

WAKEUP CALL

**WAKEBOARDERS! DO YOU REALLY
NEED TO BUY THAT V-DRIVE BOAT?**
BY JEFF HEMMEL
PHOTOS BY JOSH LETCHWORTH

Wakeboarders aren't easily satisfied. To placate their aerial cravings, they need the right hull to shape the wake, ballast to increase its height, a tower to raise the towrope high above the water, and a speed control system to compensate for dear ol' Dad's lousy driving. And while you're at it, toss in some extra room to accommodate a crowd and racks to hold the boards. • Until recently, the only boats that fit the bill were V-drives produced by skiboat manufacturers, which makes sense. After all, who best understands what people on the other end of a towrope are looking for? What they gave us became the standard, the dream machines of aspiring riders everywhere. • But as the market grew, mainstream boatbuilders wanted in on the action. With wakeboarding soaring in popularity, soon towers, ballast, and even speed controls were showing up on everything from your generic stern drive to speedy sport jets. But can these pretenders to the throne live up to the standard set by the V-drive? And more important to real-world boaters, can they work as versatile, well-mannered family boats the other 23 hours of the day? • We grabbed an experienced rider, rounded up a trio of boats, and set out in search of answers.

THE TIME HAS COME
After years of V-drives holding the wakeboard crown, stern drives and jets are making a serious challenge for best all-around package.

FLY BOYS

Our test fleet represented the best of the best for each type of propulsion. Representing jets was Sea-Doo's 230 Wake. Defending the honor of stern drives was Chaparral's 224 Extreme. And taking a stand for V-drives was Malibu's Wakesetter 23 LSV.

Each offers a stylish, well-built tower and some form of cruise control. For the Sea-Doo and Chaparral, it's the industry-standard PerfectPass. Malibu uses its proprietary system linked to the engine's digital throttle and shift.

The 23', 3,900-pound Malibu came with the base 340-hp Indmar Monsoon, which had more than enough power. The boat features four ballast tanks: one on each side of the engine, one under the cockpit sole, and one in the bow. That's a total of 1,250 pounds. Our boat included the optional (\$2,222) Power Wedge, a hydrofoil that drops down from the transom to pull the boat deeper into the water. Any combination of tanks and foil can be used, allowing the rider and driver to dial in the wake. As tested, the Malibu cost \$63,810. Add another \$2,500 if you must have a trailer.

Our 22'4", 4,300-pound Chaparral featured a 300-hp Volvo Penta 5.7 Gi/DPS, a welcome step up from the base 270 hp. There's a single 25-gallon ballast tank just forward of amidships that adds 209 pounds. The standard boat comes fully tricked out—it's not just a bowrider with a tower bolted on—and sells for \$69,441 without a trailer (which can be had for about \$2,500).

Sea-Doo's 23'6", 3,635-pound contender came with twin Rotax 215-hp 4-TEC engines, each linked to a jet pump. This is a \$5,000 upgrade from the standard twin 155-hp jets and wasn't needed. The boat holds 1,000 pounds of ballast, split between two soft bags under seats

on each side. As powered, and with a trailer, you'll pay \$50,999.

IN THE WAKE

For wake analysis, we relied on Ryan Jones, a pro rider from central Florida. Jones spent considerable time behind each boat, noting everything from the size, shape, and firmness of the wake to the consistency of the pull. His help proved invaluable in comparing each boat from the rider's point of view.

Jones is a pro, so from his hardcore perspective it wasn't surprising that neither jet nor stern drive compared well with the V-drive. He said the V-drive's wake was firmer, taller, and ideally shaped, allowing the rider to use it more effectively as a launch platform. The wake also maintained its shape a greater distance from the boat, allowing experienced riders to use a longer rope—which provides greater air time. True, it took a whopping amount of ballast and the Power Wedge to achieve that ultimate ramp, but the combination worked.

