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# Use the **FORCE**

**What do you get when you combine a hull designed and built by an Australian racing legend, 225 firebreathing horsepower and a pair of fluffy dice? A skiing/racing rig with a licence to thrill ...**

I didn't need to call Inspector Clouseau of Pink Panther fame to get an idea where this boat was heading. On the dash, written in thick black Artline pen, was the autograph of Ken Warby, the world's fastest man on water, who set the long-standing record of 317.60mph in 1977.

Warby had just launched the Force 23 at the inaugural Speedboat Festival at the National Maritime Museum in Sydney in May. But it was the Cheshire grin on the face of its builder — if not the fluffy dice swinging under the bonnet — that told of this boat's purpose in life.

"You want speed?" said boatbuilder Rod Bickerton with an almost sinister laugh. A raceboat driver, he is used to going fast. His partner in crime, Kelly, is responsible for the fluffy dice. Together, the duo leads a charmed life on some signature skiboat bends of the Hawkesbury River.

With the water lapping at their back door (literally at flood time) they can test boating ideas as fast as they evolve. The F23 took two years to perfect. Actually, the only thing Bickerton changed on the plug boat were the chines near the bow. He added "whiskers" or down-turned chine sections for added lift and dryness of ride.

## FROM THE RIVER BORN

Bickerton turned his hand to building the F23 after trotting out 25 of his race-proven F18 skiboats. In fact, he is already working on a bigger boat again, a 28-

footer with which he hopes to crack the US market.

In many ways, the F23 is a US-inspired boat. All the groovy red anodised deck fittings, which run from grab handles to fuel breathers and grommets are from Rex in California. Bickerton is the local agent for the fittings and subscribes to the American sportsboat magazines for ideas.

An immediate hit, the F23 has accounted for three new owners a month after its official launch. The average package price starts at \$54,700 with a 225hp outboard and handcrafted colour-matched tailer. On the road, the rig weighs around 1750kg or within most family car towing limits.

This demo version of the F23 had an optional bed fitted under its foredeck, optional Clarion stereo with 200W subwoofer, and a work-of-art trailer befitting a spot in a showroom, not some muddy ramp. The \$12,000 cradle pushed the rig value to \$69,000, but for that you got something very special indeed.

## BUILT TO LAST

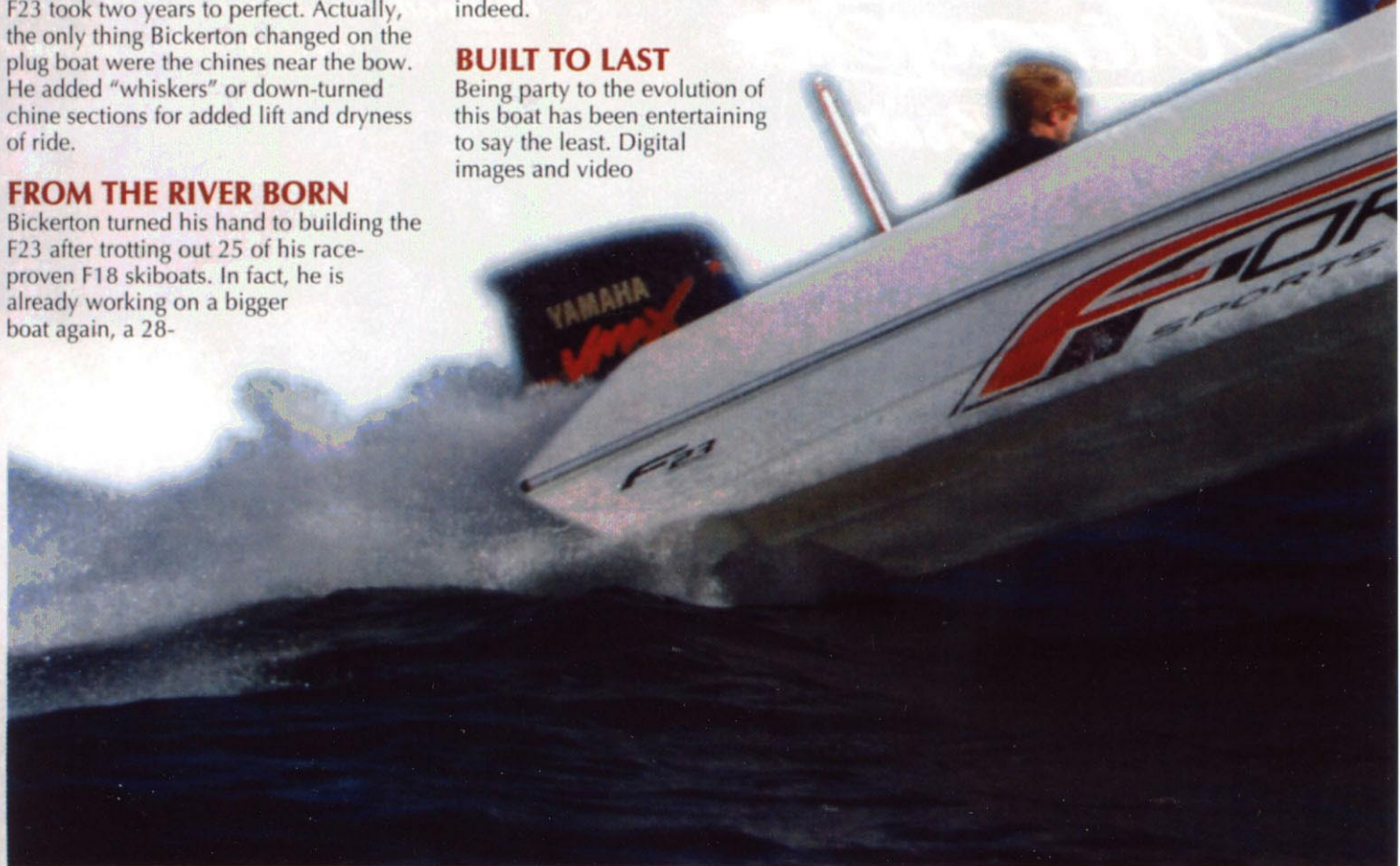
Being party to the evolution of this boat has been entertaining to say the least. Digital images and video

