

SUNSATION 32' Mid-Cabin

Sunsation followed up last year's world-beating small-block 32' mid-cabin with an equally spectacular HP500 version, which packed another 20 mph into the equation.



2005 Performance Tests: **Sunsation**





Hats off to Sunsation Powerboats, and the Schaldenbrand brothers, who created it and nurtured it to its sophisticated, present day form: the Michigan-based, rough-water vee builder has succeeded against the tallest imaginable odds that are the reality of a backyard-based, enthusiast-driven bid to become a major name in high performance sport boats.

Okay, so not a major name—the West Coast is just beginning to taste the Sunsation sensation, and 2005 will be considered a very good year indeed if production reaches a hundred units. Longevity is one thing—Sunsation built their first back in 1982—but sustained excellence is another, and every one we drive seems to be even better than the last.

Fueled by an intimacy with the water and lifted by family-wide passion for excellence, Sunsation builds a 28' and a 32' that utilize a proportionate version of the same hyper-efficient step-vee. Both are superior big-lake and offshore sport boats.

Last time we commandeered one of Sunsation's 32s was barely a year ago. We spent an astonishing part of an hour behind the wheel of the thing, which Sunsation had rigged out with a set of entry-level, 6.2-litre/Bravos. Taken individually, their 320 horsepowers aren't worthy of serious consideration on any real performance application much beyond 21' or so, but working in tandem, they made the boat ride keenly memorable for our staff.

Not only did the twin-6.2 mid-cabin cruiser come alive under their spell under such pound-efficient power, but you have to love the maintenance-friendly, turnkey nature of Merc's entry-level sport engine. But here's the kicker: it morphed into an acceleration-prone sleeper-slayer that dusted everything in its proverbial liquid path, all the way to its low-60s-mph peak. It was quicker between the buoys than 32 of 35 boats tested, a shocking thing even to the builder, and a hell of a bang

for the buck (about \$139,000).

While we can't imagine a more cost-effective path to better-than-respectable performance in a big-boat mode, this firebrand was not without its limitations. They boiled down to a couple of words: *cubic inches*.

On Board

This time around, Sunsation presented a dissenting perspective, escalating the armament on this showoff 32' to twin HP500EFIs. Their combined thousand horsepower built 35% more power (and 600 or so more pounds) into this boat than the 6.2 version. But the most significant factor in the superior acceleration of the 6.2s was the ability to prop them with 23s—giving them a much harder, quicker bite, and expanding the rev limiter to accommodate the resulting rpm.

The HP version definitely had the desired effect on the big end, catapulting us into the mid-80s.

More performance specifics below, but first a few general notations:

"The hellacious acceleration wasn't all a matter of setup. The HP boat was also a screamer. The small-block boat was slightly quicker from 0-30 and 0-40, but the cubic inches kicked in with the HP boat, and by 50 mph, it was significantly quicker to get there (by 2.5 seconds).

"RPM and speed were almost identical to 3,200 rpm, when the HPs grew legs. At 4,000 rpm, the 6.2s ran 60 mph, the 500s 66 mph.

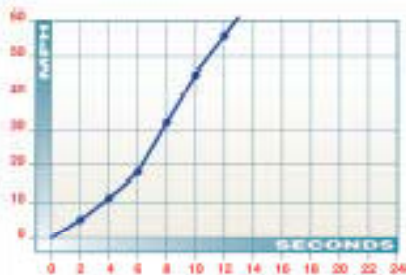
The HP500s hit like a hammer with their last thousand rpm, picking up an incredible 25 miles an hour between 4,000 and 5,150 rpm, to 84.5 mph.

Although the vehicle that emerged from the bulk-up was an entirely different boat, the personality modification was not so deeply rooted that it overshadowed the personality of the 6.2 roadster.

