

Boat Review

Fishing three-up on a bass boat really stretches its capabilities as a fishing boat to its maximum – after all, a bass boat is designed to be fished two-up, that’s the conventional. On a fine day in September at Bronkhorstspruit Dam however the conventional made way for the unconventional when I joined South African boat builder Neil Barker, the proprietor of Escape Boating, and his son Dean for a day on the water.

>> BY EUGENE KRUGER

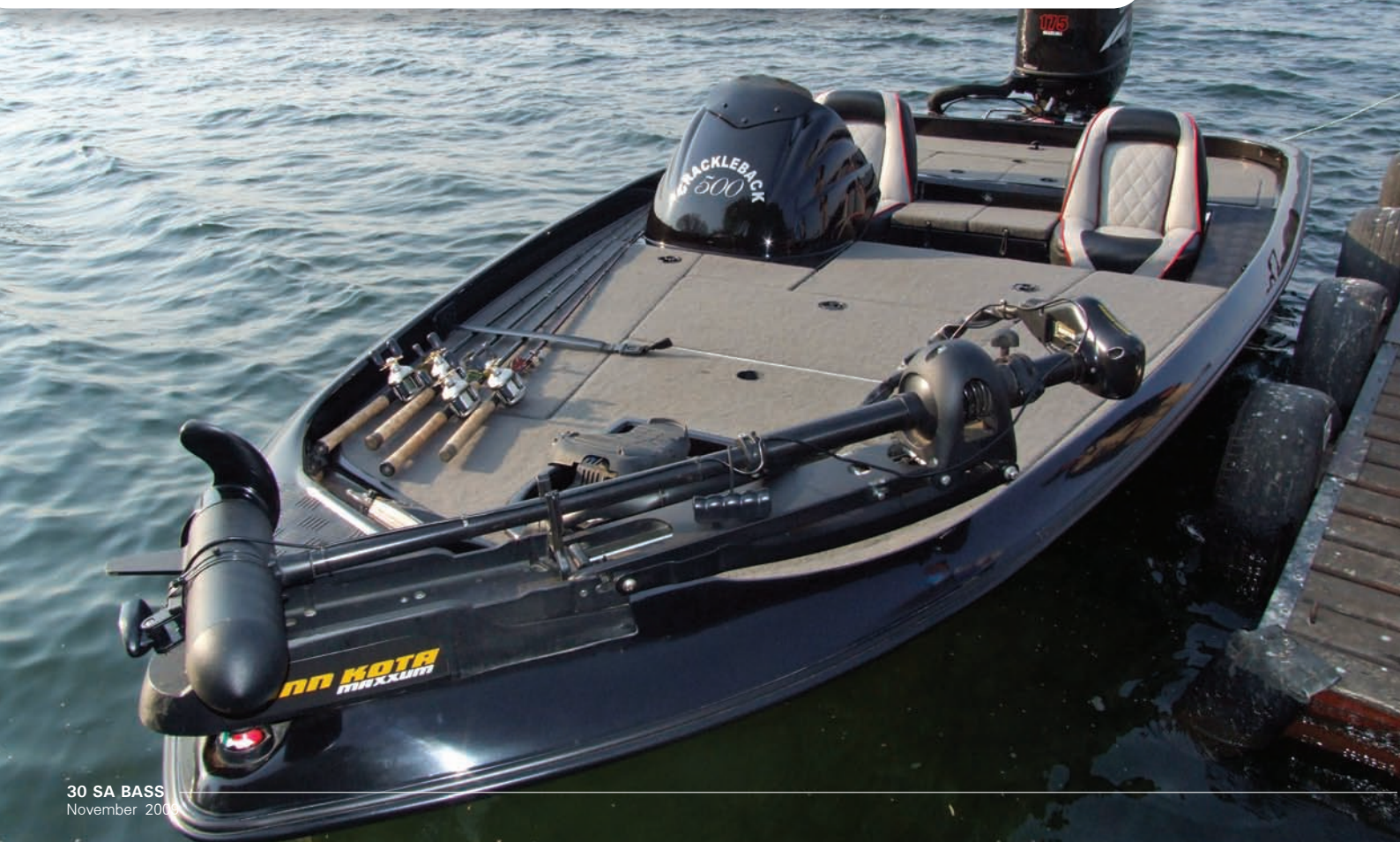
In my tackle bag were several new baits up for review, and in the crowded conditions it was going to try the patience of my fellow anglers even more, because while they would be fishing conventional techniques and baits, I would be asking to put the boat this way and that, slower and faster and so on. In addition there were tackle bags and gear for three people on board – surely this would strain the storage capabilities?