footage were regularly dispatched to keep me up to date. And from those initial trials on the river I saw a boat that could handle a lot more than flat water.

You need to think of the F23 as a fast flier for traversing a big bay in a blow. It's akin to one of those chase boats you see in the old Bond movies, hurdling roads and flying under narrow bridges. Sporty handling, lots of speed and enough freeboard to power through boat wakes and wind waves are traits of the F23.

Construction is such that you don't need to baby the boat in rough water. Bickerton used his track-proven raceboat building technology. The boat is vacuum-bagged around a balsa core for the hull and foam core for the deck.

But he's not so obsessed with high-tech to forget what works. The seven full-length stringers, three bulkheads, floor and transom are 'glass-encapsulated maple because he "knows it's strong". These things are







**"Somewhere mid-air I caught the needle ahead of Bickerton hitting it's limit ..."**



## "It's akin to one of those chase boats you see in the old Bond movies, hurdling roads and flying under narrow bridges"

'glassed to the hull and the deck is riveted and 'glassed together for a full monocoque or rigid one-piece structure.

As testimony to his boatbuilding prowess, the initial plug boat was built entirely by hand to within 1mm tolerances. The day it hit the water it floated absolutely plumb, he says. Not long after that Rod and Kelly headed down river and camped aboard.

Because the bagging gives incredible strength, the F23's foredeck doesn't need to be supported with internal uprights. Bickerton didn't want to waste space under the big nose and fitted an optional double berth on which a couple can comfortably sleep.

### HULL DESIGN

Spend time with Bickerton and you will find an enthusiastic man besotted by the mechanics and physics, the hydrodynamics if you like, of go-fast boats. He is constantly playing with hull shapes to find out what effect new appendages have and it's my guess he has a better understanding of what works and why than many major production houses.

As mentioned, he added his so-called whiskers or reverse chines to the bow area of the plug boat. Back aft, the boat

has lifting pods either side of the outboard that provide buoyancy at low speeds and upon re-entry. The pods, which are an integral part of the hull, are clear of the water at high speed.

Measuring 6.50m on the waterline, the F23 qualifies for World Waterski Rules. Its beam is a comparatively narrow 2.1m. Shaped like a projectile, the boat offers little resistance to the water. Weight-distribution is such that after getting airborne the boat comes back down with just the faintest bit of transom bias.

Purrr-fect for a smooth ride.

In fact, I can't recall experiencing on a 23-footer that is as smooth. And I say this having launched off the back of Manly ferry wake, flown across Sydney Heads, whipped the boat around potentially chattering turns, and flown by the seat of my pants, literally. All the while, the boat feels like one strong item, and despite the hollow foredeck, there is little reverberation of sound.

### TOUR OF DUTY

There are situations — post-ski barbies, trips to the other side of the bay or even a short run down the coast to a nearby port — where that optional berth in the bow will be worth its weight in gold. While headroom isn't a highpoint, there is certainly plenty of length for a couple to sleep. About 1.90m, in fact.

Fully lined, the cabin includes a small area for stowing gear such as doonas or sleeping bags and pillows. A light was positioned to shine on that furry dice up front. In future boats, Bickerton will get the owner to pull a card from a deck and the suit that is drawn will be used as the interior fit-out theme.

The extra depth at the entrance to the cabin allows for padded cushions to be fitted to hull walls. A couple can retreat to the warmth and sanctuary of the cabin in poor weather. There is room to sit up, play cards and there's cleverly positioned cabin lights and drinkholders nearby.

