

SMART MONEY SAYS

LOOKING TO INVEST WISELY IN A HIGH-PERFORMANCE BOAT FOR \$80,000 OR LESS? CHECK OUT THIS 15-BOAT PORTFOLIO.

THERE'S NO WAY TO SUGARCOAT IT: YOU HAVE THE SAME CHANCE OF FINDING the Loch Ness monster as you have finding a brand-new inexpensive performance boat, because neither exist. You can wish and whine, and moan and pray all you like, but new performance boats simply are out of the range of the "average" guy. The median annual household income in the United States is around \$45,000. That isn't enough scratch for a supercharged engine from Mercury Racing, much less a hull to stick it in.

Affordable and inexpensive are relative terms, especially in the performance-boat world where the average twin-engine 38-footer costs about a quarter-of-a-million bucks. Still, in that context there are bargains to be had in the single-engine performance-boat world.

For this roundup, we asked builders to bring us anything they wanted as long as it came with a sticker of \$80,000 or less. In checking performance-boat prices from builders around the country, we found that price threshold to be one in which a builder could still offer models with engaging performance and features at a "reasonable" cost. Like affordable and inexpensive, reasonable is surely relative.

What we ended up with was a fleet that, in the minds of our test team members, presented excellent overall value for the price. And regardless of your definition of affordability, that makes every one of the models here smart money.

Stories **MATT TRULIO** and **GREGG MANSFIELD** Photography **ROBERT BROWN** and **TOM NEWBY**



Velocity Powerboats' 260 runs better than 70 mph and costs a little more than \$76,000.

Clockwise from right: The Advantage 27 Victory's open bow had abundant seating and topped 63 mph with 425 horsepower.



ADVANTAGE

[27 VICTORY]

Advantage Boats introduced the 27 Victory in 1990 and it still remains one of the production builder's top-selling boats. It's a credit to the company that the stepped-bottom creation endures even with increased competition in the performance-boat industry.

After taking one for a ride on Lake Havasu in Arizona, we could see why boaters continue to snap up the model. The boat's handling was flawless on the lake during the early morning

test. Sweeping turns were smooth and predictable, and the boat tracked precisely where our driver pointed it.

Top speed for the boat with a MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine was 63.1 mph at 4,700 rpm. The boat was 3 mph slower than the manufacturer's estimate, and without a full tank of gas and some 600 feet lower at sea level, it likely would have topped 66 mph.

The open-bow boat reached 44 mph in 10 seconds, and five seconds later it was running 55 mph. Midrange acceleration was solid with it taking 6.3 seconds to go from 30 to 50 mph.

On the workmanship side, the 27 Victory had some of the best mold work in the roundup.

The tribal graphics done in the gelcoat were vibrant and the hullsides were free of errors. Protecting the handiwork was a sturdy rubrail with a vinyl insert.

The cockpit was a traditional setup with two dropout bolsters up front and a rear bench. The driver's dash featured Beede gauges that were privately labeled. Advantage installed a Teleflex tilting helm and opted for a Livorsi Marine throttle and shifter. All of the rocker switches were set in a panel near the steering wheel.

The 27 Victory included a small midcabin, a perfect spot for getting out of the sun. A Bomar hatch in the front of the deck let in some additional light. In the bow there was U-shape seating that could accommodate at least three people.

If friends want to put their feet in the water,

After taking one for a ride on Lake Havasu in Arizona, we could see why boaters continue to snap up the model.



Advantage added a swim platform done in nonskid. Included were a pair of stainless grab handles, a ski-tow and a remote to trim up the drive.

The boat also had some notable options including an upgraded Sony stereo system and an electric blender.

ADVANTAGE BOATS

928-680-2628, www.advantageboats.com



Clockwise from top: With a MerCruiser 496 Mag under the hatch, the Baja 275 reached 61.9 mph. Subtle blue, silver and black graphics enhanced the cockpit and rocker switches were in a panel.

BAJA

[275]

Having owned a Baja during his boating career, tester Steve David was eager to see what a new generation of Baja boats had to offer.

After driving the 275, David was quickly reminded of the solid workmanship and performance that have been hallmarks of the company's V-bottom line.

The 275 sport boat delivered a spirited performance with a MerCruiser 496 Mag engine under the hatch. The boat reached 51 mph in 15 seconds on its way to a top speed of 61.9 mph at 4,800 rpm.

Running a comfortable 45 mph on Sarasota Bay, the boat was getting better than 2.7 mpg. Even at wide-open throttle, fuel economy was more than 2 mpg.

Despite some sizable chop from wind and cruisers, the 275 delivered a soft ride for our test team. Conditions were rough enough that our testers opted to use the manual dropout bolsters. The seats were comfortable and their stainless-steel frames were securely lagged into the boat's sole.

Passengers sitting on the rear bench have the option of standing up and holding onto the elliptical grab handle on the back of the bolsters or they can use the grab handles in the cutouts in each gunwale.

Baja carried the boat's conservative blue, silver and black graphics onto the rear bench and bolsters. Additional color details were done to the driver's dash at starboard. The Livorsi II gauges were set in black and silver print panels above the Teleflex tilt helm. Rocker switches were also installed in similar panels.

Access to the cabin was through a center entry with a sliding door. The cabin was straightforward with a V-berth and stowage

underneath the spacious pad. Facing lounges with adequate headroom provided a comfortable spot to get out of the elements. For light, Baja installed a couple of spotlights on the bulkhead.