Well, all the ingredients for a stressful day on the water were there and the capabilities of Escape Boating’s new Crackleback 500 would sorely be put to the test! To begin at the beginning: launching the boat off Escape Boating’s own, in-house built trailer was a cinch.

The trailer has a 1½-ton rated axle and 14-inch, six-stud wheel rims, the same configuration that most modern tow vehicles have, so if a stud should be required it is easy to make running repairs.

The only outsourcing on the trailer is the powder coating or galvanising – everything else is built in-house. “That’s the only way I can ensure a trailer that works the way I want it to,” Neil says. Packing all the gear was just as easy – with no fewer than seven hatches there is ample space for everything. Neil and Dean used the two forward deck tackle hatches for their gear and I used the rear fuel hatch, which is the width of the boat, so there was ample space for the big tackle bag and day

ESCAPE BOATING CRACKLEBACK 500





Left: The Crackleback 500 has various power options from 90hp to 250hp. **Top Right:** The trailer is built in-house. **Bottom Right:** Fishing 3-up is quite comfortable.

pack plus-plus. A neat touch is that the dry hatches have been made waterproof by finishing the hatch rims with rubber edging that fit into a matching groove on the lid. A inner hatch spring can also be fitted as an optional extra – to close the hatch you merely touch the spring and the hatch closes automatically!

In addition to the dry hatches there are two rod hatches, one holding rods up to 8-foot and the other for rods up to 7 – foot, and two cooler boxes fitted between the seats in the cock-

pit. The livewell has twin lids so that each angler (fishing the conventional two-up crew) has his or her own fish holding facility, and another neat touch illustrating the careful thought that has gone into this boat is that the livewell has a fold-down separator plate, which when folded down turns the two smaller livewells into a big one that can accommodate a big bass. In addition the livewell has “water fill” and “well drain” features – these fill the livewell quickly and when the water level needs to be dropped, for instance when making the task of removing fish out to

be weighed far easier, or when water that is contaminated by a bleeding fish has to drained, the “well drain” pump is activated. All the pumps are fitted behind panels so s to prevent accidental damage, but can be easily accessed if they ever need repairs.

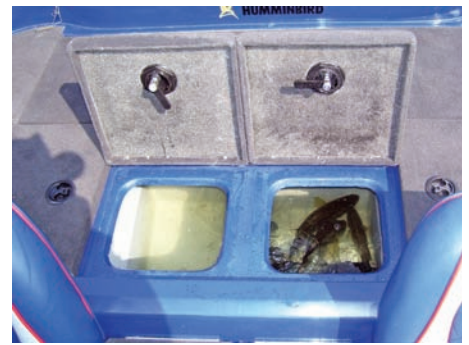
Neil and Dean’s rods were lying flat on each side of the foredeck, held in position by the quick –release rod tie downs, while my rods were accommodated on the side of the seat on a specially designed well, also fitted with a quick-release tie-down.

With everything stowed neat and tide, but also easily to hand when needed, Neil gunned the motor and the boat jumped out of the hole with ease. Neil’s personal boat is fitted with a hotfoot throttle, an optional extra. He strongly recommends adding this feature when fitting motors of 150hp and bigger, commenting (correctly) that everyone in a motor vehicle is used to using a foot throttle, so the right mind-set is present, especially when the bigger motors are fitted.

His personal boat is fitted with a 225hp but the Crackleback 500 will perform quite adequately with a 90hp. The other two Crackleback 500’s sharing the water with us on the day were fitted with a 175hp and a 250hp



The Crackleback 500 provides a stable and safe fishing platform.



Left: A quick-release tie down with the passengers rods. **Top Right:** The livewell is fitted with a separator plate. **Bottom Right:** Hatch latches fold away and are easy to grasp.

outboard. (An interesting point is that a Crackleback 500 fitted with a 90hp main motor, a bow mount foot control sneaker motor and two fish finders costs the same as a 250hp outboard!)

