TRAILER BOAT TRIALS
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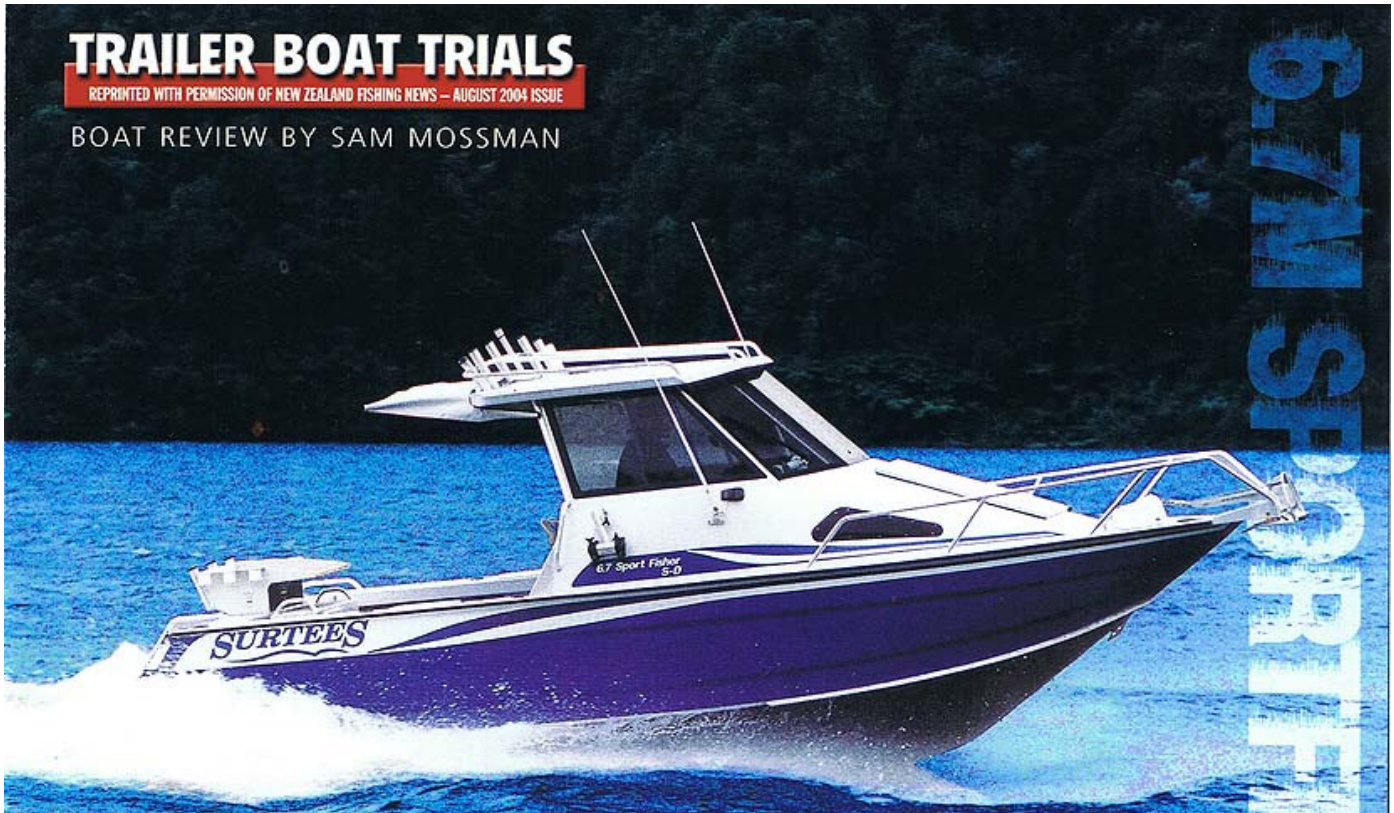
BOAT REVIEW BY SAM MOSSMAN



6.7M SPORTFISHER

SURTEES 6.7M SPORTFISHER STERN DRIVE

Surtees Boats, based in the rural Bay of Plenty near Whakatane, is a manufacturer to be reckoned with these days.

Starting as a one-man band, with owner Neil Surtees putting out about one hull a month, the increasing popularity of the innovative Surtees designs and the adoption of the latest technology and mass-production methods has seen this grow to 220 hulls a year.

These days Neil has more of a research and development role, and with the sad passing of Neil's wife, Jan, manager Phill Noblett has come to the fore.

When I arrived on a murky day in late June to do the trial, yet another large workshop was under construction, and 16 staff were hard at work. Surtees has a go-to-whoa operation these days: their own plasma cutter manufactures plate-aluminium sections to computer patterns, and at the other end of the process, two upholsterers and three mechanics do the final fit-ups.

Construction

Starting with the standard 6.7m Sportfisher Hardtop hull, Surtees has taken advantage of the latest compact, lightweight Volvo stern drive unit, the D3-160/SX, to cater for the increasing demand for stern-drive trailerboats.