The solid construction continued in the engine compartment. The engine hatch opened high on an electric screw jack, providing excellent access to the 375-hp motor and services. The motor was through-bolted to the stringers with Mercury mounts. All of the wiring was supported with stainless cushion clamps and up to production standards.

BAJA MARINE
877-321-2252, www.bajamarine.com



From above: B&H Performance included this remote battery access under the rear bench to charge the battery or provide a jump-start. The helm was completely color-coordinated.



Left: B&H's 27-foot, two-step hull performed well as it carved through long turns, as well as aggressive slaloms without slipping.

B&H PERFORMANCE

[WATER ROD 270]

In every boat they build, the folks at B&H Performance seem to pride themselves on delivering strong performance and abundant features at a reasonable price. That's the essence of value, and the Water Rod 270 we tested on the Colorado River typified the builder's core philosophy.

First, the midcabin 27-footer handled beautifully. Riding on a two-step hull with four strakes and a delta pad, the boat carved consistently through long turns, as well as aggressive slaloms, without slipping or catching. It tracked cleanly and cut through junky river water without beating members of our test teams silly.

With a 375-hp Volvo Penta 8.1-liter engine and a DuoProp drive providing the punch, the Water Rod 270 reached 63.6 mph. Worth noting was that the boat's 70-gallon fuel tank was full for our test runs. With less fuel

on board, the 4,600-pound boat might well have reached the manufacturer-estimated top speed of 65 mph at sea level. Still, we found the top-end to be more than acceptable for that of a family oriented custom sport boat.

Overall craftsmanship and attention to detail were strong throughout the boat, which was laid up with vinylester resin, 1708 and 1808 fiberglass, 2- and 4-ounce mat and 18- and 24-ounce woven roving. Mold work was devoid of lumps and bumps, and the gelcoat graphics exhibited a nice pop in direct sunlight. Of particular note when it came to workmanship was the boat's acrylic windscreen. Built-in sections met seamlessly and the windscreen fit well into a recess in the deck.

Engine compartment rigging was tidy. The builder used L-angles through-bolted to the stringers to hold the engine in place and cushion clamps for the wiring. Batteries were discreetly tucked away behind panels.

We accessed the engine via a power hatch, which was one of the boat's many standard

With a 375-hp Volvo Penta 8.1-liter engine and a DuoProp drive providing the punch, the Water Rod 270 reached 63.6 mph.

features. Clearly, the builder placed a premium on passenger comfort, which explained why a 6-foot-2 member of our test team could sit on either facing lounge in the mid-cabin without smacking his noggin on the ceiling's headliner.

Bow lounges were deep, as was the rear bench in the cockpit, and bolsters for the driver and co-pilot had manual dropout bottoms. Other standard features included a CD stereo system, marine-grade carpet, color-coordinated gauges and custom graphics.

B&H PERFORMANCE
909-864-7722, www.waterrod.com

CALIBER 1

[210 MAGNUM]

You can't get one 210 Magnum for \$80,000—you can get two. And for the money, you'd have a tough time doing any better. Equipped with a 350 Magnum MPI engine, the bow rider delivered spunky performance for our test teams. Frankly, the 21-footer was a kick to drive.

Small-block power was the way to go. First, the 300-hp engine with a 1.5:1 Bravo One drive and Mercury Revolution 21" -pitch propeller had enough pop to get the boat to 63.2 mph. The propulsion package also made for quick power delivery. From a standing start, the boat reached 58 mph in 15 seconds, and it ran from 30 to 50 mph in 5.7 seconds.

The other great thing about the small-block power move—fuel efficiency. At 45 mph, the engine burned just 12.7 gallons of fuel per hour. With that kind of fuel economy, owning a pair of 210 Magnums wouldn't be out of the question.

Despite choppy conditions, the 210 Magnum cranked turn after turn without hopping or skipping. The relatively light, low-profile bow rider stayed hooked up in corners as well as in a straight line, and the ride was surprisingly soft for that of a 21-footer with a



From left: Accompanied with a Bravo One drive, the 300-hp MerCruiser 350 Mag MPI powered the Caliber 1 boat to 63.2 mph at 4,950 rpm. The boat had Faria gauges and a Mercury throttle and shifter.

rounded keel. (The 210 Magnum also can be configured as a jet boat.)

Caliber 1 kept things clean and simple with the boat's graphics. Color lines were bright and didn't bleed into one another, and mold work didn't have any significant dimples or ripples. Two gas struts raised and supported the engine hatch when open. Through-bolted L-angles held the engine in place. The rigging was up to production-boat standards and, once again, you have to consider the finished product relative to the price.

Clearly designed to handle recreational water-ski and wakeboard tow duty, the 210 Magnum had a pair of integrated swim platforms with rubber surfacing. Contoured billet grab handles were mounted on the gunwale above the platforms to help skiers and board-

ers climb back into the boat after a run.

Seating consisted of a pair of lounges in the open bow, and two bucket seats and a four-person bench in the carpeted cockpit. There were stowage lockers under most of the bottom cushions, as well as recesses in the well-padded gunwale and map pockets on the seat backs.

Standard equipment on the 210 Magnum, the CD stereo system was mounted in the copilot's dash to port. Opposite, the helm was supplied with Faria gauges arranged around a non-tilting steering wheel, as well as four accessory switches that light when activated. A Mercury throttle-and-shifter mechanism was mounted on the gunwale.

