathic. Each of our drivers made note of the Howard's feel at high speed, citing its highly sensitive wheel manner, stability and solid ride. You won't find a white (or wet) knuckle on board if you turn her loose in suitable water.

Because the passengers sit low in the Howard, the sensation of speed is intensified. The ride at 80 was exhilarating but comfortable; the feel at the wheel was stiff, solid and rattle-free. Its easy driveability filtered through the wheel under all conditions, even as we barreled across a windswept field of six-inch to foot-high surface chop. With its broad power range and hard pull, the 502 was made for applications like this one, and the Howard put the hand-built power plant to excellent use.

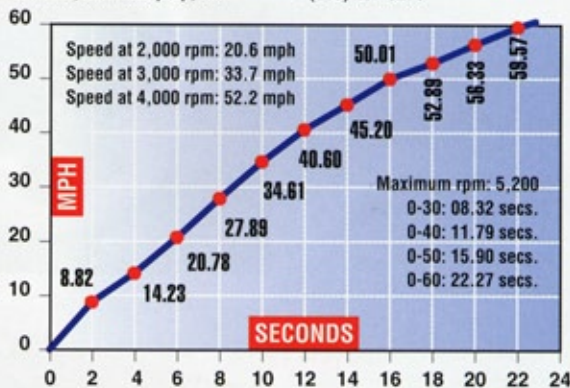
Howard owner Gene Willen attributes the hull's steadiness to the lateral stability fostered

QUICK SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: moderate chop
Centerline length: 26'
Beam: 102"
Bottom: stepped cat
Engine/drive: MerCruiser HP500
Horsepower at prop: 470
Ratio: 1.5:1
Prop: 28" Bravo four-blade
Overall weight: 3,800 lbs
Base retail price (incl. trailer): \$49,995
Standard features: seven gelcoat colors, stainless hardware, illuminated rocker switches, anodized fuel fills, ski tow, gauge bezels, grab handles with vents, interior lights, Formling wheel, Gaffrig gauges, Gaffrig dual-lever hand controls, stainless prop, four

cleats, electric engine hatch, swim steps, electric fuel-switchover valve.
Options on test boat: MerCruiser HP500 upgrade (\$13,750 incl. Gaffrig mechanical trim indicator and thru-transom exhaust), Sony stereo upgrade with four speakers (\$800).
Price as tested: \$64,545
Top speed, radar: 79.1 mph
Builder's estimated speed under optimum conditions: 80 mph

Howard Custom Boats
28113 Ave. Stanford
Valencia, CA 91355
(805) 257-9275



by the step-bottom design. The center pod carries 22 degrees deadrise, and is the actual riding surface at speed; it sits an inch deeper than the outside sponsons.

This also assists in the hull's comparably flat attitude in the turns, a trait that prompted one of our veteran drivers to call the Howard "one of the most civilized of all the cats in this size range," and "an awfully good-turning cat for its size." The latter comment was prompted by the Howard's resistance to banking and outside roll during hard cornering, a condition that often goes with the territory in this type of boat. The hull also shunned cavitation and blowout during cornering, handling with surprising agility.

Its sharp handling aside, our test boat should have been equipped with external steering, given the speeds it's running. The availability and affordability of technology

makes external steering a smart choice for any family stern drive running above 75 mph; to go without is less than prudent.

Carving turns is a bit awkward at low rpm, where cat handling is squishy by nature. No cat can match a good V-bottom's maneuverability at low rpm, but the Howard wasn't bad here. It tracked with decent precision, backed fairly well and felt controlled around the docks. It gave up a bit of bowrise off the line, but settled quickly back into a business mode.

The Bottom Line

Howard's 26-footer has taken a fast glide into the lake-cat fray and should not be overlooked in the hunt for a fast, fun, value-intensive aqua rod. Think they don't build 'em like they used to? That may be true, as Howard leaves us with little doubt that they build them better.