

THE GOAL: BUILD A BETTER SMALL BOAT

Semi-custom Gloucester 20 offers an alternative in the crowded center console field



The Gloucester 20's Carolina-like flare makes for a dry boat.

By Ted Cooper

In an era where mass production dominates the center-console market, one Massachusetts company is emerging as a true semi-custom builder intent on defining the “best of breed.”

Founded in 2002 by Joe Berkman, the Gloucester Boat Building Co. currently builds one boat: the Doug Zurn-designed Gloucester 20. Zurn and Berkman's crew are developing a design for a Gloucester 28, but for now the G-20 serves as evidence of the lengths to which a boat-builder will go to provide reliability and performance.

The latter, performance, is more than just top speed; it is the combination of features and attributes that delivers the whole, rather than just a sum of the parts.

Taking her out

The G-20 I tested was equipped with a single Suzuki 140-hp 4-stroke. Aside from being very quiet, the 20-footer easily rises onto plane without digging in her stern and dragging half the bay around behind. Her relatively shallow 16-degree deadrise aft combines with 5-inch chine flats and lifting strakes (1/3 of LOA and 2/3 of LOA) to allow the hull to rise quickly on plane with little effort and a small wake.

I took her through her paces on an increasingly breezy day. I drove fairly conservatively, trying to keep passengers comfortable at all times. The G-20 banks convincingly and smoothly through hard turns, exhibiting little or no cavitation. Even at an easy 30 mph at 4,200 RPM (with four adults aboard) she did not pound into the rising chop

associated with the gathering afternoon sou'wester. She'd jump off a wave, but then land with a comfortable “mush,” maintaining speed and control.

I handed off the controls to the G-20's designer, Doug Zurn, who pushed the throttle and put the boat into a series of hard-over turns at a top speed of 44 mph that got my attention. Banking steeply and surely, she stayed in complete control, hopping over waves and keeping the cockpit dry. Going downwind and down-sea, Zurn took his hands off the 16-inch Edson wheel, and she glided on like a track-bound express

train. This is definitely a wear-your-hat backwards type of boat.

Her Carolina-like bow flare put down anything that her fine entry (27 degrees) misses and the crew was treated to a stable and dry ride. Decidedly absent in the G-20's ride was the kidney-jarring slamming almost inevitable in this size and speed range. This is partially due to her easily driven, relatively narrow (7-foot, 9-inch) hull. There was also no discernible noise during a landing. Everything was solid, secure. Her relatively high topsides and interior return with a nice radius lets a passenger know they

are in a boat, not just on one.

Another feature the angler will appreciate is the clean decks, thanks to all-flush/retractable deck hardware, and even the running lights forward — nothing to snag a fishing line, and a totally clean look makes a nice combination.

The console is a piece of functional sculpture. All of the navigation electronics, fishfinder and VHF are neatly installed in an electrically actuated hinge-up sub-console that allows the skipper at the end of the day to flip a switch, and completely conceal them back into a flush dashboard. This gets the electronics out of sight and keeps them out of the weather when not in use. Ultra-secure custom aluminum handrails frame the console and windshield, providing excellent security for the crew. Impressive was that three of us aboard were hanging on tightly as we soared over waves, and there was no indication of flex.

In the details

The guts of the boat tell a lot of the G-20 story. She's hand laid up into mirror-smooth female molds built by Berkman and his brother, Eddy, with assistance from Dale Shipwright.

Berkman spent years learning the nuances of laminating at the side of veteran boatbuilder Mark Lindsay, first in Gloucester, Mass., and later at Boston Boatworks in East Boston, Mass.

When Berkman started his company, it was with a dream, a mortgage, a solid foundation of skills, and a vision of the right way to build a boat. Following the debut of the prototype in fall 2002, orders have been steady, he says. In March, Berkman's crew began work on hull No. 10, with commitments lined up through hull No. 13.

The G-20s come with either a standard cut-out transom version (pictured top right) or an optional full transom with Armstrong bracket; the boat features a console (left) that conceals the electronics behind a flush dashboard; further aiding the G-20's fishability is flush/retractable deck hardware (lower right).



Kevlar outer skins (optional), vinylester resin, Core Cell and a remarkable grid system deliver a strong, light and extremely rigid structure that stays put and makes the G-20 an exceptionally able boat, even in rough water. The bottom is solid glass and Kevlar, and the topsides are vacuum-bagged and laminated with 3/4-inch CoreCell. The deck and cockpit sole use 3/4-inch CoreCell for strength and less weight.

Also notable in the construction is the structural "Prismagrid" product developed by a Florida firm called Compys. This company delivers to the builder a ready-to-wet single piece grid, which is applied just after the inner skins are placed. Wet-out and installation of the entire system of pre-indexed glass-covered high density foam (in 6-inch foot-

year he began renting an additional 3,000-square-foot facility on the Gloucester waterfront to use as his new glass shop. The combination of Berkman's attention to detail and another fine Doug Zurn design produces an irresistible choice for someone who values function wrapped in a handsome set of lines.

G-20s are sold direct from Gloucester Boat Building Co. or Zurn Yacht Design, as well as from a growing number of dealers, including: Cape Ann Marine in Gloucester, Mass.; Mystic River Boathouse in Noank, Conn.; and Chesapeake Boating Center/J-Port in Annapolis, Md. www.gboats.com ■



The Gloucester 20's attractive sheerline adds to the aesthetics of her profile, but it also creates a larger entry to combat chop.

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prints) is accomplished as a primary bond (as opposed to a secondary, less reliable bond). It then cures simultaneously with the hull laminate. This process takes about two hours as opposed to "stick building" a similar structure, which might take a couple of days of trimming and fitting. Since it is done with the hull itself still "wet" and in the mold, there is no print through, or "hard spots" in the hull or topsides. Voids are filled with expansion foam, leaving no place for errant water to pool, and the fuel tank is installed in the center, between two massive fore and aft stringers.

Getting attention

With its \$29,300 base price without engine, and \$50,000-\$60,000 price tag for a fully equipped boat with engine, electronics and trailer, the G-20 emerges competitively priced to similar Edgewater, Boston Whalers or Grady-Whites. The G-20, however, provides the buyer with a more intimate involvement with the creation of his or her boat, as all G-20s are built on a semi-custom basis. The new owner of the boat we tested, Pete Meyer, keeps his in the estuaries of Essex, Mass. He is happy to lope along with the weekend crowd headed out the Essex River, then as his fellow boaters go up to speed, he says he has been known to peg it and dust them. That's kind of fun, especially when the 4-stroke is only burning a couple of gallons per hour at cruising speed. With the G-20's standard 63-gallon fuel tank, Meyer can cruise non-stop from Essex to Nantucket and most of the way back on a single tank.

For Berkman, building these boats realizes a longtime dream: building quality boats in his own shop. To that end, and to meet increased demand, last