CALIBER 1 PERFORMANCE BOATS

951-738-0880, www.caliber1.com





COBALT

[24SX BOW RIDER]

In terms of comfort and usability for a full day on the water, no boat in this fleet outshined the Cobalt 24SX Bow Rider. What Cobalt's designers were able to do with the inherently limited space of a 23-foot runabout was nothing short of amazing.

Take the head locker/changing room in the port-side co-pilot's console, which had more headroom than a lot of cabins in closed-deck runabouts of similar size. Mounted on a sliding tray, the portable head slid discreetly under the forward section of the locker. The space was dressed with valances and directional spotlights. It even had a small lounge with a pleated backrest.

Likewise, the open-bow area felt uncommonly spacious and open. Its horseshoe-shape lounge could probably accommodate four passengers without leaving anyone feeling cramped.

But the best seat in the boat wasn't up front. Surprisingly, it wasn't either of the two



Left: The smallest boat in our roundup, the 210 Magnum from Caliber 1 was big on price. The runabout retails for less than \$40,000.



Above: A roomy head locker, spacious open-bow area and a slick L-shape rear bench elevated the Cobalt 24SX Bow Rider into a class of its own.

buckets for the driver and co-pilot. For our money, the hot spot was the L-shape bench all the way aft and, more specifically, the section of it that converted to a rear-facing lounge with an adjustable-angle backrest. Very slick.

Typically elegant for a Cobalt, the helm included white-faced gauges with gold accents mounted in silver rims in a single row above the tilt steering wheel. The throttle-and-shifter unit was mounted on the starboard gunwale, which, like that to port, was richly padded. Gunwale padding from stem to stern was exceptional.

Topping out at 57 mph with a 375-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag engine and a Bravo Three drive, the 24SX Bow Rider wasn't the fastest boat in this roundup. In fact, it was one of the slowest. But it also was the easiest to drive.

Predictable and solid, yet light on its feet, it glided through long arching turns and

slashed through slaloms. In 1-foot river chop, the soft-riding runabout was remarkably rattle-free, a quality that impressed both of our test teams.

That was a tribute to the boat's fine construction, which we've come to expect from Cobalt. No production builder does a better job, as the 24SX proved with its nearly perfect tooling and gelcoat.

Far from delicate, however, the boat was built with woven roving and mat in alternating layers at the keel. Hullsides were reinforced with Spraycore, and Kevlar was used to beef up the chines. The stringer system was constructed of fiberglass and composite material was used in the transom. Engine compartment rigging, though far from custom, was well above the production-boat norm.

COBALT BOATS
800-468-5764, www.cobaltboats.com



From above: With a 375-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag, the 24SX Bow Rider topped out at 57 mph. In elegant fashion, the helm featured white-faced gauges with gold accents mounted in silver rims.



Left: Cobra Performance's single-step 260 Razor was one of the fastest boats in our roundup as it reached nearly 75 mph on the Colorado River.

COBRA PERFORMANCE

[260 RAZOR]

When it comes to attention to detail and execution in custom-boat construction, Cobra Performance Boats is tough to beat. That holds true regardless of sticker price. Of course, Cobra builds more expensive boats than the \$79,995 260 Razor sent to this roundup. But it doesn't build them any better.

Per the company's high standards, tooling was spot-on in the 26-footer. The smooth mold work was complemented by precise in-gelcoat graphics and all of the boat's hardware, from the production pieces such as Accon Pop-Up cleats to custom billet grab handles, was installed in color-matched bezels.

Custom hardware in the form of Dana Marine hydraulic hinges opened the engine hatch, where the 425-hp 496 Mag HO mill was flawlessly installed. All wiring, which was protected by conduit, was laid out in parallel runs and properly supported by cushion clamps. Wiring behind the dash was accessible behind a hinged, mirrored panel in the mid-cabin and was executed with equal precision.

One of the fastest boats in this roundup, the 260 Razor reached 74.9 mph with its engine turning 5,200 rpm. At that speed, the single-step boat did feel a bit loose and less responsive to steering wheel input than either of our test drivers expected. Our lead driver suspected a valve in the cable steering system was sticking. Full hydraulic steering likely would be the best cure, though it would bump the price past \$80,000. Some prices are worth paying.



From above: Cobra's attention to detail was superb down to the coolers with Cobra logos. The gauges featured color-matched bezels.



When it came to the 260 Razor's interior appointments and amenities, we found no room for improvement. Angled backrests made the open-bow lounges particularly comfortable, and the midcabin had good headroom. It also had a pair of coolers, with the Cobra logo on their lids, in vinyl-upholstered recesses.

Bolsters with manual dropout bottoms for the driver and co-pilot and a four-person bench comprised the seating accommodations in the carpeted cockpit. For stowage, there were in-sole lockers as well as gunwale trays and map pockets. Gauges at the helm station were installed in bezels color-matched to the custom graphics, which was standard.

Other goodies included a telescoping navigation light, a Sony Xplod stereo system, an Aqua Performance swim ladder and more. But the standout interior feature of the 260 Razor was its bimini top. Thanks to clever design and construction, it stowed neatly into the engine compartment when not in use.

COBRA PERFORMANCE BOATS
909-482-0047,
www.cobraperformanceboats.com



CONCEPT

[27PR]

For the past two years Concept has loaned POWERBOAT a center-console for safety crews to use during our roundups and Performance Trials in Florida. It also gives us a chance to hear what "recreational" boaters think about a model.

After three days of running the 27-foot model on Sarasota Bay, rescue crews had high praise for the center-console boat. The V-bottom was a gentle ride for the Sarasota firefighters and their equipment, which included scuba tanks, a backboard and a first-aid bag.