On the other hand, Jones admitted to being surprised at how nice the wake was behind the stern drive, deeming it good and clean, with a great shape and enough size to allow beginners, intermediates, and advanced riders to get a consistent pop. He added, however, that the wake wasn't as steep as either the V-drive's or jet's, resulting in a gentler trajectory through the air. This requires riders to understand a little bit more about line tension to achieve the height they desire. He also said that, if desired, passenger load or add-on ballast bags might increase the wake's height.

Despite 1,000 pounds of ballast, the jet's wake proved relatively soft, which Jones said forced him use his legs

MADE IN THE SHADE Of the two challengers, this boat outshines the V-drive with its versatile combination of good wake, family comfort, and smooth ride.





VOICE ON THE LINE We listen as Ryan Jones flies, and doesn't lie about which type of boat is best for you—while underway and towing.



more to obtain the desired pop. While peaky enough to allow basic spins and inverts from wake to wake, it made riding behind the jet more tiring. The wake also lacked consistency. Its shape kept changing slightly because the boat weaved as the rider pulled on the line.

With no underwater hardware to grip the water, the jet had the worst tracking of the three. When the rider pulls hard on a cut, he pulls the boat, which causes the driver to correct. The result is a line of shallow S-turns down the run. The rider's pull also affects speed, causing the driver or speed control system to compensate by briefly increasing throttle. That burst of power typically comes mid-flight for the rider, who is then yanked forward on his downward path, a feeling Jones equates to a tug-of-war between rider and boat.

AT THE WHEEL

To keep a rider happy, the driver tries to maintain a straight course. The jet had a tough time of this. But the stern drive and V-drive tracked well and resisted the sideways pull of the rider.

The driver also needs to hold a steady speed, usually around 24 mph, no matter what's going on at the end of the tow line. This "just on plane" speed can be difficult to maintain, especially in a turn.

With its speed control activated, the V-drive stuck to 24 mph with only minimal corrections. The boat's downward shaft angle and minimal 10 degrees of deadrise let it get and stay on plane with ease. Its engine's smooth and sensitive digital throttle response—typical for a V-drive wake-

board boat—also helped.

The stern drive, with its steeper deadrise and weighty drive unit aft, needed more frequent throttle corrections. But it managed, and we were impressed. Chaparral has done a better job of integrating the PerfectPass speed control system than most stern drive boatbuilders.

Only the jet drive fared below average in speed control. As mentioned, with little in the water, even an average rider can pull the boat from side to side, making the driver and PerfectPass work at keeping a constant speed.

Ballast was an issue in some boats. When not running perfectly straight, the V-drive's massive additional weight becomes intrusive. Having the type's typically low freeboard, these boats demand a gentle touch in turns to avoid taking water over the gunwale. The ballast also increased bowrise enough to block forward visibility while powering onto plane.

The jet drive wasn't affected as much by its ballast. It has higher freeboard so tight turns weren't as scary and bowrise was acceptable. Having minimal ballast, the stern drive boat had no issues at all.

With ballast tanks empty, the jet drive with its twin pivoting nozzles and the V-drive with a rudder and midship tracking fins reverted to their nimble selves. Both accelerated quickly onto plane and railed through corners. The V-drive's fixed shaft angle pushed the boat forward and its bow down. The level angle of the jet's nozzles pushed the boat directly forward. Both had a performance edge in acceleration and bowrise over the stern drive.

Once on plane, however, the stern drive's ability to trim

paid big dividends by reducing the wetted surface of the hull, thereby increasing efficiency and top speed. The jet did well at speed. But the V-drive's downward shaft angle causes the bow to plow, reducing its top speed.

Around the dock, each had its issues. The stern drive enjoys the benefits of vectored thrust, a huge advantage over the other two, especially in reverse. Jets can also direct their thrust, but not in as predictable a way as with an I/O. A jet can be challenging for beginners, although we've seen experienced jet boaters make it look easy. As with all inboards, the V-drive is hard to steer in reverse, and at slow speeds the prop's torque kicks the stern around, which can be used to help (once you know what you are doing).