We found no objection, for example, to the ability to level out at better than 85 miles an hour, to the cool, smooth note struck by the 500s. Nor did any of our staff recoil at a power ▶

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specifications



Test conditions: Moderate to very rough
Centerline: 30'6"

Beam: 96"

Bottom: Step vee

Drive train: Twin HP500EFI/Bravo XR

HP at prop: 1,000 total

Overall weight: 6,500 lbs.

Base price: \$122,360

Standard features: Twin MerCruiser 6.2MPIs, Imco hydraulic steering, snap-in carpet, Livorsi Monster gauges, pump-out head, compass, Mitcher T graphics, in-floor coolers, stainless cleats, Sony CD system, dual tabs, hydraulic sun hatch, locking cabin door, bow hatch, 12V receptacle, cabin lighting, cockpit cover, bow cup holders, bow lights, open-bow cabin door, pop-up cleats, freshwater tank.

Options on test boat: HP500 EFIs (\$53,340), McLeod power bolsters (\$3,885), upgraded Mitcher T graphics (\$3,850), Kiekhaefer K-planes (\$2,520), Mercury lab-finished props (\$1,785), mechanical lab/trim indicators (\$1,085), muffler tips (\$1,085), Livorsi controls (\$1,085), deck cushions (\$1,085), logo rear hatch (\$945), painted dash panels (\$840), bow cover (\$770), bow gauges (\$700), swim ladder (\$665), GPS speedo (\$581), depth sounder (\$539), power nav light (\$525), auto Halon (\$497), bow filler cushion (\$469), drive showers (\$434), color grab handles (\$364), fender cleats (\$280), remote controls (\$224), bow eye (\$105)

Price as tested: \$207,739

Top speed, radar: 84.5 mph

Manf. speed in best conds.: 90 mph

0-30: 7.65 seconds

0-40: 9.04 seconds

0-50: 10.74 seconds

0-60: 12.89 seconds

0-70: 15.75 seconds

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train that was considerably more complex, and evolved, than the 6.2s, which looked positively skeletal by comparison.

The base Sunsation is thoroughly equipped and battle-ready. Full IMCO hydraulic steering is standard, and top-end components are the rule, including Livorsi Monster gauges and compass. Base interior features include stainless railing, glove box, snap-in carpet, bolster seating, power hatch, and 12-volt receptacle. The cockpit is fit with snap-in carpet, and has integrated floor storage and large coolers. Cockpit, cabin, and bow hatches are standard.

The most is made of the available space below, and you won't find many cabins in this size class that are as accommodating or as stylish. Standards include lighting, freshwater sink, clever integrated storage, and a locking door.

Priced at just under \$208,000, more than a quarter of which is represented in the upgrade charge from the 6.2s to the HP500s (\$53,340 specifically), the HP500 cuddy was fortified with an array of options. Sunsation uses Kiekhaefer K-planes exclusively, on every boat—it's a "cost option" that every customer must take, at \$3,600. Muffler tips, IMCO drive showers, and an auto Halon system were also added to the stock configuration. Lab-finished Mercury 30' four-blades propelled us.

The power boon aside, this Sunsation was yet another reminder of this company's consistency in every aspect of the construction process. The fit and finish of the fiberglass, the techniques used in weaving the components together, and the detail work in making the package water created the right foundation for serious high performance play, and Sunsation's execution was again beyond reproach on every level.

The satisfying drive begins with a stout, well-built hull, and grows outward. Mitcher T graphics were, as usually, beautifully

done, and they came alive in the lines.

Power McLeod bolster seating is of the defining traits of this stylish, comfortable cuddy, which utilizes a full fiberglass liner. McLeod's power seats, beautifully finished and melded to the boat like a factory feature, were exquisite, as always—like the tabs, they're "optional," but not really—buy a Sunsation, and you buy the seats. You wouldn't want anything less anyway.

The defining features of the layout are its nice, deep cockpit (and lots of freeboard), a giant-sized mid-cabin with a smallish entry step, and a bow seating section that is spacious enough for two large adults and possibly a child or two. There is also a nice, large walk-through area.