The same boat that served as the magazine's rescue boat also was part of our \$80,000 roundup. With a Mercury 250 Verado on the transom, the boat packed a punch for the firefighters and our testers.

The 27PR got on plane in 4.2 seconds and within 15 seconds was running better than 46 mph. At that speed the four-stroke engine was getting nearly 3 mpg, and with a 110-gallon tank, it had more than a 300-mile range. Even at wide-open throttle, the range was still better than 200 miles.

Midrange acceleration was good for a boat

with just 250 horsepower. Running from 20 to 40 mph took 7.3 seconds and 30 to 50 mph needed 9.9 seconds.

While the 27-footer will be used mostly for fishing, it's an ideal boat for day cruising on Florida's Intracoastal. Concept went with a two-person seat at the helm and provided a grab handle for the observer to hold onto while the boat was underway. Our observer used the white powder-painted arch, which was ideally positioned.

The builder installed Mercury SmartCraft gauges in a color dash panel to match the boat's paint work. Our testers found the gauges difficult to read in the sun because of a tint on the lenses and would opt for clear ones. To the right of the wheel there were cupholders and a glove box containing the boat's stereo.

In front of the console was a single seat with Concept's logo embroidered in the backrest. Underneath the seat was a stowage locker. In the bow, the builder added some U-shape seating with cushions covering three lockers.

Additional space was available in two large lockers in the sole. The boat's sole was covered in nonskid, providing secure footing in wet conditions.

CONCEPT BOATS
888-635-8712, www.conceptboats.com

From above: At the helm, the builder installed Mercury SmartCraft gauges in the dash, along with a grab handle for the observer. A chrome electronic throttle and shifter also was included.



Left: It wasn't the most powerful boat we tested, but the Concept 27PR packed a punch with its Mercury 250 Verado pushing it to 58 mph.



DANA

[27 OFFSHORE]

After an afternoon in a 27 Offshore from Dana Performance Boats, it was easy to see why the midcabin 27-footer is one of the builder's most popular models. And that it can be had for less than \$80,000 with a 425-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine and lots of much-appreciated standard features certainly won't hurt its popularity.

The 27 Offshore's most compelling quality was its performance. At 4,800 pounds without fuel, it was one of the heaviest boats in the roundup. Unlike all of the other custom entries, it rode on a conventional V-bottom without steps or pads. And yet it was still able

to run 64.6 mph with its engine turning 4,850 rpm. Acceleration numbers reflected the heft and hull of the boat, as it reached 48 mph in 15 seconds from a standing start and took 8.5 seconds to run from 30 to 50 mph.

Could the 27 Offshore handle bigger power? Based on its ever-so-solid handling manners and perfect tracking, yes. Of course, any sort of power upgrade—the builder offers many—for the boat would boost the price well past the \$80,000 mark. Still, in a hull that turned so well and offered no unpleasant surprises, the idea of having more power to play with was intriguing.

Every bit a custom creation, the 27 Offshore boasted silky mold work and sharp gelcoat graphics. The builder preferred to keep lamination ingredients to itself, but the boat felt sturdy and sure in river chop. With the engine

hatch open on its hydraulic Dana Marine hinges, we could see the big-block was properly mounted on L-angles through-bolted to the stringers. Wiring was orderly and the bilge had a shiny, smooth finish for easy cleaning. To dress up the boat a bit, the builder installed all of the hardware, which included Accon Pop-Up cleats, anodized grab handles and powder-painted handrails, in red color-matched bezels.

For good grip in wet conditions, there was extra-strength nonskid on the boat's sole. Two



Clockwise from above: Dana's 27 Offshore featured a V-bottom without steps or pads, but still ran 64 mph. The dash was dressed up with color-matched bezels.

lounges in the open bow, love seats in the mid-cabin and twin buckets and a four-person bench comprised the seating accommodations.

Dana kept the carpeted midcabin fairly simple. In addition to the facing lounges, accommodations included speakers for the CD stereo system and cupholders. There were stowage lockers under the cushions and, in fact, the entire cabin could double as a locker if needed.

Carpeted gunwale trays provided stowage in the cockpit, as did the glove box in the copilot's dash for smaller items. The helm was outfitted with Auto Meter Pro-Comp instruments, a tilt steering wheel and a Livorsi Marine throttle-and-shifter setup.

DANA PERFORMANCE BOATS
909-399-4044, www.danaboats.com



DOMN8ER

[23 V]

Rare is the midcabin of a 23-footer that doesn't leave anyone but a small child feeling claustrophobic. With space requirements for the cockpit and the open bow—the two most popular areas—there just isn't much left for anything belowdeck. So the cabin becomes little more than a glorified stowage compartment.

The Domn8er 23 V presented an exception to this general rule. To pull it off, the builder eliminated bulkheads between the cockpit and the midcabin, where powder-coated braces pulled double-duty as footrests and deck supports. The bulkheads also were removed between the midcabin and the open bow.

The result was a remarkably airy midcabin—from the cockpit, you could see all the way through the space to the open bow. To keep the cabin feeling roomy, the builder opted for one lounge, on the port side, rather than two and a console with a dedicated retainer for a cooler opposite the lounge.

Outside of their unique back-support cush-



Clockwise from above: The 23 V reached a solid 64.9 mph. The purple steering wheel matched the bezels on the Livorsi gauges. The open-bow lounges featured unique back-support cushions.

ions, the open-bow lounges with stowage lockers were relatively standard fare. So, too, was the seating in the cockpit, which included a four-person rear bench and bucket seats on molded podiums.

