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Albin 26: 'Smooth and Steady'

This deep-V center console embarrasses much larger boats in heavy seas. Anglers will love the well-thought-out cockpit and deck. Construction materials and methods are a little behind the times.

Arjen Steegstra's Downeast-style 35-footer was doing just fine in the 4- to 6-foot seas off of Chatham, MA. The boat, with its sharp entry and significant flare, pushed aside the rollers to maintain a nice 21-knot pace in a wind blowing 20 knots. Then along came a much smaller open boat, a 25-foot, 8-inch center console powered with a single diesel. "He blew right by us at 28 knots, smooth and steady," said Steegstra. "Right then, I knew I had to have one of those boats."

This mid-1990s rough-water drive-by ended up becoming the catalyst for the development and production of one of the best-riding small center console boats PBR has tested in recent years. Albin Marine, mostly known for its low-priced diesel-powered open cockpit express fishing boats, is the builder. The 26 center console is the smallest boat in an Albin lineup that tops out at 45 feet.



We faced 4- to 6-footers in the Gulf of Mexico. The Albin cruised comfortably at about 20 knots. The ride was dry and smooth, with no slamming or rattling.

Industry Connection Led to Partnership with Albin

Steegstra, a resident of Gloucester, MA, who fishes for giant tuna off Cape Cod (quite successfully—see below), did get his 26-footer. The driver—and designer—of the 26 mentioned above was Ron Menard, owner of Cape Cod Marine, which also did the finishing work on Steegstra's 35-footer.

Steegstra actually sold his Cape Cod 26 because someone was willing to pay thousands of dollars more than he paid for it. Later, Steegstra regretted the move and started hounding Cape Cod Marine to build another 26 for him. But the builder was having production problems. Steegstra grew impatient, so he used his contacts in the marine industry as a seller of Volvo diesels to begin negotiations with Albin Marine in nearby Connecticut. Albin powers many of its boats with Volvo engines. After about a year, Steegstra finally convinced Albin to build its first Menard-designed 26, which he bought. Albin wanted to put teak and seats all over the boat, but Steegstra and Menard convinced them that they were straying from the whole idea behind the boat.

Design

The whole idea was to give fishermen a small open boat that could handle rough water. This meant the hull had to be relatively long and narrow, with a sharp entry, and lots of deadrise. The engine sits under the console, and the twin 80-gallon aluminum fuel tanks are mounted outboard and aft—both help lower the center of gravity and smooth out the ride even further.

Ron Menard designed his boat after putting in a year's worth of research. He examined the designs of well-known offshore outboard boats from builders like Contender and Regulator.

He noticed that some of these vessels were overly tender because most of their weight—the fuel tank and outboards—is on the centerline. So he made it a point to place the fuel tanks along the outboard sides of the hull.

Another observation: Many boats have very low cockpit soles, which means that if a couple of guys stand in the cockpit, the scuppers become submerged. On the Albin 26, the cockpit sole is raised significantly to avoid this. Even with a 795-pound tuna hanging out the transom, and one person in the cockpit, the scuppers on the 26 are several inches above the water (see photo on page 3).

Performance

We had a great day for a sea trial ... the Coast Guard had posted a small-craft warning. The 2-foot chop in Tampa Bay, FL, quickly morphed into 4- to 6-footers as we headed into the Gulf of Mexico. The boat rode comfortably at about 20 knots. We did not pound and we did not get wet. We did encounter a loss of steering control for a few minutes before we reached the Gulf. We turned the boat to port to maintain our course, but when we turned back to starboard the boat continued to go to port. We had to stop the boat to regain control. The steering was fine after that. We could not duplicate the situation. The builder said one of the trim tabs, which were not working at the time of our sea trial, may have been stuck in a lower position than the other.

At 3-1/2 turns from lock to lock, the hydraulic steering was easy to operate and responsive. The helm seat was comfortable. But our test boat's stationary footrest, which is part of the aluminum frame of the helm seat, dug into our tester's calves while he drove the boat standing. Visibility was very good. The boat planed off at a flat angle so that the bow never cut off our view of the horizon—even when the PBR tester punched the throttle while seated.

The horizontally mounted steering wheel was at the perfect height for our 6-foot, 2-inch tester. The horn switch is in the top right-hand corner of a panel of toggle switches. We'd prefer it separated from the pack and colored red for quick recognition.

Construction

End-grain balsa is used as a coring material in the decks, hull sides, and the outboard sections of the hull bottom. Menard said he is well aware that balsa needs to be used with care to avoid water intrusion and subsequent rotting of the wood. But he likes the strength and stiffness it brings to the boat. The first 6 inches of the top of the hull sides are solid glass. The balsa is removed from all through-hull areas and replaced with a composite material. "Nothing, nothing goes through the core," said Menard.

The coring on the bottom is done specifically to support the twin fuel tanks, said Menard. His earlier boats had solid glass bottoms. Menard made the switch because he saw that the bottoms would actually flex when they sat on the arms of boat lifts. "I wanted more protection for the tanks," he said. The bottom of the boat from the centerline outboard to the stringers is solid glass. All through-hulls are in this solid-glass section.

It's good that Albin is carefully installing the coring material. However, we do think the builder should consider vacuum-bagging the core for an even better bond between the glass skins and core.

The builder also currently uses marine-grade plywood for stringers and bulkheads. They're coated in polyester resin and encapsulated in fiberglass. We think vinylester resin should be used. It is more durable and crack resistant. On the plus side, the builder does use a 100 percent vinylester resin in the skin coat for blister protection.

Cockpit/Deck



The 26's tuna door is usually large enough—not for this 795-pound bluefin, though. Note that the scupper drains are still above the waterline despite this monster.

You can tell that a fisherman designed this boat.

Menard opted against a two-part tuna door. The deck cap at the transom remains intact over the door to maintain hull stiffness and strength.

We mentioned the raised cockpit sole and deck. Kudos and accolades. We also like the non-stop toekick. It's everywhere ... at the transom, sides, and bow. The cleats, chocks, and nav lights are recessed. The anchor locker is huge.

The fit and finish on our test boat is not on the same level as a Regulator or Contender. The forward hatch lids will slam against the hull sides if you let them. And the centerline hatch lid that leads to the portable head fit poorly.

The engine sits under the console. Two hatches on the outboard sides of the console give you quick access. The entire console swings forward to provide complete access. An electrically powered winch with cable pulls the console forward. This works fine, but the winch on our test boat could not be operated manually. And the console is heavy: it'll take two men to lift it. And then there's no means of holding it up.

We think the builder needs to come up with a better way of providing full engine access.

The fuel tank installation is better than most we've seen. The aluminum tanks can be extracted without cutting the sole. But we'd do away with the thin sheets of foam on the bottom and the sides of the aluminum. Foam traps moisture and leads to corrosion.

Conclusion

This is a great offshore boat, with just about all the cockpit characteristics we like. And the fuel economy of a diesel adds to its allure.

There's room for improvement. We'd like to see the builder use more advanced boatbuilding techniques, such as vacuum bagging the core. In addition, the access to the engine should not rely upon an electrical winch, in our opinion.

The 26 with a single 315-hp diesel retails for \$89,900. Crazy, right? However, believe it or not, the Albin is a less expensive alternative than some other outboard-powered 26-foot center consoles. For instance, the Regulator 26 with twin 250-hp 4-strokes (it's not offered with an inboard or single outboard) retails for \$117,500.

Contact - Albin Marine, 203/661-4341, www.albinmarine.com.

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