

Sunsation

Michigan-based Sunsation Powerboats has taken solid shape as a respected builder of rough-water performance boats, beneath the versatile hands of a talented band of boating brothers, the Schaldenbrands.

Sunsation has kept production numbers down and standards up: The boat line is driven by family instincts developed through years of performance hot-boating, as well as intimate customer feedback.

The Sunsation universe has gained presence and notoriety through the years, its momentum driven by great reviews, top-heavy production hours and growing industry awareness. In spite of their steady growth, Sunsation ownership remains a tight niche: There are builders of custom boats that produce more boats each year than Sunsation has built in ten years of production. There's an appeal in owning something that you don't see slipped up at every marina on the planet, especially when it's not just different but also top-notch. Limiting production and retention of the same top-heavy labor formula that has guided the company from the start also assures Sunsation's recognition as a premium-level hot-rod boat that is very sensibly priced and laden with value. That's especially gratifying when imple- ▶



2003 PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS: **Sunsation 32' Dominator**



mented on one of the fastest, most efficient vee-hulls in performance-boating today.

That's not purely subjective: Though conservatively powered, by Sunsation ownership standards, this base 496 Magnum/Bravo configuration made spectacular use of its available 750 horsepower. It not only powered us deep into the 70s with minimal effort, but also established the Dominator as

one of sport boating's quickest-accelerating hulls. Nothing tested this year, in Havasu or Florida, matched the acceleration generated by this dual-496 sleeper, which screamed from 30 to 60 miles an hour in 5.92 seconds and which cruised at an astounding 67.2 mph at 4,000 rpm. At poker runs and other hot-boating haunts, Sunsation's deepening reputation as a driver's boat

has strengthened their foothold, in part to boats like this one. Did someone say "dialed in"?

The 32-foot Dominator is the cornerstone of Sunsation's line, though the new, smoothly sculpted Innovator 32-footer will absorb some of that thunder. Sunsation also builds a 28, in a mid-cabin bowrider, and traditional hard deck.

The Sunsation's running surface is an aggressively cut, 24-

degree rough-water cut that utilizes a conservatively sized, anti-adhesion step. Give this design a moderate amount of power, and it airs out. Controlled and fun to drive fast, the Dominator platform has long been a favorite of HOT BOAT's driving team.

HULL AND HARDWARE

The Dominator commands a lean, aggressive demeanor. It's beautifully proportioned and



looks fabulous on the water. The layout and hull design strike a sensible balance of style and function, between the cockpit, deck and rear quarter.

Structural integrity is tantamount to the rough-water boating experience, and Sun-sation builds every hull seemingly with expectations of a degree of abuse. The Dominator is rock sure in the

rough, a solid, well-built foundation on which to build a thoroughly exhilarating power-boating experience. The Sun-sation earned our best marks and garnered five-star impressions for its tooling, molds and glass quality and also piqued the attention of our team with another outstanding graphic execution from Sun-sation's resident Imron artist, Mitcher-T. The base Sunsa-

tion leaves the mold gloss white, and Mitcher generally takes over from there. His work on this boat was, as usual, top grade. Our test machine was fitted with Sun-sation's new windshield option, a \$3,250 investment in the prevention of bitter wind face. The windshield protected, without detracting from, the Dominator's strong visibility over the deck; it also

transformed the appearance of the boat. An access step is tooled into the Sun-sation's liner, easing passage over the windshield.

Vents are flushed to the glass, and five mooring cleats (\$238) are softly pocketed into the hull shape. Stainless railing on the deck perimeter is standard, and so is the rectangular Bomar ventilator hatch. The integrated stern platform is easily accessible (with help from handles and a drop-down ladder, \$552) and textured for slip-resistance.

