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## Agile Angler

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"The Blackfin 29 is hands-down the most expensive 29 foot sportfisher around," declared Blackfin dealer Brad Buettner of Long Beach, California. "But you get what you pay for," he quickly added.

Because Blackfins of any size are not exactly chock-a-block in West Coast marinas, the boats may be something of a mystery to many West Coast anglers. So first, a little history.

"The Bertram 31 was my favorite boat," Blackfin founder Carl Herndon once told Sea. In the tradition of Bertram, classic sportfishing boats built to the highest standards are Herndon's stock and trade. An alumnus of Bertram, Herndon formed Blackfin Yachts of Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1973. He still owns and operates the company.

Though Blackfins are popular among East Coast anglers, Herndon has made little effort to market his tournament-level sportfishing boats on this side of the country. Buettner's brokerage, Stan Miller Yachts of Long Beach, took on the Blackfin line in 1992, and is the sole Blackfin dealer on the West Coast.

"We wanted Blackfin because we felt they were the benchmark sportfishing boats in the 21 to 38 foot range," Buettner said. "Bertram and Hatteras once held that title. But they started specializing in larger boats."

Thus, Blackfin has filled a niche in the market -- an increasingly important one, as it turns out.

Many anglers in recent years have downsized out of large boats in the 45 foot-plus range, moving into smaller sportfishing boats that don't require a vast commitment of financial resources. Smaller boats not only cost less to buy, they're less costly to operate and maintain. And unlike a large sportfisher, a husband and wife or two fishing buddies can easily handle the boats in the Blackfin size range, without the need of paid crew.

But experienced anglers who are used to the offshore capabilities of large boats still demand roughwater seakeeping



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ability from their smaller craft. And here's where the Blackfin 29 earns its money.

Few small sportfishers can match the Blackfin's ride. Heavily built, with a wide beam, deep-V hull (22 degrees of deadrise aft) and a generously flared bow, the boat can handle serious offshore work, despite its diminutive size.

"The ride is what sells the boat," said Tracy Merrill, a Southern California fishing guide. Merrill frequently drives a client's 29 foot Blackfin -- equipped with pulpit, full railing and a bow-mounted bait tank -- as far as 60 or 70 miles offshore in search of marlin.

"It has a large-boat ride. When the sea gets snotty, it punches right back. We're able to get more fishing time in, instead of packing up and heading back. And when we do head in, a guest can sit in the cockpit with a cocktail in hand and not spill it," Merrill said.

That's just as Herndon intended. "Our boats are typically heavier and drier (than the competition)," he said.

Herndon has yet to build a cored-hull boat. Though he does use lighter materials in the deck and superstructure of his boats, Blackfin hulls are solid fiberglass.

"We like the weight, and we like it down low," he said. "We do it for stability, to give a heavy, solid, well-balanced feel."

Tipping the scales at between 11,000 and 14,000 pounds, depending upon whether the boat carries gasoline or diesel engines, the Blackfin 29 Flybridge has the heft typically associated with boats several feet longer.

Making its debut in 1983, the Blackfin 29 is still in production in two forms: the Combi with a 62 square foot cockpit, an express helm and a small cabin; and the Flybridge Sportfisherman (introduced in 1985) with a 52 square foot cockpit, a flying bridge and a full cabin. "When customers see the relatively small difference in price, they usually go for the Flybridge," Buettner said.

The Combi 's cabin has a convertible dinette forward, a small space for a galley to port and an enclosed stand-up head compartment to port. But the Flybridge carries forward V-berths, a convertible dinette to port, a full galley to starboard, plus a head compartment to starboard.

Headroom in the Flybridge model is 6 feet, 6 inches, even in the head. On the oversize bridge, there's room for five. The wide bridge does, however, mean narrow sidedecks, which can make the journey to the foredeck perilous at times.

Interior trimmings are posh. Earlier boats were well finished with traditional-looking white laminate countertops and teak-trimmed cabinetry. More recent editions have Corian-like countertops and white ash trim. The raison d'être of the Blackfin 29 may be the pursuit of fish, but the accommodations of the Flybridge model make it a comfy weekend family cruiser, as well.

Until recent years, the vast majority of Blackfin 29s were delivered with twin 454 cubic inch gasoline inboards. These 320 hp Crusaders will cruise the boat at between 22 and 26 knots, with top speeds just over 30 knots. But today, most buyers want the more fuel-miserly diesels.

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"I've never delivered a Blackfin 29 with gas engines," Buettner said.

Blackfin has offered twin Caterpillar and Cummins diesels in the 300 to 330 hp range, or twin Volvo Pentas of 230 hp. Buettner says his own Blackfin 29 Flybridge with KAMD 42 Volvo Pentas cruises comfortably at 27 to 28 knots and tops out at nearly 35 knots, while giving a range of 250 nautical miles at cruising speeds.

Accessibility to the engines is good through the twin raised engine boxes at the rear of the cockpit. But as Merrill points out, you're packing a lot of systems -- heating and air conditioning, as well as diesel and gasoline generators are options -- into a relatively small hull, so some equipment will inevitably be buried.

Over the years, Blackfin has done some tweaking here and there to improve the boats. For instance, for 1997 the 29 Flybridge has a new tournament-style center bridge with an expanded electronics console. The 1997 Combi also has a new bridgedeck with revised seating and an enlarged electronics console.

But the basic hull configuration, styling and interior layouts of the Blackfin 29 Flybridge and Combi have proved so successful that they've required virtually no changes over the boats' relatively long production runs.

As the sleek blonde says in the hair color commercial, "Expensive, yes. But worth it."

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*All or parts of the information contained in this article might be outdated.*

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