



Everglades 435 CC

BET YOU DON'T KNOW CENTER CONSOLES...

No longer just utilitarian and strong, center consoles have gone from ugly workhorse to handsome prince. By Dean Travis Clarke

The boat's entire interior — from stem to stern — became usable workspace. That boat became the equally iconic Boston Whaler 17 Nauset (later the Montauk).

Boston Whaler. In 1961, while experimenting with center of gravity on a new model, Fisher mounted a steering wheel on a box so he could move it around inside the hull. His epiphany came when he saw how wide open the hull was for fishing.

Ultimately, Fisher hired Bob Dougherty as Whaler's chief engineer, and he introduced the concept of the "Unsinkable Hull." After many years with Whaler, Dougherty started Edgewater Boats in Florida and subsequently Everglades Boats — both truly innovative marques and still very successful to this day.

Some aficionados choose to believe that Aquasport introduced the first center console. However, that company was founded in 1967 and debuted its first model — a 17-foot center console — in 1968.



HydraSports 53 Sueños



Sea Vee 370Z

CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY

Technology has advanced further and faster in the last 50 years than in all the time humans have walked on two feet. That applies to center consoles as well as the marine industry in general. Certainly some of the advances have less significance than others; still others have been game-changers.

► Design & Construction

Computer design paired with five-axis routers allow builders to make much more exacting tooling. Composite technology combined with new construction methods such as resin infusion and vacuum bagging make hulls that have no air pockets in the laminate and enjoy a stronger and lighter resin-to-glass ratio. Better resins have all but licked the osmotic blistering problem prevalent just a few years ago. And all this construction technology also makes for a healthier and safer workplace for the craftsmen on the lines.

Hull design itself has also changed, with ever-growing lengths and beams and smoother-riding steps or vents. Where the original 17- to 21-footers served well for inshore waters, far offshore is where owners want to go now, out to the canyons or over to the Bahamas or to Mexico from Florida or California. HydraSports Custom recently debuted its mammoth 53 Sueños — the largest outboard-powered center console on the market. It carries 1,000 gallons of fuel. Before your jaw drops, consider this: You can hang four 627 hp outboards on the transom.



HydraSports 53 Sueños



Edgewater 368CC



Boston Whaler Outrage 370



Hunt 32CC



Scout 420 XLF

► Stuff

The advent of larger and larger hulls naturally calls for “stuff” to fill the additional space, which means another change. A console with sitting-only headroom, a portable toilet, a single baitwell in the transom and a pair of skinny, non-insulated fishboxes in the cockpit sole are no longer adequate. In lieu of those, the market prefers a cabin with standing headroom and a realistic berth, a porcelain toilet or even a separate head with a shower stall, a sunpad with copious storage beneath, and heavily insulated fishboxes — often with cold plates to cut down on the amount of ice you need to bring aboard. Don’t forget generators, air conditioning, industrial ice-makers, joystick controls, enough storage for an entire tackle store, über-comfortable seating both fore and aft, and a “dive door” in the hull side to use for swimming or to make boarding and disembarking more “lady-like.”

► Going Places

Such long-distance capability calls for far better navigation abilities than those old inshore boats ever had. Thankfully, marine electronics have kept pace. Absolutely everything you need — everything the largest commercial ships have aboard — is now available to us in integrated form. Our chartplotters can communicate with our radars and autopilots. We can use the same display to navigate and monitor engine performance, pumps, entertainment systems, and other vessels in the area, and to send distress messages with our position and information about our boat and its occupants to search and rescue. Plus, we can see individual fish sitting on the bottom in 10,000 feet of water!

► Power & Speed

And therein lies yet another huge technology advance. Some 99 percent of all center consoles sold go with outboard power. Precious few builders even offer inboards in this niche any longer. In addition to Yamaha’s 350 hp engines, Mercury now offers 400s, and Seven Marine created its own market with 557 and 627 hp units.

In my childhood, 20 knots was pretty darn fast. Today, a center console won’t sell if it doesn’t top out at well over 50 mph. Alden Thornton at Nor-Tech shared the story of a customer he took out for a sea trial on a 39-footer with 12 people aboard, and they still topped out at 82.7 mph. Now you know where that fuel goes! But just think: With that kind of fuel capacity, you could drop back to a slow cruising speed and have the range to make it way down into Baja or out to Bermuda or non-stop L.A. to San Francisco. An Alaska fishing trip would be a breeze.



Mag Bay 33



Scout 420 XLF



Boston Whaler Outrage 370



Everglades 435CC

CHANGE IN ACTIVITIES

Since the birth of the totally utilitarian, no-bells-or-whistles, small inshore fishing platform that was the original center console, many conceptual changes have taken place. Where once the center console qualified as the equivalent of a seagoing man-cave, today, that’s rarely true.

According to Scout Boats’ Alan Lang, almost all center consoles today serve multiple applications. “Our customers want what I call a date-night boat. They want to fish during the day and yet be able to cruise aboard a fancy boat with family and friends later,” Lang said, adding that bare-bones just doesn’t make it in today’s market. “Our customers expect more, which is why we add air conditioning to the console and the cabin — and yes, there actually is a real cabin, even on our 30-footer. Most of our customers want what I call a gentleman’s fishing boat.”

Make no mistake: hardcore fishing still occupies the firmest footing in this niche. In fact, today’s models offer more serious fishing features and abilities than any of their predecessors.