One of our performance team found a few minor issues in positioning, that didn't surface until we found some butt-battering water. In a standing position, the throttle levers were a little tight to the body, making operation somewhat uncomfortable. Also, the location of the power seat switch, to the driver's right, is less than ideal—in rough water, adjusting the seat meant removing one's hand from the throttles for a skosh longer, and the boat reacted. Putting them to the left would mean locating them on the walkway, and risking inadvertent contact, but our driver preferred this lesser evil.

Gauges are distributed upon a large, wraparound panel, with primary dials front and center. All are easy to view, even those displaced to the port side, and so are the indicators—nothing is obstructed. There are step-ups molded into the port side dash, enabling easy access to the forward part of the boat. There's a neat little rearview mirror, a feature we overlooked until our boat load of staff hit rough water. We were able to monitor our passengers' reaction to the ride without swiveling. There were no wind deflectors, and we picked up the expected rush.

Optional Livorsi controls (\$1,085) and **CONTINUED ON PAGE 122**

SUNSATION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 68

GPS (\$581) communicated effectively and stylishly, Sunsatation tacked on another \$863 for bezels, on a painted dash panel that ran \$840. Optional equipment included grab handles, stereo remote, bow gauges, and stainless, drop-down ladder.

The Sunsatation excelled in every area of our tests that called for subjective feedback. Our team lauded this boat's wiring installation, placement and comfort of controls and switches, quality and finish of

its hardware installation, and overall seating comfort. Hand holds are located throughout the cockpit.

Performance

The 32' Dominator is fully juiced, below the water line. The Schalkdenbrands, hardcore boaters all, created their running platform based on needs they recognized and priorities they embraced as speed-craved motorsports enthusiasts. Unwavering handling at high speed is the dominant gene of their design, and there are lots of complimentary cohabitants.

It's easy to maneuver the 32' in tight quarters, and four-way visibility is full-on in a standing position. It parks easily, and invites smooth operation with a sensible design in its command center. Give it the go, and Sunsatation's growing reputation as one of the quickest hulls in captivity kicks in immediately. Our boat planed instantaneously, climbing on top without hesitation. The boat maintained its outstanding response, and the HP500s were wondrously matched. "It just lays out real nice, and then goes," a test driver wrote. The ride is easily tuned via trim, but rides nicely at just about any angle. Work the trim, and the hull will elevate, but it's damned near impossible to get it to rock.

The ride remains on the sensational side as you gear the boat into the midrange. It has a neat, light, and communicative feel, yields excellent visibility, and carries very well under varying water conditions. Wheel it around, and it responds in either direction with grace.

All of this makes the Sunsatation a well-thought choice if your boating takes you onto large or largely populated locales, and you're almost certain to see more of a proliferation on big West Coast lakes like Havasu and Mead (the 28' may be sized better for Havasu's crowds and such, and offers very comparable rough-water pluck.)

We captained the Sunsatation for the better part of the Performance Productions East Coast poker run, giving us a great opportunity to check it out while under the fully unscripted influence of the elements. Our reactions held up along the way.

We also found ourselves in some truly brutal water during our test. With just a driver and copassenger, we were able to bear down, find a driving rhythm, and get through it without much problem. Carrying rear passengers, however—especially inexperienced boaters—was another story. In the nastiest of the water, we eventually slowed our pace (after reading abject horror in the aforementioned rearview mirror); that diminished the efficiency of the ride, but made the leg bearable to our aft beings.

The Bottom Line

Sunsatation meets the many challenges of big-boat performance with a fast, rock-solid foundation, tempered with great engineering, and a full saturation of quality, both in component and execution. This hull is a bonafide hot-rod, an acceleration monster with great driving manners, and looks to match. Despite a price increase (\$115,480 last year's test, this year \$122,360) over last year, the 32' remains a five-star value in the context of the performance boating industry—even when you factor in the costs of trucking one to the West Coast. ■