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PLEASURE
BOAT

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40-FOOT V-BOTTOM

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MODULAR MONSTER
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FORCES OF NATURE

As an NFL offensive lineman, Brad Benson was known for going all out. As Pass Blocker, his 52-foot MTI cat proves, his approach hasn't changed.

words Matt Trulio

When you play professional football, your life—save what little time you get to heal your body and spend with family and friends between February and June—is football. When summer rolls around, you don't head to the lake for endless hours of waterskiing the way you did growing up with your brothers in rural Pennsylvania. You head for your team's summer conditioning program. In short, you head for the weight room and stay there until preseason practices begin.

Such was the life—and not one you'll ever hear him complain about—of Brad Benson, a former offensive lineman for the New York Giants team that beat the



After making its debut in the 2013 Key West Poker Run (above), Brad Benson's six-seat 52-foot canopied catamaran from MTI also took center stage at the Miami Boat Show Poker Run.

Pass Blocker

Denver Broncos in Super Bowl XXI in 1986. It wasn't until Benson, now the 58-year-old owner of the Brad Benson Auto Group, a thriving Hyundai dealership in South Brunswick, N.J., retired three years later that he rediscovered the passion for time on the water he'd found with his parents and brothers.

"We didn't have anything fancy, just an aluminum boat with an 85-hp outboard that we'd waterski behind, but we had fun," Benson recalled. "But in college and pro football—both of my brothers played in college, one played for the Jets—we got away from boating. I only got back into it when I retired."

After owning a string of high-performance boats including 32- and 35-foot Fountain V-bottoms, 37- and 42-foot Outerlimits V-bottoms and one 48-foot open cockpit catamaran from Marine Technology Inc. (MTI), Benson now has something rather fancy indeed in the form of *Pass Blocker*, a 52-foot, six-seat MTI with a fully enclosed cockpit and twin Mercury Racing 1650 engines. And with its 185-mph top speed, the all-carbon-fiber boat that features a canopy structure with a roll cage, double-thick walls and two-inch-acrylic windows in addition to the "cosmetic windows," is as fast as they come.

"Right now, Brad has the fastest poker run pleasure boat we've ever built," said Randy Scism, the owner and founder of MTI in Wentzville, Mo. "We have a two-seat raceboat that might be a little faster, but that's an all-out raceboat. This is a pleasure boat."