The hull bottoms are 5mm, with 4mm sides and 3mm topsides. There are small reversed chines and no strakes. Six fully-welded stringers run up the full length of the hull, and additional longitudinal support is given by the plate that forms the top of the ballast tank (which we will come to in a moment). Laterally there are gussets that tie the stringers together at 400 centres, in addition to the bulkheads. Everything under the floor is fully seam-welded, making the hull very strong. Two sealed under-floor chambers provide buoyancy, but figures were not available at the time of writing. The surveyors have given this hull an 800kg safe working load.

Normally, boat manufacturers try to walk the fine line between a hull design with a deep enough vee to cut easily through the sea, but not so deep that the boat is overly tender at rest. The Surtees design allows the best of

both worlds, with a fine entry design, variable to 18° at the stern, but adding a self-flooding ballast tank along the keel line to make the hull stable when not under way.

This is done by welding a plate across the hull above the keel, forming a triangular tank that is open at the stern and vents forward up through the anchor well. As soon as the boat settles off plane, the tank floods, effectively adding about 300kg to the lowest point of the hull, then drains more-or-less instantaneously as the hull rises back onto the plane.

Power and performance

Volvo's new 160hp D3 stern drive was only launched in May of this year. This compact, five-cylinder aluminium engine (with steel cylinder liners) weighs only 310kg and is getting very close in weight and price to the latest hi-tech outboards. Surtees ordered immediately and is probably the first company in New Zealand to fit one of these engines to a trailerboat.

The Volvo Penta SX leg is spinning a 19" pitch prop, although a 17" has been tried quite successfully, and is preferred to get the idle speed down to trout-trolling levels. Standard fuel capacity is 200 litres of diesel under the floor, or 150 litres if you want an under-floor fish-bin fitted.

Test day proved to be a bit noxious weather-wise, and a heavy sea had closed the Whakatane bar. Overcast, cold and with occasional rain squalls — yep, good old Kiwi winter! Plan B was to tow the boat in the other direction, and in due course Phill and I found ourselves at Lake Okataina on the last day of the trout season. In the bleak conditions there were only a couple of boats on the water (and yes, Coutta, it is a tricky ramp to back down!). It was wind-swept and cold, and we were pretty pleased to have the shelter of a hard top.

Given that there is less buoyancy in freshwater than salt (so there is not as much lift for the hull as you would get at sea), we got 3700rpm out of the engine (rated to 4000rpm) and a smidgen under 60kph (32 knots). The electronic throttle was a bit sudden, but you get used to it. It certainly makes the boat sit up and take notice! Trim tabs from Lectrotab are fitted, but to be honest, I did not need to use them. The Hy-drive Admiral hydraulic steering was positive and good to use.

The hull, with an 18° deadrise, fine entry and down-turned chines, gave the excellent rough-water performance that Surtees hulls are known for. The keel-line ballast tank gives good stability at rest and drains in only a few seconds as the boat comes onto the plane. Outboard versions of this hull have a gate that allows the option of retaining the ballast when under way, but with the fitting of the stern drive this is not feasible.

The engine installation is remarkably compact, extending through the transom wall. This is made possible by remote-fitting the air filter and fuel filter, and having a back hatch on the transom wall to access the turbo adjustments, high pressure fuel pump and hydraulic steering. A sand trap is fitted to the water intake for shallow beach and ramp work.

Surtees has given a lot of attention to servicing access on the engine installation, and by removing screw-off front plates on the engine box, the whole engine can be pulled out in just an hour.

Anchoring

The test boat was fitted with a permanently mounted Sarca anchor on a South Pacific 800F windlass. To allow sufficient fall for this, warp capacity was limited to 100m. The control switch was mounted at the helm. Access to the bow around the cabin sides was easy, or the large forward hatch could be used.

Layout

The cabin is lined down to the squabs, with under-berth stowage. Large side pockets provide further stowage. A screw-off panel conceals the wiring behind the dash, which is neatened

1. The Sarca anchor is permanently left on the bowsprit. 2. A hardtop is difficult to beat on a bleak winter's day. 3 – 4. The compact engine and battery installations. The space is well utilised by the bait station placed on top.

by a professional-looking wiring loom. The Volvo instrumentation is linked in series with three wires only and the signals are computer-controlled, considerably reducing the amount of 'spaghetti' back there.

With in-fills added, the berths could sleep two adults and a child, full length. The step-down drains via bung into the ballast tank, and the sliding cabin door could be made lockable.

The wheelhouse has a big dash, with a marine-carpet cover and a back lip, both helping retain odds-and-ends placed there. Instruments are flush mounted, as is the VHF and sound system. Helm visibility is good, both seated or standing, through the lightly tinted toughened glass windows (4mm front, 6mm side sliders). A Roca wiper was fitted in front of the helm.

In front of the passenger was the Surtees mini-galley — shelves designed to take a gas cooker, water tank and a cup rack. Plenty of grab rails are fitted, and an extendible bimini top fits the rear of the hardtop for extra protection.