White-rim Livorsi Marine gauges in purple bezels were organized around the tilt steering wheel at the starboard-side helm station. The wheel partially blocked our 6-foot-tall lead test driver's view of a few of the gauges, but he found the Mercury throttle-and-shifter unit within easy reach on the gunwale.

He also discovered the 23 V open bow was a pleasure to drive, especially in aggressive turns where it carved deeply. The nimble 23-footer's conventional V-bottom with a delta pad proved stable and predictable throughout our agility drills.

Under the power engine hatch for the 23 V was a 375-hp 496 Mag mill from MerCruiser. A Bronson-Hill-tuned 24"-pitch Bravo One four-blade propeller on the 1.5:1 Bravo drive put the power to the water.

With the engine turning 5,100 rpm, the boat topped out at 64.9 mph—and it felt solid at that speed. Acceleration was fairly strong, as the compact V-bottom hit 62.2 mph in 15 seconds and ran from 30 to 50 mph in 5.5 seconds.

In our most recent encounter with a Domn8er product, the company has proven it's a bona-fide contender in the West Coast custom world.

DOMN8ER
909-931-3268, www.domn8er.com



From above: Essex went with a simple look at the helm with white privately labeled Livorsi gauges. The builder included a 425-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag HO to power the 25-footer.



Left: While its handling manners were polished, it was the bright gelcoat and clean tooling that gave Essex's Tempest exceptional dock appeal.

ESSEX

[TEMPEST]

We haven't spent a whole lot of time in Essex boats, but based on the Tempest midcabin model, we've been overlooking a good product. The 25-footer delivered great performance in our tests, and was built to custom standards and loaded with amenities.

To power the single-step hull, the builder chose a 425-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine with a 1.5:1 ratio Bravo XR drive and a Bravo One 24"-pitch, stainless-steel propeller. The boat topped out at 68.8 mph with the engine turning 5,200 rpm, which was a respectable speed.

More than respectable was what little time the Tempest took to get there. From stopped in the water, it reached 60.7 mph in 15 seconds—a few more seconds was all it took to eek out the top-end—and it ran from 30 to 50 mph in 6.3 seconds.

Handling manners were polished. The Tempest leaned into turns and held its line, even when those turns went from sweeping to abrupt. It leveled off gently when exiting turns and exhibited good straight-line tracking whether accelerating or decelerating. The boat even managed to provide a soft ride in wind-whipped, 1-foot chop.

Bright gelcoat and clean tooling gave the Tempest exceptional dock appeal. Beyond the bling, however, the boat appeared and felt solid. A pair of screw jacks raised the engine hatch for access to the big-block power plant mounted on L-angles through-bolted to the stringers. Wiring was protected in conduit and supported with cushion clamps, which the manufacturer took the time and trouble to space evenly.

We certainly didn't expect to find bolsters with power dropout bottoms in a boat that costs less than \$80,000, but the Tempest had a pair of them in its carpeted cockpit. Aft of those coveted seats was a deep four-person bench. In addition to stowage com-

The 25-footer delivered great performance in our tests, and was built to custom standards and loaded with amenities.

partments under nearly every seat in the boat, including the lounges in the open bow, there were gunwale trays and map pockets. Other cockpit niceties were a CD stereo system in the co-pilot's dash and privately labeled Livorsi gauges at the helm.

Simple as it was, the Tempest's cabin was functional and spacious enough for adults to actually use. Headroom above the facing lounges was good, especially for that of a 25-footer, and there was no lack of cupholders. Spotlight fixtures also were included.

ESSEX PERFORMANCE BOATS
909-983-4566, www.essexboats.com

FORMULA

[240 BR]

When Formula introduced the new 240 BR earlier this year, the brass at Formula made sure the runabout was built to the same standards as its higher-priced boats. The same carpet, gelcoat and vinyls used to build its 48 Yacht also are found in the 24-foot runabout.

The quality showed while running the boat for tests on Sarasota Bay. There were no rattles, even when our testers crossed some substantial cruiser wakes. "Rock solid," declared chief test driver Bob Teague after putting the 5,200-pound boat through its paces.

Formula brought the boat with a Volvo Penta 5.7 GXi engine with a DuoProp drive

and the package was good for 51.2 mph at 5,100 rpm. Even as the water conditions worsened, the boat's handling remained strong. Slalom turns at different speeds got top marks as did the boat's tracking at low and high speeds.

From stopped in the water, the 240 BR leaped to 47 mph in 15 seconds. Midrange acceleration was just as snappy, going from 20 to 40 mph in 5.6 seconds. The ride, whether you were sitting in the open bow or in one of the pedestal seats, was cushy.

The bow playpen had fully padded gunwales and U-shape seating with angled backrests so passengers could recline and

watch the water at speed.

In the cockpit, a large wraparound windshield prevented wind and spray from hitting the driver and observer. At the driver's spot to starboard, Formula kept the gauges at a minimum. One gauge monitored four engine functions while another gauge was the tachometer. To keep track of speed, there was a Garmin chart plotter screen.

The driver and co-pilot seats had flip-up bottoms for added visibility when towing a boarder from the durable wakeboard tower. A spacious locker in front of the observer's position included a portable toilet.

Another notable amenity was the galley to



Above: The Formula 240 BR we tested actually topped \$80,000, but without the stainless sport arch, the boat falls just below the price point.