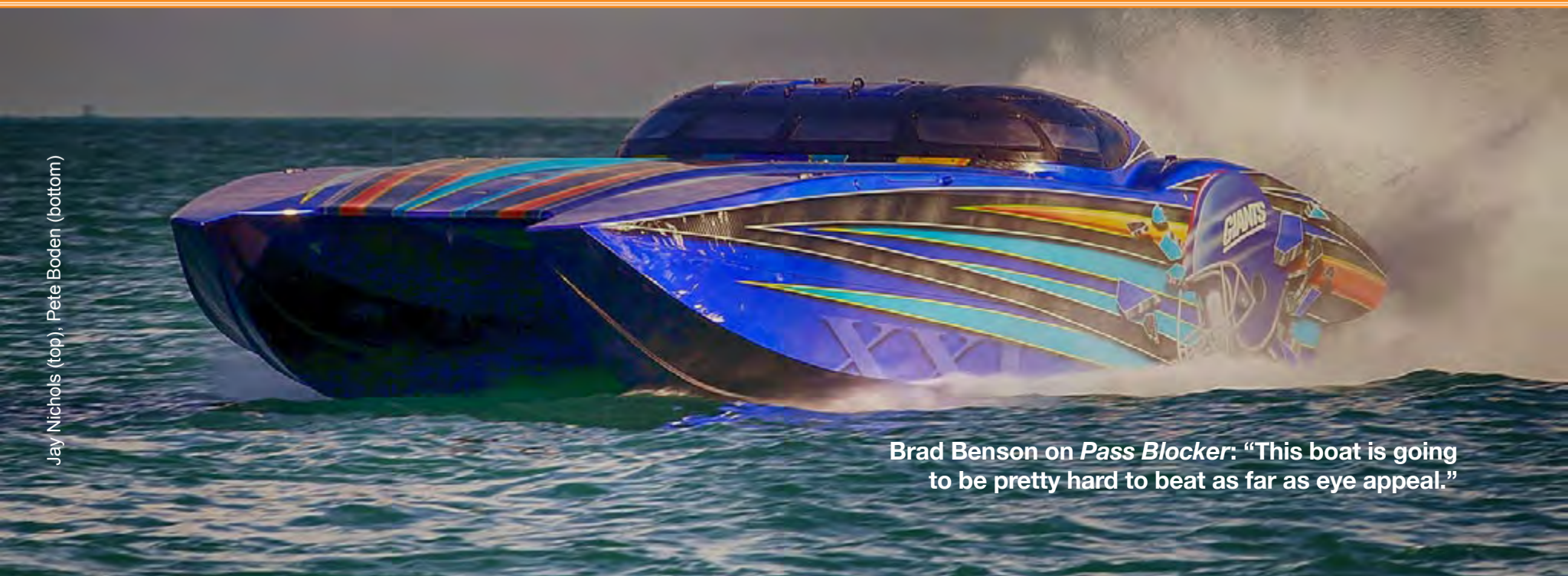
As pleasure boats go, *Pass Blocker*,



A pair of 1,650-horsepower turbocharged beauties from Mercury Racing powers the show-stopping 52-foot cat.

however, has more than a few features you'd typically find in a raceboat in addition to its roll cage and extra stout canopy. Each of the cat's six forward-facing bucket seats—the front four being of the suspension variety—has a five-point restraint harness. Each also has its own emergency oxygen system. The hull is equipped with two escape hatches, one forward and one aft, in the event it overturns.

As it turned out, the rear escape hatch



Brad Benson on *Pass Blocker*: "This boat is going to be pretty hard to beat as far as eye appeal."



Brad Benson teamed up with his crew chief for *Pass Blocker*, Tom Healey (left), to run the canopied 52-footer in the Miami Boat Show Poker Run. Benson invited speedonthewater.com's Matt Trulio (right) to join him for part of the run.

provided a bit of drama for Benson, his crew chief Tom Healey of Team Marine in Mount Holley, N.J., and his sons, Tyler and Clint. On their Monday return home from the Florida Powerboat Club's 2013 Key West Poker Run, the rear escape hatch malfunctioned while the boat was running up the coast in the Atlantic Ocean at 100-plus mph in six- to eight-foot seas.

"We were running outside about three or four miles south of the Bahia Honda Bridge," Benson recalled. "We had finally found a sweet spot for speed in those conditions. We came down hard on one and I felt a little water hit the back of my neck. We came down from another and I felt more water on the back of my neck, and my son, Tyler, said 'Hey Dad! This hatch is coming loose.' As soon as we slowed down to take a look, water would come through the opening like a fire hose so we had to get back up to speed."

Though neither Benson nor Healey believed the cat would sink, they did know it would be a whole lot harder to recover offshore than it would be if they could get it to the Intracoastal Waterway and Bahia Honda Key. At least there they could beach the boat in shallow water and call a crane to retrieve it.

"Our goal in heading back in was getting out of an uncontrolled environment where we had every bit of six- to eight-foot seas and getting it into a more controlled environment on the inside where we could make a better judgment on a course of action," Healey said.

Added Benson, "People have asked me, 'Didn't you know the escape hatch is above the waterline in the hull?' Of course I did, but it wasn't above the waterline in six- to eight-foot seas."

Benson and Healey eventually found a spot in front of an RV park where they could beach the 52-footer. They built what they hoped would be enough momentum to get it close to the beach, then raised the drives and shut off the engines. The boat came to a stop in ankle-deep water with its nose within three feet from dry sand. Four hours later, it was back on its trailer thanks to a mobile crane service based in Key West. Damage to the drives, sponsons and propellers was cosmetic.

Fitted with a new four-point rear hatch, *Pass Blocker* ran a few months later in the Miami Boat Show Poker Run, where the extent of the drama was limited to finding the correct slip at Holiday Isle Marina in Islamorada, Fla.

