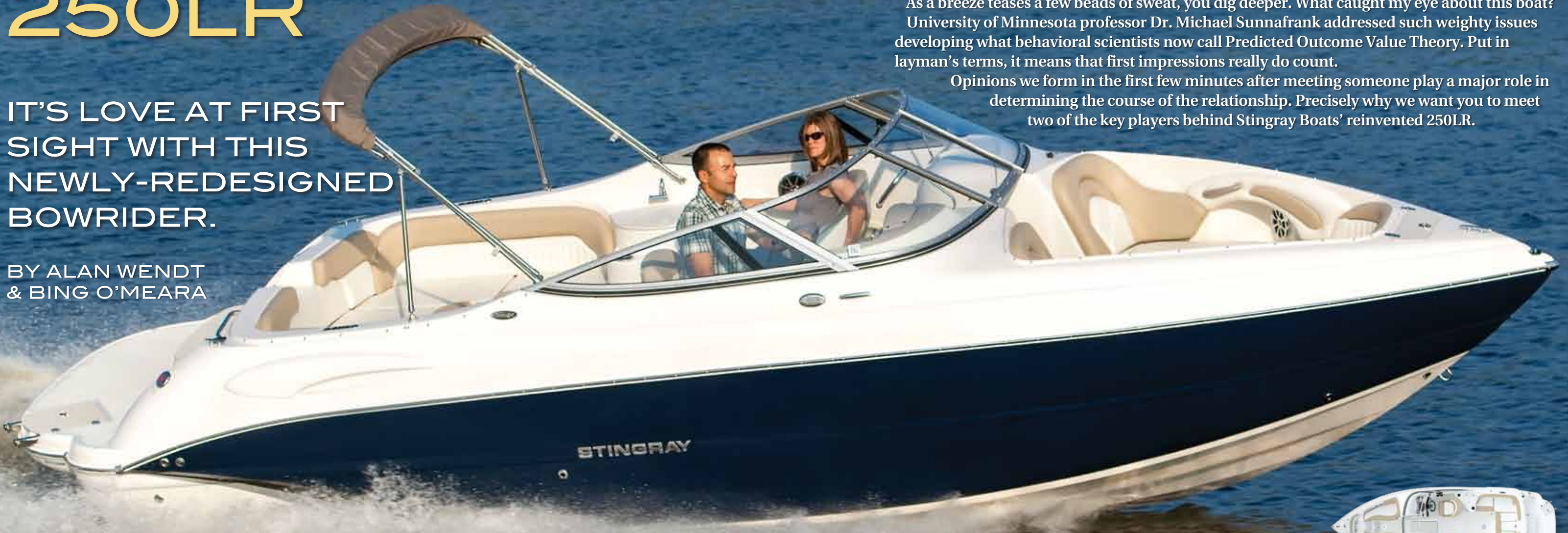


STINGRAY 250LR

IT'S LOVE AT FIRST
SIGHT WITH THIS
NEWLY-REDESIGNED
BOWRIDER.

BY ALAN WENDT
& BING O'MEARA



During those rare, well-deserved Saturday afternoon naps, when even the sun-warmed vinyl aft cushion feels like a Five Star luxury hotel mattress, the mind quizzes your soul. Why did I marry her? What two forces make it possible to love my pickup truck Monday through Friday, but compel me to borrow her BMW on the weekends?

As a breeze teases a few beads of sweat, you dig deeper. What caught my eye about this boat? University of Minnesota professor Dr. Michael Sunnafrank addressed such weighty issues developing what behavioral scientists now call Predicted Outcome Value Theory. Put in layman's terms, it means that first impressions really do count.

Opinions we form in the first few minutes after meeting someone play a major role in determining the course of the relationship. Precisely why we want you to meet two of the key players behind Stingray Boats' reinvented 250LR.



STINGRAY 250LR

Standard Equipment

Bow anchor storage; cooler/storage box w/drain; enclosed head w/window and lighting; stainless steel spring line cleats; filler cushion, aft walk-thru; freshwater sink (cockpit); 3-year Hull Blister Protection Plan; 5-year Hull Protection Plan; remote oil change system; power trim and tilt; power steering w/tilt steering.

Specifications

LOA: 25'
Beam: 102"
Draft (up/down): 17"/34"
Weight (dry): 4,340 lbs.
Fuel Capacity: 68 gals.
Water Capacity: 17 gals.
Power: MerCruiser 4.3 MPIC 220 hp
Volvo 5.0 MPI 270 hp
Price: \$54,877 (Mercury) / \$58,898 (Volvo)



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ROOTS OF THE BRAND

Fans of Stingray may already know its founder, Al Fink. Describing him as an independent boatbuilder would be dismissive. Better pull out the thesaurus and add all of the synonyms: Self-governing, free-thinking, confident. And I'll add one more: Innovative.

Performance and accountability is what drives this guy, not surprising since he spends free time tinkering with dragsters at Darlington, near the Stingray plant in Hartsville, South Carolina. With a passion for gadgets, Stingray has been an early adopter of disruptive technology in all aspects of boatbuilding. The company pioneered multiple axis, large-bed CNC (computer numerically controlled) water-jet machines that cut a wide range of different materials to tolerances within thousands of an inch.

Fink is fond of saying, "Quality starts with accountability." Poke your head in his office, and you'll understand why. A wall-sized projection screen displays a constantly updated spreadsheet tracking every single employee, part, even staples that pass through the plant.

"If a problem arises, we can pinpoint the cause and immediately take action," he says. "This thing even calls me at home when there is a problem."