INTERIOR AND AMENITIES

Sun-sation has consistently made improvements on all of their tooling through the seasons, and a very good boat has evolved into something truly special. Indeed, one of its most appealing characteristics is its tooling, which is elevated to pure art in a liner-based interior that encompasses the entire passenger quarters. Elegant panels and arcs are neatly cut into the dash, each angle offset and tailored to perfectly fit Monster GPS speedometer and twin tachometers up high, a rocker switch panel just below. Gafrig instruments, compass and depth sounder are standard.

Kiekhaefer controls lie at a natural angle off the well-padded armrest of the McCleod drop-through bolster seats, a highly recommended interior appearance group upgrade (\$5,091) that sends the upscale feel of this boat

2003 PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS: Sunsatation 32' Dominator

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into hyper drive. The McLeod treatment sends visual snap through the cockpit, and Sunsatation picked up the beat with a rigging execution that is befitting a fastidious, small-volume custom builder. It was beautifully done in our boat, with intricately cut panels gracing the forward bolsters and grips integrated into the design. Rear passengers also reported a high level of comfort, whether at a relaxed glide or deep into the rpm.

Our boat matched up purple interior panel fabric, raised powdercoated bezels and a beautiful Gaffrig, powdercoated steering wheel. Snap-in carpet dressed the lit cockpit, along with many other standard features: electric engine hatch, glove box, drink holders and grab handles throughout the layout.

The Dominator's cabin follows a minimalist theme, establishing a clean, elegant look and fitting the concept with rich textures, softened edges and contoured, angled finishes everywhere the eye could see. Cabin design, often an afterthought, has been an obsession for Sunsatation since the formative years; the 2003 fleet is the beneficiary of this impressive evolution. The glasswork below is outstanding in its function and detail.

A horseshoe-shaped conversation pit encourages use with its plentiful head- and legroom and extra-supportive seats. A privacy curtain isolates the forward vee-berth. The fiberglass galley design incorporates a stainless sink with pressurized, on-demand water, countertop and cabinet storage. A locking, sliding door is standard.

DRIVE TRAIN

Serious discussions about powering the 32-footer begin with the 496 Magnums. This setup has the goods to get into the Dominator's bottom design and let it run. You won't require anything more than a set of 496s to take advantage of this hull's impressive efficiency quotient. Our twin '96s made for a pretty tight fit in the Sunsatation well, which was a clean, neatly organized host. They were mated to base Bravo Ones, with 1.5 gearing, and turned stainless 28-inch Bravo four-blade props. Kiekhaefer tabs (\$2,329) are rigged into nearly all Dominators built, and Imco full-hydraulic Stern Advantage steering is standard. We topped out the 496s at 4,500 rpm, 300 down from peak rating.

PERFORMANCE

We have tapped into the awesome efficiency of this hull design on many occasions, but there is no stopping the Sunsatation boys in their determined march for optimum dial in; this was one of the best of our numerous, highly enjoyable turns in the Sunsatation seat. Pure acceleration drove our enthusiasm this time around; it was simply incredible, on twin 496 power. This is testament not only to the pure value of MerCruiser's 496 setup, but also to the keen efficiency of the Sunsatation bottom. Simply put, the Sunsatation cleaned everyone's clock in the acceleration wars, from Florida to California. The feel of the boat was nice and light, it aired out spectacularly, and it used its available power to

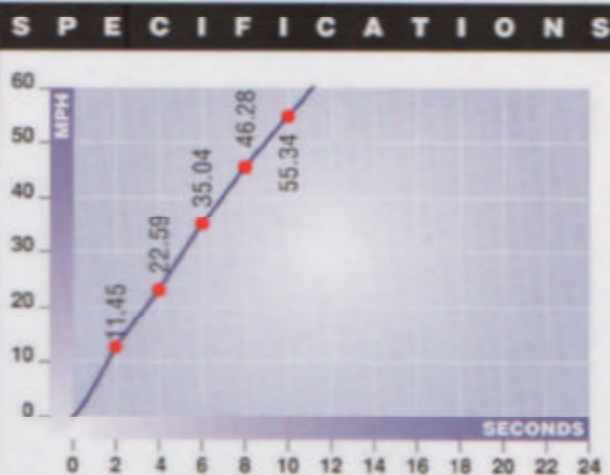
perfection. It really worked well under twin props.