Above: From the Corian countertop and stainless sink to the same carpet, gelcoat and vinyls it uses on its higher-priced boats like the 48 Yacht, Formula spared no expense on its new 24-foot runabout.

“Rock solid,” declared chief test driver Bob Teague after putting the 5,200-pound boat through its paces.

starboard. It included a stainless sink with water and a Corian countertop that had a trash receptacle under the unit. Food and drinks could be stored in the cooler under the L-shape bench seat.

Sun worshippers will appreciate the sun pad on the 240 BR. The pad flattens out to provide room for three people. If those folks decide to take a dip in the water, Formula included ladders on the swim platform and in a locker in the bow.

FORMULA BOATS
800-736-7685, www.formulaboats.com

KACHINA

[26 FORCE]

Without question, the 26 Force from Kachina was the best-equipped model in this roundup. But to say the Phoenix custom builder went beyond the call with the closed-deck 26-footer, which was introduced in 1999, would be inaccurate. Louie Majors and his crew at Kachina pride themselves on delivering as much boat as they can, especially when it comes to amenities, for the money.

In the case of the 26 Force, that meant standard features including “unlimited color” custom graphics, a tilt Momo steering wheel and color-matched, privately labeled gauges, a wet bar with a sink and a blender, a Porta Potti and more. Then there were the upgrades, which included a more-powerful CD stereo system, a DVD player with a 10-inch flip-down flat-screen television system, electric cabin fans, deck hatches, docking lights, a privacy curtain, a cockpit cover and a Livorsi Marine muffler system.

And the builder still managed to bring the 26 Force in for less—and we mean two bucks less—than \$80,000. Amazing.

Clockwise from top right: With numerous added features, the 26 Force reached 63 mph with a solid 425-horsepower engine. The spacious cockpit included many cupholders and pockets.



And the builder still managed to bring the 26 Force in for less—and we mean two bucks less—than \$80,000.

With all the weight the added features brought to the party, it was no wonder that the boat topped out at 63 mph, where other models in the same size class with the same 425-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine ran 70 mph and beyond. Then again, the single-step model handled smoothly and predictably, and it glided softly through river chop. The boat also stayed on course without requiring correction from our test drivers in gusty crosswinds.

To the builder's added credit, no corners appeared to be cut in the boat's construction. Tooling was smooth, and the gelcoat, with its clean color separations, exhibited a strong shine. To provide the 26 Force with extra muscle, the builder "double-cored" the boat with balsa and Coremat.

Naturally, the 26 Force had a power engine hatch, and it raised to an angle that gave our inspectors a great look at the engine installation. Through-bolted L-angles held the power plant to the stringers. Rigging was generally good in terms of support and routing for the wiring. The bilge was finished in spatter gelcoat for easier cleaning.

Two solid bucket seats and a rear bench were installed in the carpeted cockpit. Given the space the builder allotted to the cockpit, we were surprised by the spaciousness of the cabin. The belowdeck space was large enough to accommodate a pullout "sleeper" berth, as well as two lounges and a small galley.

KACHINA BOATS
602-244-1450, www.kachinaboats.com



Above: The 27 Sabre's helm featured Beede gauges with color-matched bezels, a non-tilt steering wheel and a Mercury Racing throttle and shifter.





Above: Featuring a 425-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine, LaveyCraft's 27 Sabre catamaran was the only boat in the group to break the 75-mph barrier.

LAVEYCRAFT

[27 SABRE]

A few boats in this roundup came close to cracking the 75-mph barrier, but only the 27 Sabre catamaran from LaveyCraft actually did. That alone made a compelling case for the bow rider as a worthy choice. But there was more to the story.

Like several similar-sized boats in the fleet, the 27 Sabre was outfitted with a 425-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag HO engine. But it was the stepped LaveyCraft cat hull, in combination with a 1.5:1 ratio Bravo XR drive and 26"-pitch lab-finished Bravo One four-blade propeller, that made the best use of it. The boat reached 75.1 mph with its engine turning 5,100 rpm.

Acceleration numbers were solid. From a standing start, the 27 Sabre reached 54 mph

in 15 seconds, and in another 5 seconds it ran past 60 mph. Running from 30 to 50 mph took 6.1 seconds. Though it wasn't the quickest model in the roundup, the LaveyCraft entry was among them.

Handling was superb, especially in rougher water. The 27 Sabre ripped through turns without slipping. It didn't matter if those turns were radical slaloms or sweeping arcs, the 27-footer leaned in, hooked up and stayed on track. And there was no drama on exit—the boat simply leveled off.

When it came to build quality, the 27 Sabre was among the best, if not the best, of the bunch. Whether it's producing an \$80,000 "entry-level" model or something in the low six-figure range, LaveyCraft prides itself on gelcoat graphics. The test boat reflected that level of commitment, as did the boat's flawless mold work.

For all the beauty, however, there was plenty

of beef. In addition to being laid up with vinylester resin and various layers of fiberglass, the boat's hull and deck were vacuum-bagged and cored with DecoLite. And, again per Lavey's self-imposed standards, engine compartment rigging was immaculate.

Lavey supplied two lounges in the open bow. Gunwale padding up front, an area too often neglected, was exceptional. Likewise, gunwales in the carpeted cockpit, which had twin bucket seats and a four-person bench, were richly padded. Even the walk-through had good padding.

All of the Beede gauges at the helm were easily readable. The steering wheel didn't tilt, but none of our test drivers found the wheel or the Mercury Racing throttle and shifter on the gunwale difficult to reach.