The helm seat was a swivelling upholstered plastic bucket type, while the passenger's side has a king and queen unit. Both are fitted with external bungee straps (for easy-access lifejacket stowage) and have internal storage. Wide gunwales with deck-tread panels provide further seating positions, and a pair of clip-on side seats have been modified to neatly fill the space between the engine box and the side of the boat. Fuel tank (and filling port) are fitted centrally under the deck with a magnetic gauge.

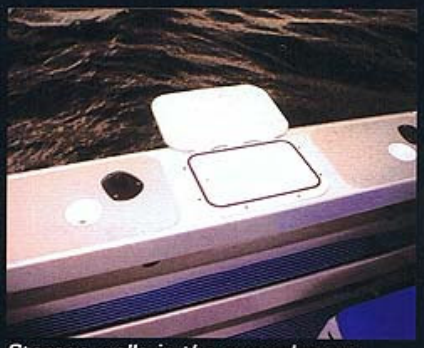
The gunwales are fully utilised with a bait/stowage locker, three sinker/cup/can holders and three rod holders along each side. Cockpit lights are fitted, including one that shines into the battery locker in the transom wall. The centre of the transom is taken up with the sealed engine box (fitted with internal bilge pump and float switch). A stowage locker in the front of the box is what Surtees call 'the pie-warmer', as it picks up heat from the engine.

The port side of the transom has a 'fish TV' livebait tank with a transom gate giving access to the chequerplate boarding platform. A fold-down 'T' boarding ladder and grabrails/tie-off points are both fitted.

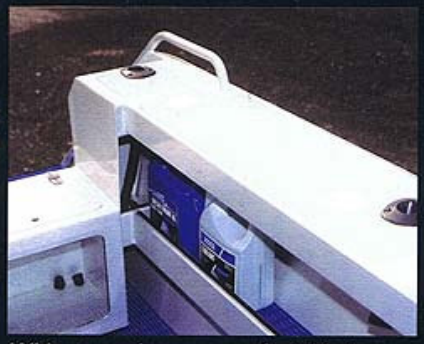
A sealed deck drains to two sumps under the transom, each fitted with a 2000gph bilge pump. Inspection hatches in the boarding platform allow easy access to these. Mounting brackets are fitted to the stern so that transducers, water pickups, etc. do not require holes to be drilled through the hull.

The hull is acid washed and painted. Raw aluminium is finished in a clear two-pot product from DuPont called Emron.

Both seating units have bungee cords for handy lifejacket storage.



Storage wells in the gunwales are a useful idea.



Wide gunwales are comfortable to perch on.

The cleverly-designed bench seats hook onto the side shelves at any point.

Overall, very good use of space and some clever design points, with practical use always to the forefront.

Fishability

The ballast tank and chequerplate deck with tube-mat cover give good stability and footing. The gunwales are comfortable to work off, with flat faces, toe recess and mid-thigh support. There is little intrusion from the engine box into the cockpit, and what there is, is also capitalised on by using the top as a mount for the bait station. This bait station is large, drains overboard, has a bait trough at the back, and three rod holders and six 'sinker cups' around the edges.

Six through-gunwale rodholders are fitted (nylon on the test boat, but aluminium is often fitted as requested).

The six-position rocketlauncher on the hardtop is an easy reach from the cockpit (when the bimini is not extended), and Surtees-designed outrigger bases are fitted to the cabin sides. A through-platform berley pot is set over the stern.

Divers have easy access back into the boat and plenty of gear-stowage space.

An excellent fish and dive machine.

Trailering

The 6.7m hulls are carried on Voyager trailers from Phil South Engineering in Hamilton. These are a cradle A-frame design with keel-entry roller and seven pairs of wobble rollers per side. It has dual axles, zinc-treated leaf springs, stainless hydraulic trailer brakes, wind-down jockey wheels and submersible lights.

The bow post has been modified to take another clever Surtees design – a self-releasing and hooking stay for the bow, which can be hooked up and unhooked just by driving the boat forward. Ideal for dry-footed operation on a chilly winter's day!

Twin safety chains, dual coupling, enclosed wheel nuts, 13" low-load wheels, and an oversized dual-ratio manual winch are other features – and the extended tie-down connections that keep the straps away from the paintwork on the sides is yet another clever idea.

All-in-all...

Solid construction, great sea keeping and clever design make these boats hard to beat. Add a very compact and quiet diesel inboard that closely approaches the latest hi-tech outboards in weight and price, a no-compromise approach to the quality of components (such as the batteries and trailer), along with a whole raft of practical features, and this must be getting close to the ultimate Kiwi fishing machine. f

Specifications

L.O.A.	6.7m
Beam	2.35m
Bottoms	5mm
Sides	4mm
Topsides	3mm
Deadrise	18°
Basic key-turn package	**$77,000**
As tested	**$95,165**

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