



[2001 Performance Reports]

HUSTLER 344 CHEETAH

Hustler takes lessons learned from its larger boats and applies them to the new 344 Cheetah.

Story by staff

At first site, it was easy to tell that the new 344 Cheetah was Hustler. It bore a striking resemblance to its larger brethren in the Slingshot line, and it shared some of their performance characteristics.

At an as tested price of \$198,855, the 344 arrived at our Captiva Island, Fla., test facility fitted with performance goodies such as McLeod cockpit hardware and a pair of MerCruiser 502 Magnum MPI power plants. Other options included an Azimuth compass, a depthfinder, oil temperature gauges, snap-in carpeting, 8-inch stainless-steel Accon Pop-Up cleats, fender cleats and a custom graphics package. Tipping the scales at 7,200 pounds- light when you consider its length and construction- the 344 carried the standard 8'6" beam.



FROM LEFT: THE GAUGES AND SWITCHES, ARRANGED ABOVE AND AROUND THE STEERING WHEEL, WERE EASILY VISIBLE. TWO FACING LOUNGES, A V-BERTH, A HEAD AND A MINI GALLEY WOULD MAKE THE 344 IDEAL FOR OVERNIGHT STAYS. IN THE COCKPIT, TWIN MCLEOD ELECTRIC BOLSTERS PROVED TO BE COMFORTABLE AND SUPPORTIVE.

PERFORMANCE

Hustler's 344 Cheetah had one of the more interesting bottoms testers had seen. For example, the first step from the bow measured about 1-inch high and broke the strakes. A couple of feet aft of the first step, the second step measured about three-eighths of an inch high. A couple feet farther aft, there was another 1-inch step, and a couple of feet aft of that was another "minor" step. All steps extended to the chine.

The "major" steps were high enough to break the strakes, the innermost of which were located about 14 inches from the centerline and were staggered closer toward the keel as they passed through each step. The outer strakes ran straight from fore to aft.

On the business end, Hustler chose 1.5:1 Bravo One drives with low water pickups that spun Bravo One 15 1/4" x 28" lab- At first site, it was easy to tell that that the new 344 Cheetah was a Hustler. It bore a striking resemblance to its larger brethren in the Slingshot line, and it shared some of their performance characteristics - finished props that rotated outward. Mechanical indicators were fitted to the drives and the Mercury 280S K-planes. In addition, Hustler design engineers fitted Marine Machine full-hydraulic rams on the outside of each drive and connected them with a tie bar bolted to wing-plate-style caps.

With this combination, the 344 reached a top speed of 80.4 mph on the radar gun, which was pretty impressive in its own right, but even more so when one considers that the boat was carrying nearly a full tank during the tests. Burn off, say, about 100 gallons of fuel, and the boat would weigh 600 pounds less, which should be good for 2 mph, perhaps even 3 mph. Add two optional Mercury Racing HP500EFI engines, and it would get even better. At cruising speeds, about 4000 rpm, the 344 hummed along at just better than 55 mph, which would make short work of long trips. During handling maneuvers, the Hustler didn't act like a 34'-long boat with four steps on the bottom. It did not turn like a conventional deep-V, but it slalomed admirably at all but the fastest of speeds and tracked well.

WORKMANSHIP

On shore and at the dock, testers noted the high-quality construction and attention to detail, but pointed out a few flaws in the mold work and in the rubrail installation. Slight waves in the finish and a few undulations in the rubrail kept it from scoring higher, but those were about the only quibbles.

Underneath was a lamination schedule that began with handlaid biaxial- and triaxial-fiberglass roving, encapsulating five full-length stringers and transverse bulkheads. Hustler bonded all fiberglass assemblies together, including the cabin liner, then vacuum-bagged them for added strength.

The engine compartment and rigging also were worthy of praise. The hatch consisted of open-molded fiberglass finished on the underside with brush-painted gelcoat and raised with a single electric screw jack.

Down in the bilge, Hustler mounted the 502-cubic-inch mills onto a fabricated aluminum T-system that was through-bolted to the keel stringer and added reinforced aluminum brackets through the outside stringers- a substantial mounting system. All wiring that could be hidden was tucked up and under the gunwales. Clean and uncluttered.