Harnessing the 496s also virtually assures a worry-free setup and decent fuel economy, at least compared to the thirstier, more powerful upgrades.) The hull is wonderfully responsive to power, very quick and nimble. The setup doled out a consistent rush of acceleration, which remained consistent and well defined all the way through the range. We found 30 mph from idle in an astounding 5.12 seconds—making the dual 496 Dominator one of the quickest boats we've ever tested off the line. It only got better: 0-to-60 in 11.4 seconds and 40-to-60 in an incredible 4.2 seconds. It was a screamer.

One dynamic of the bottom design is that it likes to throw off a little bowrise getting onto plane, even when you ply the takeoff with a little tab. Vision is momentarily blocked getting on plane—the bow contours upward, and it likes to ride nice and high at idle and low rpm, standing speeds if you want to get a clear, consistent view across the bow. The boat finds plane almost immediately, however, and then it's nothing but low, level and lovely. It carries beautifully once you pour on the coals, which is a natural reaction once you get to know this boat. It's among the most agile offshore boats you'll ever drive.

The ride at cruise and speed felt fine. The hull airs out spectacularly beyond 3,200 rpm, running an almost unfathomable 54 mph there. Running 50 at 3,000 is a rare feat for a big vee-bottom, and it offers insight into this boat's wide appeal.

The Sunsatation likes to be driven, not just ridden. It runs loose but controlled at speed and likes trim. Its light feel and loose feel is key in its spectacular numbers. The ride is dry and secure, but you get a little ventilation at high speed in rough water sometimes. It's a fun, reactive drive, more so



Test conditions: Moderate to rough
Centerline: 32'
Beam: 96"
Bottom: 24-degree, pad-bottom, single step
Drive train: Twin MerCruiser 496 Magnum/Bravo I
HP @ prop: 750
Overall weight: 6,500 lbs.
Base price: \$123,776
Standard features: Mitcher-T custom graphics, Sony CD system, compass, Gaffrig gauges, stainless props, electric hatch, Bomar bow hatch, Imco hydraulic steering, locking cabin door, snap-in cockpit and cabin carpet, courtesy lighting
Options on test boat: Windshield package (\$3,250), Corsa Quick and Quiet exhaust w/stainless tips

(\$3,797), Kiekhaefer K-planes (\$2,329), side deck rails (\$839), swim ladder w/grab handle (\$552), raised bezels (\$552), depth sounder (\$503), McLeod hatch logo (\$378), fender cleats (\$238)
Price as tested: \$141,305
Top speed, radar: 76.9 mph
Mfg. est. speed: 75 mph
0-30: 5.12 seconds
0-40: 6.84 seconds
0-50: 8.77 seconds
0-60: 11.04 seconds
30-60: 5.92 seconds
40-60: 4.20 seconds
Speed @ 3,000 rpm: 51.0 mph
Speed @ 4,000 rpm: 67.2 mph

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than on some of the bigger, heavier, point-and-shoot performance cruisers.

DRIVER'S NOTEBOOK

Driver 1: Very fast for its power—almost 77 with 496s is very impressive. This hull has a great, natural ride, and it's good and fast. It levels out immediately on plane, no need to tab it. You get a little blind spot coming onto plane. It's very, very responsive—it's solidly built, but feels light on the water. The finish work gets better and better, and this boat is prime work. The tooling is very sculptured, very finished. Great dash panel, excellent visibility and beautiful work here. Great dash layout. Lots of interior storage and some nice features inside. The windshield is very stout. The ride feels light and responsive, and this is a good choice for power. It felt good in the turns, though it had just a little ventilation in bumpy water in the turns. No deck flex. A fun drive. Very nice hardware, with the matched purple powdercoating.

Driver 2: Great headroom—Sunsation has really refined their interior tooling and