LITTLE BIG MAN

Here's a fourth alternative—a waterbike. Sea-Doo's Wake comes with either 155 hp (\$11,499) or 215 hp (\$12,799) in a hull based on the three-passenger GTX. It has a retractable tow pylon and gunwale-mounted board racks, and it's the first to have ballast. Easily removable twin plastic tanks sit on the aft platform and slightly forward into the footwells. This can add up to 200 pounds by using the jet pump.

That added weight boosts wake size slightly but does more for its shape and firmness, allowing a rider to perform tricks you wouldn't normally see behind a waterbike. Wakeskaters are also big fans, as the lower wakes are better for many tricks. Plus, the bike can maneuver quickly back to a fallen rider without disturbing the water as much as a boat does.

Driving with full ballast and someone in tow is like having a heavy passenger behind you. The Sea-Doo is slightly tippy at idle speeds and feels stern heavy underway, but it's manageable. Sea-Doo's new trim system, which allows for driver presets, helps. It lacks a speed control similar to what's on Yamaha's high-end waterbike. This would eliminate some of the surging that's unavoidable while trying to maintain a steady speed with a thumb throttle. —JEFF HEMMEL

STOW THE BOARD

Beyond wakeboarding, each form of propulsion has its advantages and disadvantages.

A jet drive has the least draft, as little as 1' in the case of our Sea-Doo. By comparison, the V-drive extends 2'3" below the surface and the stern drive 2'9". In fairness, the stern drive can be trimmed as high as 1'6" and still keep going, while the V-drive's depth is fixed. Strike an underwater object or go aground and the jet would fare best. The stern drive should kick up, which might reduce damage. But the V-drive's rudder, shaft, and prop would take a beating, possibly even poking a hole in the bottom of the boat.

The jet also holds an advantage in terms of security, with no exposed prop to endanger a downed rider. A V-drive's prop is well under the hull, farther away from swimmers than the stern drive's. However, an extended swim platform can reduce this potential problem for transom-mounted stern drives.

All three have their engines in the stern, keeping the cockpit clear and spacious. Both jet and stern drives direct their power out the transom. A V-drive's driveshaft runs forward into a gearbox, where it's redirected aft. As a result, the engine sits "backward" in its compartment, which makes maintenance tasks more complex.

As for fuel efficiency, the stern drive and V-drive got 3.3 mpg at 24 mph—better than the jet, which only got 2.4 mpg. At 30 mph, both prop boats averaged 3.0 mpg, whereas the jet got 2.3 mpg. Beyond 35 mph the stern drive was the clear efficiency winner, with the jet and V-drive suffering, as neither have drives that can be trimmed.

CRUNCH TIME

How do they stack up in the end? Price is one consideration.

Our jet-powered Sea-Doo 230 Wake goes for only \$50,999. Make it even more of a bargain and save \$5,000 by getting the smaller engines, which we think would do just fine. As tested, that's about \$13,000 less than the Malibu and nearly \$20,000 less than the Chaparral. The jet may use more gas, but its low price more than makes up for that. The jet is also fun to drive, it's safe, its 16 degrees of deadrise softens the waves, and it has low-draft versatility. Its wake, however, isn't up to par, nor is the driving experience while towing.

The V-drive Malibu Wakesetter 23 LSV remains the ideal for wakeboarding. It was easy to drive and produced the best wake, which could be tailored to any skill level. That said, it also offers minimal freeboard when fully loaded with ballast, and its shallow deadrise delivered a hard ride in rough conditions.

That leaves the stern drive Chaparral 224. As our wake expert reported, it produced a surprisingly good wake and requires little to no extra ballast to get there. It's also a solid choice for the driver, as it tracks straight and is minimally affected by the rider. But what ultimately swayed our opinion is that it's arguably the best compromise for the vast majority of us who need a boat for more than just wakeboarding. Its 18-degree deadrise takes the jolt out of rougher, real-world conditions, and the stern drive has great manners at speed and around the dock.

So if your kids are demanding a wakeboard boat, but you need it do other things as well, the Chaparral stern drive is a pretender no more. †