Perfect balance: an older boat and the latest 4-strokes

“You show this to anybody, and I’ll kill you,” says Jon Lyons, absently, as he bears down on one very busy page of my notebook with a green Sharpie.

For the last two hours he has been drawing chines and deadrises and running surfaces and hull steps, referencing a dozen production skiffs for comparative purposes as he tries to explain the engineering virtues of the 26 Regulator — a boat he has sold and repowered quite a few times in recent years — and classic deep-vees in general.

“My dad’s the engineer. I do this stuff by feel,” he adds, approximating the 26’s steep, unadorned vee, running over a half-dozen other drawings in this fourth attempt to drive the importance of weight distribution and horsepower through my concrete frontal lobe.

Lyons, 32, has been handling skiffs of every size, purpose, configuration and price range since about the time he transitioned out of Pampers — a fact less significant than where he has handled them.

During his lifetime, Jon’s family has built a relative empire out of Ocean House Marina in the backwaters of Ninigret Pond in Charlestown, R.I., a sprawling network of bars, shoals and narrow, meandering channels connected to Block Island Sound via one of the Ocean State’s most ruthless inlets: Charlestown Breachway, the seaward terminus of which sports a cluster of stones resembling a tautog’s teeth.

He carves routes through the place that even experienced watermen wouldn’t attempt in flats boats, much less the 5-ton deep-vee fishboats Lyons sells.

Since Regulator’s decision to mothball its 26 center console and push on with the newly...
A Pair of 200-hp Yamaha 4-strokes is a good choice for repowering a Regulator 26.

engineered 25, Lyons has observed a major surge in interest in the used models. No doubt the fishing media’s tendency to gush over that particular 24-year-old design has stoked the fires in recent years. There’s something to be said for the human tendency to seek out what we cannot have. What goes without saying is that the 26 also has churned up a formidable track record among serious anglers, notably from Maryland north, where Regulator has bucked a southward trend in its class of high-end center consoles, selling 70 percent of finished hulls north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

With the spiking interest in used models has come a large repower market, which, in essence, Lyons has spent the better part of the last three hours trying to illuminate for me. For weeks he’s been venting his frustrations over the boat-buying public’s failure to understand the less-is-more concept in certain repower scenarios — the overarching principle of balance in all of them.

“With most of your bigger-displacement hulls — the diesel-powered Down Easters, Carolina sportfishermen, Novi lobster boats and the like — and even with beamier, flatter-bottomed skiffs, there’s much less juggling, less balancing in the power end,” says Lyons. “It’s when you get into the deep-vee, outboard-powered fishing platforms, the planing hulls built for speed, seakeeping and softer entry — Grady-White, Regulator, SeaCraft, old Hydra-Sports and all the others — that you have to start thinking hard about striking a perfect balance.”

It’s the last bit — this Zen and the art of outboard repowering — that might or might not align with our culture’s strong suit: Selling less-is-more to a more-is-better guy is no cinch. “Back before Genmar hit the wall, we were selling a number of the old 21-foot center consoles — beefy little boats that lined up pretty nicely with a single Yamaha 4-cylinder 150,” recalls Lyons. “That was when the F200 V-6 had just hit the market, and guys were coming in with the idea that 150 left the 21 a little underpowered — they wanted the 200.”

That 150 could turn out nearer to 175 horses because it weighed 450 pounds, against 600 pounds for the F200, so that same boat with the 150 was actually quite a bit quicker out of the hole. “That was when we really started to pick up on the fine detail, dialing in the performance,” says Lyons.

“You know you’ve got it right,” he adds, “when you get a boat that jumps up on plane and stays there around 3,500 to 3,800 rpm — anywhere in the 3,000 range you’ve got a well-balanced, efficient boat.”
Extending that rough guideline, if you’re running up past 4,000 rpm to get up on plane, you can be fairly confident that you’re under-powered, or carrying too much weight astern. At the other end of the spectrum, if you find the boat wants to squat down and you’re all over the trim tabs to keep the bow down — similar symptoms with different causes — you could be flirting with over-powering, a concept to which Lyons objects. “It’s not so much that you’re overpowered — it’s that you’re overweighted,” he explains, then pauses. Balance, he mutters.

Why all this balancing? Let’s face it, when you’re dealing with offshore center consoles, some of which are literal products of rocket science — rocket science plus hydrodynamics plus alloys and compounds on loan from aerospace, complete with NASA-inspired pricing — it would be almost disrespectful to blow a piston because you propped the motors out wrong or to plod along at 18 knots, burning more fuel to get there at glacial speeds, using pure boredom to destroy all this thoroughbred equipment. From Jon’s standpoint, it would be a shame to ruin a boat’s hole-shot performance — its acceleration capabilities, in general — or to put monumental strain on motors chasing 2 or 3 knots of top-end speed you might actually get to see once in the span of the years you own the boat.

These are fast, streamlined boats purpose-built to carry ambitious fishermen long distances to prime grounds in sometimes hostile conditions, to maximize fishing range and opportunity, to get home in one piece. “These hulls are sharp — straight deep-vee from bow entry to transom — and they’re heavy,” Lyons says. “You gotta run these boats hard if you want to see them function properly — do what they’re engineered to do: to jump up on top of the slop and go. Fast.”

As manufacturers tackle the historical Achilles’ heel of 4-stroke technology — weight — they have opened up new solutions to various power challenges. “Any time you put the big V-6 4-strokes on the [Regulator] 26 — the F250s are a common choice — the boat tends to bow-jump under the associated load,” Lyons notes. “But with the new F200s, Yamaha’s use of ultra-strong, lightweight materials has let them shave off major pounds. Now you’re getting back to the weight the 26 was engineered to carry in 2-stroke 200s, only now it’s 4-strokes delivering the horsepower. With the 26,” he adds, “you’re getting perfect balance and a way better ride out of a pair of 2.8-liter 200s than you generally do out of much larger F250 V-6s and at a significantly lower price tag.”

In the end, says Lyons, it’s about trust. “Often we have to advocate for our customers’ best interests, even on the occasions when customers don’t quite know what those are. You get them a better ride and the right balance to deliver the speed without hammering on the motors.”

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