But the computer couldn't tell Fink about buyers' changing tastes in boats. That job fell to his new COO, Erik Nordin. In Europe, where Stingray had a solid track record of success, customers were leaning towards warmer colors in vinyl materials. Two and three tone-on-tone styling that's part of the redesign in the 250LR is indicative of styling that resonated with buyers. The boat needed curb appeal to even gain consideration, and Nordin knew the design had to be inviting — telegraphing "this is the place to be."

A RE-ENVISIONED BOWRIDER

A full color band or stripe in the gelcoat was an engineering challenge. Fluid curves resembling a dolphin jumping waves is easy to create on the computer, but much harder to perfect on the shop floor. The blend and contrast of

colors is part of that Predictive Outcome Value Theory, part of that "love at first sight" fascination.

Nordin admits that with the dramatic interior changes he was proposing and the stripe line addition, he expected stiff resistance not just from Fink, but the legion of Stingray dealers. He met with the gelcoaters to get their buy-in, tweaked the molds and built one boat that was all black, including the windshield. Off to a corner of the assembly building it sat for the team to study and for visiting dealers to ponder. Days ticked by. One by one, suggestions rolled in. The resistance was melting like ice in Lake Michigan on a spring day.

Dealers spoke of customers' desire for day boats, with generous entertainment space and more seating. It all played nicely into Nordin's vision for a wraparound, U-shaped bench seat that creates a communal atmosphere in the cockpit. With a built-in refreshment center featuring a freshwater sink, overboard drain, removable 25-quart cooler and optional table, all of the basics we expect to see in a large bowrider were now there. Forward of the helm station, two shapely and decorator-designed loungers are sure to be claimed by teenagers. They even have their own built-in cooler right at the bow.

Of course, kids and water are going to mix, and like so many models today, this Stingray meets expectations with a fully integrated swim platform, ample room for dangling your feet in the water, or simply getting ready for skiing, wakeboarding or tubing.

Like many mid-size bowriders, this model is fitted with a concealed Porta Potti opposite the helm. Two modestly priced upgrades add a sense of sport and elegance: A custom Italian steering wheel and Latte dash package. Both features undoubtedly influenced by Fink, who has a penchant for vintage automobiles. Designers have thoughtfully left room for popular, modular-sized navigation and GPS units for those who foresee longer trips on unfamiliar bodies of water.

"We may have splurged a bit with the optional 500-watt Polk Audio 5-Channel Subwoofer stereo," Nordin says with a boyish grin. "The premium sound probably isn't something

previous buyers of the brand expect, but younger buyers are driving improvements. We are seeing more wives and girlfriends actively involved in the decision making process, and as a result we are building in features that appeal to him, to her and together, as a couple."

A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

This economic reset may be one of the boating industry's greatest catalysts for positive change. Especially for boat builders like Stingray, that concentrate on the entry-level models up to 25 feet. When you look at the 250LR, you are seeing the future of Stingray with similar changes taking place across the company's entire line of boats.

Something that won't change is the proven Z-Plane Hull. Without getting too technical, the design of the strakes act as horizontal planing faces when submerged, and when very near the water's surface, the outside edge of the Z-Plane acts as a spray release. This exclusive design passes through the water with no bubbles formed by the hull shape.

Further translation, the 250LR hits a top speed in the mid 50's with just a 320 hp engine.

"This is what attracted me to Stingray," Nordin confesses. "I actually started talking with Al about joining him several years ago. We shared a passion for manufacturing, operations and accountability."

Where there's clearly no compromise is the boat's performance. The 250LR is an extremely responsive boat. Quiet and smooth, she turns on a dime. The high sides and hull design means the boat can handle choppy water with ease, an important feature on larger bodies of water.

"I'm not sure everyone understands what the bottom does in terms of aerodynamics and fluid dynamics," Nordin states. "This is what makes Stingray so unique. The Z-Plane Hull mitigates the air and water turbulence and delivers clean, smooth water to the propeller. It means we can attain fast speeds with a lighter engine, which translates into a very economical boat in terms of fuel economy."

35 YEARS OF BOATBUILDING BLISS

Before the recession and shakeout of boatbuilders and dealers, Stingray ranked nine or 10 in terms of volume. Respectable to be among the top 10 boatbuilders. Today, they rank even higher — fifth or sixth in the country. That's an awesome achievement, as Stingray celebrates its 35th anniversary in 2014.

After learning how to build fiberglass boats from another builder, Fink and a handful of like-minded craftsmen set up shop about 2 hours south of Charlotte and began building no-nonsense runabouts. In the nearby hills peppered with NASCAR alumni of race teams' good help, well vetted ideas abound. That core of workers has today grown to several hundred, and the plant occupies a collection of buildings totaling 250,000 square feet. Many employees have been there for years, fiercely loyal to Fink and the brand they've built.

"Stingray knows its customers, and Al tries to perfect the product he's focused on to please those customers," notes Debbie Packer, Stingray creative manager and a 15-year plant veteran. "He's been able to do that because he doesn't try to be bigger and better than everyone else. Stingray builds boats to order instead of just mass producing them, so the dealers and customers are getting what they want, and it's easy to react to changes in both the market and the economy. Where I see some people thinking a few months down the road, Al always is thinking well beyond that, and I think that's why he's been so successful over the last 35 years."

With 20 models under 25 feet, that market space on the Stingray waterfront is well covered. That's why the flagship 250LR is an important model. With a resurging boat market, there's temptation to build an even larger Stingray in the future.

For the boater who's adventurous and likes exploring multiple bodies of water, the 250LR meets all the criteria: Easy to trailer, family oriented, and perhaps the most important component, accountable affordability. **LB**

Thirty-five years ago, models had the corner on curves. Today, Stingray designs breathe new life into the art of manufacturing.

