



Testers Notebook - Hustler 344 Cheetah

Location: Lake Simcoe, Ontario, Canada

Test load: Safety gear, No water, No waste, Half fuel. Driver only.

Test day conditions: Wind 15-18 knots, Waves two feet, choppy & gusty conditions.

Synopsis: With a 24-degree deadrise, Hustler's Tek-Step hull is comfortable in rough water. A ventilated-step bottom gives the boat speedy performance without sacrificing desirable handling attributes, resulting in a boat that's very fast but also enjoyable to drive.

By [Mark Rotharmel](#)

Here's a question for performance boaters: when is a cat not a cat?

When the cat is a Cheetah, a 34-foot offshore V-bottom designed by a pioneer in stepped-hull technology!

Global Marine Performance, builder of Hustler powerboats, introduced its Cheetah Poker Run edition at last year's Miami Boat Show. Few were released in 2000 but orders for both these and the luxurious pleasure version are ramping up for 2001 following rave reviews.

Hustler's lineup of go-fast boats ranges from 26 to 50 feet, with recent attention centred around its 388 Slingshot model, a front-runner on the Factory 2 offshore racing circuit. The Cheetah again utilizes Hustler's patented variable 24-degree deadrise hull and ventilated Tek-Step bottom - but the steps are shallower, configured more like shingles to produce superb handling at high speeds.

These days, serious Poker Run participants own boats capable of running 80 mph plus. At speeds this high, handling is a priority and boat manufacturers understand their obligation to safety. Hustler's new Cheetah is a testament to this.

Quickly readied for our test, the 344 Cheetah was splashed with 30" pitch Bravo One props spinning on Mercury Racing's robust new XR drives. Powered by twin fast and reliable 470-hp HP 500 EFI's, the boat had not yet been dialed in, but even so, we captured a top speed of 84.3 mph/4,900 rpm on GPS, 86 mph indicated on the speedometer. A few hundred rpm and additional mph remains, but straight off the trailer, a mid-80's speed is quick.

Top end is important, but if you can't use it safely, the excitement wears off fast. The Cheetah handles magnificently at high speeds - regardless of how much trim is used. Test day was windy and rough, but conditions did little to challenge the way it performs. With tabs up and out of the way, the 344 stays low, tracks true and feels perfectly balanced. A good performance boat should be easy to steer. This one is.

Acceleration times are impressive: 0 to 40 mph in 8.7 seconds, to 50 in 10.2 seconds and 70 in 16.9 seconds. Demonstrating excellent mid-range, the Cheetah pulls from 50 mph to 70 mph in just 7.7 seconds, and took 17 seconds to accelerate from 40 to 80 mph. You could cruise around all day long at 60 mph/3,800 rpm without straining the motors one bit. At 3,300 rpm, the boat runs a fuel-efficient 50 mph. It also planes flat at 25 mph/2,300 rpm.

Like its predecessors, high-speed cornering comes naturally. The hull sets quickly when trimmed under, yet the bow will still bite when trimmed at 0 degrees, or even slightly positive. Frankly, it slaloms like a runabout, instantly reacting to aggressive steering commands. With its quick throttle response and direct angle of attack, I thoroughly enjoyed driving this boat.

Knowing speed is punishing, raceboat construction techniques are employed. The hull, deck and liner are fiberglass bonded, and vacuum bagging with tri-axial and bi-axial rovings, carbon fibre and Kevlar hybrids, is employed. Materials like Divinycell, and Baltec coring and vinylester resins are cured in the mold.

Aggressive performance requires an aggressive look - exactly what designers work hard to capture. The Cheetah's low-profile tapered lines harmonize with its interior and exterior graphics, incorporating the coveted checkered flag with crisp accent colours. Every paint job is custom, and its name can be featured on the sides or deck as desired.

The 344's custom McCleod cockpit emphasizes Hustler's commitment to comfort and safety. Twin bolsters with lumbar backrests and adjustable headrests incorporate pistol-grip handles for passengers. While the Poker Run edition has four bolsters, our test model had an aft bench, that unless you sit down leaves little room for movement. Keeping in mind the purpose of this boat, storage

space is at a premium, but satisfactory for most performance boaters.

The helm is first class. A decorative cheetah-coat theme is used for back-panels and the race-designed dash features top-line Nordskog or Gaffrig instrumentation. Access to the foredeck is simplified by steps integrated into the passenger console and the floor is angled for bracing at speed. A solid, sliding pocket door permits access to a white, bright and somewhat tight cabin. Headroom isn't a strong point but for overnighting, the Cheetah's enclosed head, sink, cooler and spacious berth will be appreciated.

Undeniably, Hustler's 344 Cheetah is bred to run aggressively, with wind and waves as its prey. It attacks the water with cat-quick agility and looks so good doing it. Cat lovers beware - this Cheetah shows its claws.

Specifications

Length.....34 ft. 4 in. (10.46 m)

Beam.....8 ft. 6 in. (2.59 m)

Weight.....7,200 lb. (3,265 kg)

Fuel..... 135 gal. (510 L)

Power & Performance

Test boat engines: Twin Mercury Racing HP 500 EFI, 470-hp, 8.2 litre (502-cid) V-8 gasoline engine, pushing a 30-inch four-blade Bravo One prop through an RX drive.

Acceleration: 0-20 mph: 5.60 sec.;
 0-30 mph: 7.11 sec.;
 0-40 mph: 8.74 sec.;
 0-50 mph: 10.25 sec.,
 0-60 mph: 13.91 sec.,
 0-70 mph: 16.93 sec.

Top speed (GPS): 84.3 mph / 4900 rpm.

Cruising speeds (GPS): 40 mph / 3,100 rpm;
 50 mph / 3,300 rpm;
 60 mph / 3,800 rpm;
 70 mph / 4,400 rpm.

Speed testing by Garmin GPS