LAVEYCRAFT PERFORMANCE BOATS
951-273-9690, www.laveycraft.com

RINKER

[270 FIESTA VEE]

Families searching for an affordable boat stocked with amenities won't find many that come as loaded as the 270 Fiesta Vee.

For \$80,000 and change, buyers get a complete stand-up head locker, a sleeping cabin, air-conditioning and a safe to lock away all the money they will save.

The 270 Fiesta Vee offered an inviting cockpit with superior space for entertaining friends. The builder installed a spacious bench seat on the port side. Opposite the bench seat was a galley with a sink and fresh-water and a trash can below. To provide shade for the passengers, Rinker included as standard equipment a bimini top on a stainless frame, which covered a large section of the cockpit.

The helm was to starboard and the seat featured a flip-up bottom to help when docking or leaving a slip.

There was a full complement of Faria gauges, as well as a remote for the stereo, a compass and a Horizon VHF radio, all of which come standard.

The driver and passengers were well protected from wind and spray with the sizable

wraparound windshield. Steps provided easy access to the deck and the anchor windlass. The windlass, costing \$2,200, was one of the few options on the Fiesta Vee.

Belowdeck, a V-berth could be used for dining or sleeping space for adults. An aft cabin was large enough for a couple of kids to sleep comfortably. A head locker on the starboard side featured a porcelain pump-out head and a stainless sink with a spout that can be used for a shower.

Rinker didn't stop there. It included a full galley rarely seen on a 27-foot boat. There was a microwave, a single-burner cook top, a sink and a refrigerator. While cooking dinner, the kids can watch the Toshiba television and get local channels thanks to the antennae on the radar arch.

To bring the boat in near the \$80,000 mark, Rinker went with base power—a 280-hp Volvo Penta motor.

Buyers would be wise to spend the money and upgrade to the 375-hp power option. With a boat full of guests and gear, the extra horsepower will be welcomed.

No boat in the roundup came with more creature comforts than the 270 Fiesta Vee. For some families that is priceless.

RINKER BOATS

574-457-5731, www.rinkerboats.com

To bring the boat in near the \$80,000 mark, Rinker went with base power—a 280-hp Volvo Penta motor.



Above: The extraordinary amenities in the galley of Rinker's 270 Fiesta Vee included a microwave, single-burner cook top, sink and refrigerator, all of which are not usually found in a 27-foot V-bottom.





Above: The 270 Fiesta Vee wasn't the fastest boat in the fleet—it only reached 41.2 mph—but it was loaded with amenities and had plenty of space for entertaining.

VELOCITY

[260]

For the horsepower and money, buyers would be hard pressed to find a performance boat that goes as fast as the 260 from Velocity Powerboats.

With just a 375-hp MerCruiser 496 Mag in the engine compartment, the pad-keel-bottom boat ran a healthy 70.8 mph on Sarasota Bay. The boat needed just 15 seconds to reach 55 mph, and at that speed the engine was turning a moderate 4,000 rpm. The big-block showed its limitation in midrange acceleration with the V-bottom taking 7 seconds to go from 30 to 50 mph.

Velocity builds its boats for offshore conditions and it showed in the 260. Weighing 4,000 pounds, the boat felt solid running over cruiser wakes and was responsive to the driver's steering wheel input at varying speeds.

Manual dropout bolsters for the driver and co-pilot and a rear bench comprised the seating in the cockpit. At the driver's spot to starboard, the builder went with a throttle and shifter and Monster gauges from Livorsi

Marine. The hub of the steering wheel came with the Velocity logo.

A Taylor Made Systems windshield supported by a white frame kept the wind out of the faces of our test team. The windshield never rattled, even when we took the boat offshore. Credit goes to the crew at the factory.

The strong workmanship continued in the engine compartment. The MerCruiser motor was mounted on L-angles through-bolted to the stringers. What wiring we could see was properly supported with stainless cushion clamps. The builder placed aluminum diamond plating on the engine floor and created a small stowage area for tools. Additional

stowage was available under the rear bench.

Access to the cabin was through a sliding center-entry door. There was a large V-berth with a pad and facing lounges. A suspended headliner covered the ceiling and the builder included several spotlights for use at night. For those needing some air, the boat came with a large deck hatch, which added \$700 to the boat's \$76,300 price.

Tucked away in the cabin was the Sony Xplod stereo with a CD player and a 12-volt receptacle for keeping cell phones charged.

VELOCITY POWERBOATS

407-321-1340, www.velocityboats.com



From left: The cockpit featured manual dropout bolsters for the driver and co-pilot and a rear bench. In the engine compartment, the builder installed aluminum diamond plating and built a small stowage area.



Left: Velocity's 260 V-bottom reached more than 70 mph and produced a responsive and solid ride over cruiser wakes on Sarasota Bay.