The speakers are at the cabin entrance and dotted about the interior are various storage recesses for personals. Kelly attributes these as her own doing. Girls are usually accompanied by various items, she says. There are also places for storing mobile phones, car keys and suchlike.





## CREATURE COMFORTS

The seat bases from Springfield are through-bolted into stainless-steel backing plates 'glassed to the sealed floor. Anchored like the Queen Mary, the seats aren't going anywhere. Plastic cushion backs and fibreglass shells make for low maintenance.

The aft lounge is big enough for four adults and deep for a sense of security. Unlike a lot of skiboats, you sit in the Force 23, not on it. And unlike a lot of boats, wherever you reach intuitively you will find a solid — not plastic — handrail.

The F23 has forgiving padded coamings and go-fast graphics and a bright-red Rex skipole bolted to a huge reinforced backing plate. There are also aft skihooks and moulded steps to help you from the water.

The deep engine well will keep the slop at bay and ensures the guests on the aft lounge are dry. Beneath the split-bases of that lounge are two iceboxes. Only half the crew needs to shift to get hold of a drink.

The lounge backrest rises on a gas strut to reveal a ski locker, designer battery holder, oil bottle and storage space. Throughout the boat are eight drinkholders, eight grabrails, dual recessed fuel fillers and

breather in that excellent Rex bright-red anodised alloy ... some \$2000 worth all up.

The pop-up button-mushroom sized alloy cleats, which provide somewhere to swing a fender or throw a springer amidships, are a feature in themselves. The rubrail is a one-piece anodised aluminium number, but the end caps and dash are racy carbon fibre. Almost time for a drive.

## DRIVES YOU WILD

Groovy white gauges relay your speed, engine water pressure, engine temp, trim and running hours. A Rex switch panel activates the navigation lights, courtesy lights, the horn that announced the F23's arrival at Manly Wharf, and the bilgepump.

The Momo wheel was linked to Outrigger steering so Bickerton could feel where the boat wanted to go. A smooth operator and predictable, the F23 will be fitted with a hydraulic steering as standard in future. The foot throttle is a standard inclusion.

Underfloor there's a 200lt fibreglass tank but there is a 250lt option that turn the F23 into a performance cruising boat like those which might feature in the Poker runs in

**Clockwise from below: While not huge on headroom, there's plenty of room to stretch out on the optional bunks ... the fluffy dice are a nice touch; The F23 rolls on a trick colour-matched trailer and can be towed by a large sedan; There's cold storage under the rear lounge; Note the large pods either side of the outboard to provide buoyancy at low speeds and soften the blow upon re-entry; The helm is functional with vital instruments and Momo sports wheel. Foot throttle is standard.**



## FORCE F23

**Price as tested: \$69,000 with Yamaha 225hp EFI and custom trailer**

**Options fitted: Clarion sound system with subwoofer, custom dual-axle brake trailer, vee-berth upholstery and cabin fit-out**

**Priced from: About \$54,700 as drive-away package**

### GENERAL

**Material:** Foam and balsa bagged GRP  
**Length (overall):** 7.30m  
**Beam:** 2.10m  
**Deadrise:** 21°  
**Rec/max hp:** 225/300  
**Weight:** 700kg hull only

### CAPACITIES

**Fuel:** 220lt  
**Passengers:** 6  
**Accommodation:** 2.5

### ENGINE

**Make/model:** Yamaha 225hp V-Max  
**Type:** Fuel-injected V6 petrol two-stroke  
**Rated hp:** 225  
**Displacement:** 3.0lt  
**Weight:** About 235kg  
**Prop:** 23in stainless

*Thanks to Yamaha Motor, Marine Line Upholstery and Fibreglass International*

**SUPPLIED BY: Rod Bickerton, Force High Performance Boats, tel (02) 4575 4038.**

the state. Ah, so there's the reason for the fluffy dice.

Here, the F23 fulfils the roles of social and race skiboat and fast cruising conveyance. The hull runs lovely and flat and there is good vision over the windbreaker at wakeboarding speeds. The sheer size of the boat will mean that you aren't at the mercy of wakeboarding boats or wind waves.

Somewhere mid-air I caught the needle ahead of Bickerton hitting its limit. According to the GPS, the boat does 123kmh at full noise (6000rpm) with the 225hp Yamaha EFI VMax outboard spinning a 21in SS prop. The big V6 outboard propelled the boat to a carefree mid-40kmh at 2600rpm.

Reflecting the performance bent were fast cruise speeds of 59kmh at 3100-3200rpm and 69kmh at 3500-3600rpm. But no matter what speed and how hard you run the boat, the F23 remains kind to passengers. I found it that way and more driver-friendly than the F18.

A boat that bridges the tyranny of distance, the F23 went from one side of the harbour to the other in the blink of the eye. Let's just say it is a force to be reckoned with in the hands of one Rocket Rod Bickerton, a boatbuilder who prefers life in the fast lane.