“Today’s boats provide plenty of secure rod storage, as many rod holders at customer-dictated angles and superior pressurized livewells to not only supply enough water flow for baits but to also stop the sloshing around that

beats baits up so badly,” said Sea Vee’s John Caballero. “At the same time, we offer innovative seating that folds away and hides in forward gunwales and in the transom, so when you do want to take your family out cruising, everyone can be comfortable.”

Barrett Howarth at California’s newest builder of beautiful center consoles, Mag Bay, said that the aesthetic demands of today’s buyers have changed as well. “Even the most serious anglers want their boat to look good,” he said. “Companies still building hulls with lots of sharp angles and workboat looks aren’t succeeding like those embracing radius curves, flowing lines and gentler shapes.” Barrett’s father, Michael, is the brilliant engineer who partnered in the repeatedly successful boat companies Pacific Seacraft and Cabo Yachts.

RELATIVELY NEW FEATURES

› Joystick Controls

With joystick controls available for every form of propulsion now, the least experienced tyro can — with 10 minutes instruction — dock like a pro even in adverse conditions. And men beware: Gone are the days when your significant other will automatically defer to you when it comes to boat handling. In fact, gone are the days when she needs you aboard at all.

› Dive Door

This innovation serves multiple purposes and therefore qualifies as one of my favorites. A section of the hull side is hinged and swings in or out (depending on the manufacturer). For sitting alongside a dock, I prefer doors that swing inward. At the dock, ladies in dresses boarding for your cocktail cruise will never need to sit on the gunwale and swing their legs over again. Rather, they can step aboard daintily. For swimming and diving, it affords access to the boat away from the propellers.

› Chill Plates

One of the most onerous tasks fishermen must regularly undertake is ice management. A serious fishing trip requires buying and storing hundreds of pounds of ice — no mean feat in un-insulated fish boxes. Most upper-tier CCs today offer optional cold plates integrated into heavily insulated boxes that readily provide cold ranging from soda and beer temps to turning seawater into slushy brine.

› Towers

Fishermen have long known that the greater the elevation of the spotter, the better one could see fish below the surface. For a long while, center consoles had no elevated point from which to scout. Then T-tops came along, providing both shade at the helm and a handhold for spotters when standing on the gunwales. Finally, towers entered the picture on center consoles from the biggest to the smallest, often with the ability to fold down for storage or trailering. The advent of digital controls for outboards allowed two complete, independent helm stations for upper and lower control.

› Hideaway Seating

The entire raison d'être for a center console design is to afford fisherman an unobstructed 360-degree workspace. When your family wants to cruise and needs comfortable seating (hardcore fishermen historically stand for the entire day), built-in "furniture" is nice but trashes the unobstructed fishing access. Hideaway seating started with padded benches that folded out from the transom. When that proved successful (and acceptable), some companies built the same kind of foldaway seating into the bulwarks forward. Another very functional addition replaced the old-school "coffin box" previously used for fish, with a large box on pneumatic lifts that not only provides large sunpad lounging space, but copious storage within as well.



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Edgewater 368CC



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Edgewater 368CC

ON THE HORIZON

The 50-plus-foot size range has reached its max for the moment," Leva said. "Not because there's no market for a larger model, but we've butted up against the limits of outboard power — for the time being." With four and five engines on the transom of boats this size, there just isn't enough space to hang more powerheads. Boat size will likely continue its upward motion when manufacturers introduce higher horsepower units.

The once plebian center console has finally claimed its rightful place as perhaps the most functional, multitasking small luxury yacht in the world. 🐾



HydraSports 53 Sueños



Mag Bay 33



Hunt 32 CC

CHANGES IN BUYERS

Center consoles once appealed to the average blue-collar fisherman. Affordable and unadorned, the boat could be used to fish all day, and back at the dock it could be clean in 10 minutes. "At the outset, I compare the old center console owner to a 1954 Ford F150 pickup truck with mechanical windows, no backseat, three manual gears on the steering wheel post and a vent window. Today's center console buyer is an Escalade with all its luxury features," said HydraSports Custom's president, Alex Leva. Today, center consoles can easily cost a half million dollars or much more. The Seven Marine outboards alone run more than \$70,000 apiece.

So what does the buyer of a large center console look like? Throughout the size spectrum, buyers share certain traits: sophistication, high expectations, interest in detail, desire for better quality finish and greater boating flexibility. Additionally, the niche breaks down into several sub-groups: non-fishermen (a substantial segment), multipurpose owners, large yacht owners who want a tender and long-term owners of large boats who want to downsize to handle a boat with few or no crew and who want easier maintenance.

Peter van Lancker, president of Hunt Yachts, insists that upcoming generations, being outdoor oriented, like center consoles for the ease of movement and utility. The older boaters like them for the same reason, but because you need not climb stairs. Many center console boats have one deck level from

bow to stern. "I've also found that ego often takes people in a different direction with center consoles," he said. "People who run these boats are usually considered very knowledgeable."

As I indicated, very few builders produce inboard center consoles anymore. Hunt Yachts is a notable exception, with both inboard and outboard models. "Of course, something else Hunt offers that no one else does," van Lancker said, "is a very traditional look."

To the Web

BostonWhaler.com
EvergladesBoats.com
EWBoats.com (EdgeWater)
HuntYachts.com

HydraSports.com
MagBayYachts.com
Nor-TechBoats.com
ScoutBoats.com
SeaVeeBoats.com