The boat performs solidly on the water, with no instability even at high speeds – this is because Neil has re-designed the hull that now features a double vortex pad at the rear of the hull. No wonder then that it gives a solid, smooth ride with no sideslip around a corner or bouncing around on choppy water. There is also a lot of legroom beneath the single console and the floor, beneath the console is slightly raised to prevent any water running into it, while a footrest is built in for the left foot. Another feature of the hull is that if the boat stops suddenly or is reversed under power, there is no water gushing over the transom. Neil has taken his

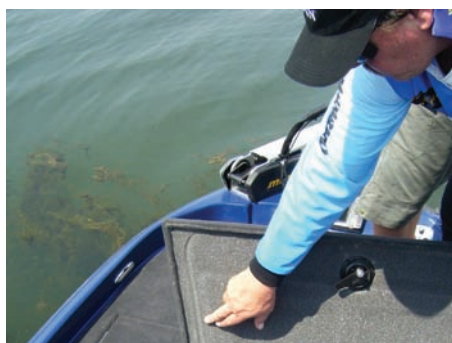
boat to well over 120kph, but only for demo purposes. “When you go fishing there is no need for racing,” he says, “but if you need or want to go flat out, this boat will get you there and back quite safely!”

We started fishing, Neil and Dean on the foredeck and me on the rear deck – hopping around from side to side or moving from fore to aft went off without any hitches, the wide deck providing more than sufficient space for everyone. The lids of the cooler boxes between the seats are sturdy enough to carry an angler’s weight, so moving from the aft deck to the cockpit for a coffee break or to change baits or rods was easy and importantly, safe and stable.

Delving into the hatches was also quick and easy, with the hatch latches easy

to grasp – they also fold down into recesses so lie level with the floor and will not hurt a bare foot. Neil has these hatch latches manufactured locally, which has lowered their unit cost considerably – the actual figure is astronomical! Another point regarding the hatches that needs mentioning is the fact that there are no sharp or ragged edges that could cause injury to shins, feet or hands – even the cooler box fastenings use rounded fastening pins and strong rubber bands.

We did land some fifteen bass – with Neil taking the honours with the most fish followed by Dean who amongst his fish also “donated” two spinnerbaits when his line parted on nice size fish! On the other two boats Shaun and Hannes also landed their limits, while Clint and Duncan got the two biggest bass of the day with fish of 2kg and



Left: Grooves on the hatch lids make them waterproof. **Middle:** The console layout. **Right:** The built in cooler keeps drinks cold even long after the day is over.



The Crackleback 500 doing what its supposed to; providing an efficient, stable and safe fishing platform.

dition it tows very easily.” Clint Scott from Boksburg, who skippered SA BASS sub-editor Duncan Murfin for the day, has a Crackleback 500 fitted with a 175hp outboard; he upgraded from a Bass Seeker 440 some months ago and his overriding comment on the boat is a loud “awesome!” He also mentions features such as stable, safe, comfortable, low wind resistance, easy towing, high performance – “it’s all awesome!” Both Hannes Lindeque and Duncan Murfin echoed these comments, having enjoyed a day’s bassing off a boat that provided all that is required by a discerning basser.

As a closing comment Neil highlights these features of his Crackleback 500: “The deck layout, waterproof hatches, lots of leg room beneath pilot console, hull designed for quick planing and a smooth, dry ride, and the transom design that prevents water washing over it when reversing or stopping suddenly.”

2,2kg respectively.

The Crackleback 500 is designed to make a day’s bassing pleasurable, safe and efficient. Shaun Oosthuizen from Randburg has been using his Crackle-

back 500 fitted with a 250hp outboard for some 5 months and skippered SA BASS publisher Hannes Lindeque for the day. “It is a great fishing boat,” he says, “it is very comfortable and stable and I am very happy with it – in ad-



THE STANDARD CRACKLEBACK 500

THE STANDARD CRACKLEBACK 500 IS SUPPLIED ON ITS OWN TRAILER, WITH OUTBOARD MOTOR AND CONTROLS, STEERING WHEEL TRIM AND TILT LEVER, BOW MOUNTED FOOT CONTROL SNEAKER, TWIN FISH FINDERS, LIVEWELL GAUGES AND CONTROL SWITCHES, WATER PRESSURE GAUGE AND REV COUNTER, CUP

HOLDERS AND CARPETING. OPTIONAL EXTRAS INCLUDE A SPARE WHEEL, FOOT THROTTLE, POSITIONING OF CUP HOLDERS, GAUGES AND NIGHT LIGHTS. HULL COLOUR, POWER RATINGS, CARPET COLOUR ETC ARE ACCORDING TO THE CHOICE OF THE CLIENT.

*AVAILABLE FROM ESCAPE BOATING.
TEL: 011 421 8676,
E-MAIL: NEIL@ESCAPEBOATING.CO.ZA
WEB: WWW.ESCAPEBOATING.CO.ZA

Visit our show room to view the **NEW**

CRACKLEBACK 500

Escape
BOATING

Escape Boating, Benoni
Tel: (011) 421 8676
Fax: (011) 421 8690
E-mail: neil@escapeboating.co.za
www.escapeboating.co.za