

February 21st 2010. By Matt Trulio.[Bookmark and Share](#)

The Big Picture: Sunsation and Checkmate Fill the High Performance Gap

Think affordable entry-level go-fast boats are gone with production builder shutdowns? Think again—and look to the regional builders.

Last year was not kind to production—as opposed to custom—high-performance boat builders. The sad fact is there's not a single production go-fast boat company with the lights on, if you will. Donzi, Fountain and Baja by Fountain have gone dark, and while all three are likely to reemerge in some form in 2010, that form—and more specifically the output of new product—remains to be seen. Combine that with the credit crunch for both dealers and would-be buyers, and the situation looks even bleaker.



Sunsation is a semi-custom builder with an outstanding reputation for build quality and customer service.

But I see some light at the end of the tunnel and I'm reasonably sure—for nothing is ever guaranteed—that it's not an oncoming train. The light, at least from this end of the tunnel, comes in the form of regional boat builders such as Sunsation Performance Powerboats in Algonac, Mich., and Checkmate Power Boats in Bucyrus, Ohio.

A few weeks ago, [Sunsation](#) started production of its 36 Dominator V-bottom. For sure, the project was several years in the making, though the actual tooling phase took just three months. But according to Joe Schaldenbrand of Sunsation, the company already has six orders for the new 36-footer.

The reason? Well, without question Sunsation has an incredibly loyal customer base. If you're a Sunsation owner, you tend to be one for life. But here's the bigger reason: With a pair of Mercury Racing 525EFI, the 36 Dominator costs around \$240,000. That's less than the price of the average liked-sized, like-powered production high-performance boat—if you could find one right now. And Sunsation is, at the very least, a semi-custom builder with an outstanding reputation for build quality and customer service.

"You can actually get it a little cheaper than that with a different interior package," said Schaldenbrand. "We are really trying to hold the line on pricing on the 36, and we feel really good about it. It's going to get us through the spring."

Of course, in heady economic times a builder such as Sunsation could never pump out the 300 or 400 sport boats the way the production builders once did—but these are not heady economic times. The demand for such volume simply isn't there. In its best year, Sunsation produced less than 100 boats, and right now that could be enough to handle much of the production go-fast boat demand.

[Checkmate Power Boats](#), which enjoys a strong following, is another one of those regional performance-boat builders with well-priced, well-built offerings. The company makes V-bottom sport boats from 21 to 30 feet long.

Checkmate was purchased by Doug Smith, founder of Baja Performance Boats, which was sold to Fountain Powerboats in 2007. Smith immediately went to work improving the Checkmate's construction processes and upgrading the materials used to build the boats.

"Checkmate always was known for good quality," Smith told me last spring. "We just wanted to make it a little better, and then gradually expand the line."

And with price tags that begin in the low- to middle-five-figure range, depending on the model and power, entry-level buyers can get into a new Checkmate with snappy performance and excellent handling manners. I know, because as editor at large for Powerboat magazine I've helped test a few. Like the other members of the magazine's test team, I found them to be a pleasant surprise, especially when they outperformed a few bigger-ticket models from other builders.



Sunsation's 32 SSR is one of the boats filling the high-performance gap.

Like everyone in the high-performance powerboat world, I'm hoping that the big production-boat builders make big comebacks. But I'm a realist, and I don't see that happening anytime soon. In the meantime, entry-level buyers, as well as experienced go-fast boat owners on a budget, should look to the regional builders. They're filling the gap quite well.



Editor's Note: Boats.com bi-weekly columnist Matt Trulio is the editor at large for Powerboat magazine. He has written for the magazine since 1994. Trulio also founded speedonthewater.com, a web site dedicated to covering the high-performance powerboat world, where he blogs daily.