Come time to perform minor services, the Hustler would be equally accommodating. Spark plugs on the outside and inside of each engine were easily accessible, as was access to the water pumps. Because the engines were mounted somewhat high, our lead tester noted that ease of bilge cleanup would be a snap. In fact, he also noted that access to minor services doesn't get much better.

INTERIOR

Inside the cockpit and the cabin, the 344 exhibited excellent quality and mindful attention to detail. For instance, the dashboard was held in place with Allen-head bolts tapped into the floor. It also featured a mold-ed- in step and was fitted with a grab handle to facilitate access to the fore-deck. Seams were filled with caulking.

To starboard, Hustler equipped the 344 with black-faced Gaffrig gauges ringed by powder-painted bezels. It also used Gaffrig levers. Gear selectors were mounted to the driver's left and the throttles- with an integral drive-trim switch- to the right. Forward of the throttles lay individual trim switches for the tabs and drives, and a Bluewater mechanical indicator.

Hustler also fitted the cabin door with rubber retainers- similar to those used to hold down engine boxes on ski boats- which testers raved about, considering how many "ordinary" latches they've broken in rough-water testing.

Inside the cabin, which included the liner system, Hustler built a simple, straightforward interior with a berth at the bow and twin facing lounges amidships. It also had a head to star-board and a galley to port, which included a refrigerator and a sink.

OVERALL

Hustler did a nice job on its 344 Cheetah. At 80.4 mph with nearly a full tank of gas, it's fast. The cockpit is functional, and the boat would serve well as a place to spend the weekend.

TEST RESULTS

Hull Information

Deadrise at transom	24 degrees
Centerline	34'4"
Beam	8'6"
Hull weight	7,200 pounds

Pricing Information

Base retail	\$174,087
Price as tested	\$198,555

Engine & Propellers

Engines	MerCruiser 520 Magnum MPI
Cylinder type	V-8
Cubic-inch displacement/horsepower	502/415
Lower-unit gear ratio	1.5:1
Propellers	Mercury Bravo One 14 1/4" x 28"

Standard Equipment

MerCruiser 454 Magnum MPI engine with Bravo One drive, bilge blower, engine-room lights, heavy-duty battery with race-type mounts, power engine hatch, cockpit grabrails, wraparound dash with gauges for fluid level and oil and water pressure, waterproof trim and tab switches, Gaffrig throttle and shifter, snap-in carpet, self-draining ice cooler, enclosed head with a portable toilet, deck cleats, navigation lights, fiberglass swim platform.

Options on Test Boat

Upgrade to custom graphics (\$8,000), twin MerCruiser 502 Magnum MPI engines (\$7,503), McLeod cockpit package (\$5,850), Accon Pop-Up cleats (\$950), snap-in carpet (\$750), depthfinder (\$650), stainless-steel Gaffrig trimmed throttles (\$280), bezel (\$240), compass (\$200), hour meters (\$125), oil temperature gauge (\$125), fender cleats (\$95).

Acceleration

5 seconds	27 mph
10 seconds	49 mph
15 seconds	62 mph
20 seconds	71 mph

Mid-Range Acceleration

30-50 mph	4.5 seconds
40-60 mph	6.1 seconds
40-70 mph	11 seconds

RPM vs. MPH

1000	7 mph
1500	9 mph
2000	10 mph
2500	22 mph
3000	34 mph
3500	47 mph
4000	58 mph
4500	70 mph
5000	78 mph

Top Speed at RPM

Speedometer	84 mph
Radar	80.4 at 5150
Nordskog Performance Products GPS	78 mph

Planing

Time to plane	5.17 seconds
Minimum planing speed	20 mph

Fuel Economy

At 45 mph	1.7 mpg
At 55 mph	1.7 mpg
At 65 mph	1.1 mpg
At WOT	1.1 mpg

Fuel Capacity

135 Gallons

Test Conducted At

Captiva Island, Fla.

Manufacturer

Hustler Powerboats, Dept., PB, 124 Springville Road, Hampton Bays, N.Y. 11946
(526)728-8282 www.hustlerpowerboats.com.

Powerboat Magazin Jan. 2001