

impressions | Chaparral

By Michael Verdon



Beat The Clock

Put your time to good use with a ride aboard Chaparral's nimble, cleverly designed 236 SSI.

There's something liberating about boating on an empty lake on a Tuesday afternoon, when most people are watching clocks. That feeling of pleasure gets ratcheted up a notch or two when you're screaming across the water at 50 mph on a showroom-fresh bowrider, with three hours on the engine. Throw in a warm sunny day, hanging out on the transom in a secluded cove, and you have the recipe for the perfect boat test.

But even in a cold downpour, testing boats never gets old — especially when testing the nimble, fast ones. It's like meeting a new person. There's a thrill about seeing a new face and gauging the strong points, while looking for flaws behind the cosmetics. First impressions count, but ultimately it comes down to the details that determine the personality — and your assessment of it.

You had that experience recently on Chaparral's 236 SSI, one of the company's latest offerings. Lake Tarpon, just outside of Clearwater, Florida, is wind-swept and cobbled with waves on the test day — not exactly foot-high speed bumps, but you can hear the hull thumping as it rockets along.

The 236 goes head to head with other brands in this highly competitive niche, with a comprehensive list of standard features that's long enough to brag about — the cockpit table, insulated bow cooler, oversized ski locker, and integrated swim platform. There are a few warts on the boat, but gener-



ally it's well-built and smartly designed, and a pleasure to drive. You and a friend have a half-day to test the 236, running it hard in the chop, squeezing out white-knuckle turns, and later hanging out on the sunpad and transom. It's a great day boat, for either two couples or a small family.

The quality on the 236 starts at the stern — a long, integrated swim platform that gives the profile an unbroken, sweeping look (unlike some bolt-ons) while removing a lot of potential stress from the transom. The platform measures 27 inches by 86 inches, with a three-step ladder to starboard. There's also a 15-inch by 16-inch wet stowage bin to port, with a 5-inch depth. The bin is fine for stowing a towrope, but it's insulated, too, for cold drinks. The platform's generous size allows easy water access, making it a place where kids can jump off the boat at anchor, or for adults to put on water skis without feeling like they're falling off of a narrow step.

That sense of space translates forward into the cockpit, with a U-shaped lounge extending 47 inches forward from the rear to the front edge, near the helm and companion seats. Storage is on the starboard side, and to port, there's a carry-on cooler. The 12-inch-wide walkthrough center channel from the transom to the cockpit is preferable to having to step over the large sunpad, though you have

to push the cushions into the cockpit. Still, details like that set the boat apart from the competition.

The same goes for the engine compartment, which is unusually roomy for a boat this size, providing good working space. Still, the design would've been better if Chaparral had built-in storage boxes on both sides of the MerCruiser. As it stands, the space is wasted — and gear you try to stow would probably end up in the bilge. Boxes could be an aftermarket feature.

The only other flaw that's discussed involves the bottoms of the helm and companion bucket seats. On the surface, the seats are top-notch, using top-grade vinyl, while offering lumbar support and shock absorption. But the flip-up bolsters show the inner foam and plastic skeleton, and glue oozes from under the vinyl.

Even with this oversight, the helm is still the place to be, offering a straightforward and glare-free view (thanks to the color-coordinated beige helm station) of the water, and a sense of style with a wood-grain dash, Faria gauges, illuminated rocker switches and tilt steering wheel. (Resettable breakers are located directly below the wheel so you don't have to crawl under the helm to get to them.)

The 236 has Chaparral's Extended V-Plane hull, which gives it a quick time to plane of 4 seconds. Part of that's also due to the extra horses in the upgraded 350-hp

THE VERDICT

Chaparral's created a top-of-the-line vessel in the 236 SSI. Aside from a few minor nitpicks, it's well-built and smartly designed, and has plentiful storage. It's nimble and fast and has a quick time to plane. With a comprehensive list of features and a boat that's fun to drive, you can't go wrong with this bowrider.

Chaparral 236 SSI

LOA 21'6"

Beam 8'6"

Weight 4,338 lbs.

Fuel 54 gal.

Top Speed 50.9 mph

(w/350-hp, 5.7L MerCruiser MAG BIII)

Time To Plane 4 seconds

0-30 mph 7 seconds

Decibels @ Idle 72 dB-A

Decibels @ 30.8 mph 83 dB-A

Decibels @ WOT 92 dB-A

Base Price \$45,387

(w/260-hp, 5.0L MerCruiser MPI Alpha)

Price As Tested \$48,986

(w/350-hp, 5.7L MerCruiser MAG BIII)

Hull Warranty Lifetime limited

NMMA Certified? Yes

Chaparral Boats Inc.

P.O. Box 928

Nashville, GA 31639

(229) 686-7481

www.chaparralboats.com




350 MAG MPI (a 260-hp, 5.0L MerCruiser is standard) and the tracking ability of the Bravo III drive. There's some excessive bow rise when bringing it on plane, but you get over the hump fast enough to prevent it from turning into a problem.



You can't fake a good ride on a bad hull, so the driver does his best to throw the 236 off-kilter running rings around Lake Tarpon, but with little success. Despite a slightly annoying rattle from the canvas on the bimini, the boat stays firmly on track in the half-foot chop, turning on a dime with no hint of skidding, and staying dry (except for minor splashes now and then) going upwind. It's a really fun boat to drive, and the MerCruiser 350 MAG feels just right.

But the boat's also designed to work hard at rest. The insulated ice chest in the bow has an overboard drain (the same goes for the cupholders), and standard features include an aft cockpit table, with filler cushion. Storage is plentiful, with space under the bow cushions (hinged tops) and a large in-floor wakeboard locker. A snap-in carpet is optional over the diamond-patterned nonskid.

The walk-through window has a nifty but functional magnetic latch that holds it open. All through-hull fittings and cleats are stainless-steel, with backing plates. But the transom lift rings don't have any bedding, and water trickles into the engine while backing down the boat.

Still, the overall impression of the 236 SSi is one of a top-class bowrider that can compete with just about any other boat in its class. It's not the least expensive among its competitors, but it offers many superior amenities. Plus, it provides a great way to enjoy a day on the water — which beats watching the clock any day of the week. 

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