ADVANTAGE



27 VICTORY \$79,325

Centerline/Beam	27'3"/8'2"
Hull weight	4,580 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag HO/425
Fuel economy at 45 mph	NA
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 24"
Zero to 15 seconds	55 mph
30 to 50 mph	6.3 seconds
Top speed at rpm	63.1 mph at 4,700
Contact	928-680-2628, www.advantageboats.com

BAJA



275 \$78,953

Centerline/Beam	27'2"/8'4"
Hull weight	4,400 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag/375
Fuel economy at 45 mph	2.7 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Mirage Plus 14 5/8" x 23"
Zero to 15 seconds	52 mph
30 to 50 mph	8.1 seconds
Top speed at rpm	61.9 mph at 4,800
Contact	877-321-2252, www.bajamarine.com

B&H PERFORMANCE



WATER ROD 270 \$78,250

Centerline/Beam	26'8"/8'6"
Hull weight	4,600 pounds
Engine/horsepower	Volvo Penta 8.1 Gi/375
Fuel economy at 45 mph	NA
Propeller	DuoProp F7
Zero to 15 seconds	56.5 mph
30 to 50 mph	7.8 seconds
Top speed at rpm	63.6 mph at 4,700
Contact	909-864-7722, www.waterrod.com

CALIBER 1



210 MAGNUM \$39,694

Centerline/Beam	21'1"/7'9"
Hull weight	3,520 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 350 Mag MPI/300
Fuel economy at 45 mph	3.5 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Revolution 14 5/8" x 21"
Zero to 15 seconds	58 mph
30 to 50 mph	5.7 seconds
Top speed at rpm	63.2 mph at 4,950
Contact	951-738-0880, www.caliber1.com

COBALT



24SX BOW RIDER \$73,185

Centerline/Beam	23'9"/8'6"
Hull weight	4,300 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag/375
Fuel economy at 45 mph	2.3 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo Three 15 1/2" x 24"; 14 1/4" x 24"
Zero to 15 seconds	58 mph
30 to 50 mph	6.2 seconds
Top speed at rpm	57 mph at 5,000
Contact	800-468-5764, www.cobaltboats.com

COBRA PERFORMANCE



260 RAZOR \$79,995

Centerline/Beam	26'8"/6"
Hull weight	4,000 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag HO/425
Fuel economy at 45 mph	2.9 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 26"
Zero to 15 seconds	61 mph
30 to 50 mph	4.9 seconds
Top speed at rpm	74.9 mph at 5,200
Contact	909-482-0047, www.cobraperformanceboats.com

CONCEPT



27PR \$76,295

Centerline/Beam	26'8"/7'10"
Hull weight	3,200 pounds
Engine/horsepower	Mercury 250 Verado/250
Fuel economy at 45 mph	2.9 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Mirage 14 1/2" x 21"
Zero to 15 seconds	46.6 mph
30 to 40 mph	7.3 seconds
Top speed at rpm	58.1 mph at 6,100
Contact	888-635-8712, www.conceptboats.com

DANA



27 OFFSHORE \$78,900

Centerline/Beam	27'8"
Hull weight	4,800 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag HO/425
Fuel Efficiency at 45 mph	2.2 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 26"
Zero to 15 seconds	48 mph
30 to 50 mph	8.5 seconds
Top speed at rpm	64.6 mph at 4,850
Contact	909-399-4044, www.danaboats.com

DOMN8ER



23 V \$58,090

Centerline/Beam	23'1"/7'6"
Hull weight	3,450 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag/375
Fuel economy at 45 mph	3.3 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 24"
Zero to 15 seconds	62 mph
30 to 50 mph	5.5 seconds
Top speed at rpm	64.9 mph at 5,100
Contact	909-931-3268, www.domn8er.com

ESSEX



TEMPEST \$79,800

Centerline/Beam	25'6"/8'4"
Hull weight	4,850 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag HO/425
Fuel economy at 45 mph	3.2 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 24"
Zero to 15 seconds	61 mph
30 to 50 mph	6.3 seconds
Top speed at rpm	68.8 mph at 5,200
Contact	909-983-4566, www.essexboats.com

FORMULA



240 BR \$83,325

Centerline/Beam	24'8"/6"
Hull weight	5,000 pounds
Engine/horsepower	Volvo Penta 5.7 GXi/315
Fuel economy at 45 mph	2.7 mpg
Propeller	DuoProp F5
Zero to 15 seconds	47 mph
20 to 40 mph	5.6 seconds
Top speed at rpm	51.2 mph at 5,100
Contact	800-736-7685, www.formulaboats.com

KACHINA



26 FORCE \$79,998

Centerline/Beam	26'1"/8"
Hull weight	4,000 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag HO/425
Fuel economy at 45 mph	1.8 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 22"
Zero to 15 seconds	55 mph
30 to 50 mph	7.5 seconds
Top speed at rpm	63 mph at 5,200
Contact	602-244-1450, www.kachinaboats.com

LAVEYCRAFT



27 SABRE \$79,900

Centerline/Beam	27'2"/8'6"
Hull weight	4,300 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag HO/425
Fuel economy at 45 mph	2.7 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 26"
Zero to 15 seconds	54 mph
30 to 50 mph	6.1 seconds
Top speed at rpm	75.1 mph at 5,100
Contact	951-273-9690, www.laveycraft.com

RINKER



FIESTA VEE 270 \$80,044

Centerline/Beam	27'10"/9'1"
Hull weight	7,350 pounds
Engine/horsepower	Volvo Penta 5.7 OSi/280
Fuel economy at 45 mph	NA
Propeller	DuoProp F2
Zero to 15 seconds	34 mph
30 to 50 mph	NA
Top speed at rpm	41.2 mph at 5,050
Contact	574-457-5731, www.rinkerboats.com

VELOCITY



260 \$76,300

Centerline/Beam	25'11"/8'2"
Hull weight	4,000 pounds
Engine/horsepower	MerCruiser 496 Mag/375
Fuel economy at 45 mph	3 mpg
Propeller	Mercury Bravo One 15 1/4" x 28"
Zero to 15 seconds	56 mph
30 to 50 mph	7 seconds
Top speed at rpm	70.8 mph at 4,800
Contact	407-321-1340, www.velocityboats.com