Never Enough

Several years ago, David Woods, of Pier 57 Marine in Counce, Tenn., sold Benson his first *Pass Blocker*, a stellar open-cockpit 48-footer powered by Mercury Racing 1350 engines. Benson had originally trekked, via fractionally owned aircraft, to the Pier 57 dealership to check out a 40-foot MTI, but couldn't keep his eyes off the white 48-footer Woods had in stock.

Problem was, with bad weather coming in that could scuttle Benson's flight back to New



Pass Blocker

Jersey, he only had time to take a test ride in one boat. He chose the 48-footer—a boat he originally hadn't even come to see—and never regretted it.

“I went out on the lake with Billy Moore and it was pretty rough, but the boat was just gliding over it,” Benson said. “It ran 157 mph pretty much with its tongue hanging out, and I'd never been in anything like it before. When I got back to the docks, David asked, ‘Hey, how'd you like it?’ I still had my poker face on, so I said, ‘It was all right.’ David was cool—I think he's pretty good at reading people. He's a people person. I smiled and said, ‘I'll have to write you a new check. I already made out this one for the 40.’ He said, ‘Just give me that one. You can send me the rest.’”

“I looked at the 48 and said, ‘This is the real deal, I'm never going to own another boat,’” added Benson, who within a year replaced the cat's original Mercury Racing supercharged 1075/1200 dual-fuel engines with quad-overhead cam turbocharged 1350s. “It was amazing.”

Two years ago, Benson decided it was time for the back surgery he'd been putting off. Knowing he'd need a year off the water, he told Scism he was selling the original *Pass Blocker* and would order a new one when he got back on his feet.

“Randy (Scism) asked me, ‘Brad, what would make you order one now?’” Benson recalled. “I told him, ‘Something that is bigger, faster and safer. If you could do that, I would be in.’ Two days later he sent me pictures of the molds for the 52.”

Scism and Benson struck a deal on the new 52-footer, which Benson wanted “to be like a raceboat with a slightly nicer cockpit and no numbers on the side.” Benson originally ordered the cat with Mercury Racing 1350



Each of the cat's six bucket seats in the uniquely configured cockpit has a five-point restraint harness as well as its own emergency oxygen system.

engines, but then he began hearing about their 1650 counterparts that would be released before his boat was finished. At first, said Benson, Scism, who was involved in prototype testing of the 1650s with his racing partner Bob Bull in a 48-foot MTI cat in offshore racing, tried to talk him out of the upgrade.

“Randy said he figured I was going to call him, and told me that these engines were going to be different than my 1350s, that sometimes I would turn the key and idle out of the no-wake zone and sometimes I wouldn't,” Benson said.





Mark Morris of Visual Imagination handled the graphics for *Pass Blocker*. Said owner Brad Benson, "They're the best I've ever seen, and Mark is a complete gentleman."

"He also told me I was going to have to run and carry race fuel, and being able to pull up to the docks and put 91-octane gas was one thing I liked about the 1350s. I told him I had to think about it and I'd give him an answer in a week.

"I was thinking about it and thinking about, and I thought, 'This is going to kill me if

"We are so fortunate to have some really cool clients. Brad is a team player, and I think he's as happy as can be with his boat now."

someone blows by me," he added. "So I called up Randy and said, 'I guess I owe you money because I want to upgrade to the 1650s.' He told me he'd already ordered them for me. I said, 'It better go fast, like 170 or 180.' He said it would go fast—he already knew how fast it would go."

When the boat was finished in the fall of 2013 before the Key West Poker Run, Benson and Healey flew to Missouri's Lake of the Ozarks to test it with Scism. The cat's M8 drives had been blueprinted by Wilson Custom Marine and fitted with 1.24:1 gear reductions. Propellers were 38-inch-pitch five blades from Hering. With a few tweaks

after several runs, the 52-footer reached 185 mph and was, said Benson, "close to hitting the bump boxes." Benson had his dream ride.

"We are so fortunate to have some really cool clients," said Scism, who has built six 52-foot cats to date. "Brad is a

team player, and I think he's as happy as he can be with his boat now."

"This boat is going to be pretty hard to beat as far as eye appeal," Benson said. "As far as motors go, what's next for me will be determined by technology. If Mercury Racing came out with 1800s, I'd own them." **SOTW**