

F&B's Small Craft Section

The New Honda 20hp 4-Stroke - A Quiet Achiever



Whilst the big outboard companies engage in something akin to range warfare as they compete for the boating consumer's support, Honda Marine in Australia has stood clear of the flak and discount wars, quietly going about their business: providing what they believe are the best 4-strokes on sale in Australia today, a list that now includes their new 15/20 hp series.

Story and pics by Peter Webster

If any one company deserves the accolades for introducing 4-strokes to the Australian boating market, it is Honda Marine.

Back in 1996, when F&B tested the first Honda 90 in Australia, we witnessed the re-launch of a brand that in fact had been on sale in Australia for many years previously, but in a very small way.

From 1996 though, things changed dramatically, didn't they? Following the successful launch of their 'bullet proof' 90hp series, an engine that has gone on to achieve legendary status in the charter world, Honda then released the powerful 130hp engine, and spent the next couple of years concentrating

on developing their dealer network and establishing the advantages of their big 4-stroke engines.

Subsequently, it must be said that some of their less glamorous, but nevertheless vitally important engines soldiered on, utilising designs and technology that in some cases was well in excess of 10 years old.

The 15hp Honda 4-stroke F&B has been using in the *Dusty Rover* project has been on our books now for nearly 4 years, but it had already been on sale in Australia for a dozen or more years.

But it has been such a reliable and economical engine, most people who bought them, still have them, because they just keep on, keeping on.

Honda has earned a wonderful reputation for the longevity of their outboards in Australia. Several of their 90hp engines in charter boat work have logged upwards of 5,500 hours before any serious maintenance or repairs were required. Similarly, this little 15hp gem is commonly used on houseboats with thousands of hours being put away pushing enormous houseboats up and down rivers and dams without seeming to feel the strain.

We've used the Honda 15 now for approximately 125 hours, in a situation where it actually does more work than *Dusty Rover's* Yanmar diesel.

The 'mothership' principle here means that we use *Dusty Rover* to travel from one location to another, before launching the Stessl dory, our amazing little 3.4m alloy sportfishing boat, powered by the Honda 15 longshaft 4-stroke.

We've had nary a complaint with the 15hp Honda, beyond the fact that when we load up the writer, Ruth (skipper), all the big camera gear for the broadcast TV outfit, the Minn Kota electric motor, 105 amp hour Century battery, fuel, water, still-photography equipment and the tackle box, it is a nearly impossible load for the Honda 15 – but to its credit, it does actually handle it all fairly well, pushing the boat up to around 11-12 knots flat out, fully laden – but preferably downhill with the tide pushing from behind!

That's a very torquey performance, but obviously enough, we'd like more speed to go from one destination to another – especially if we are trying to meet other people or complete filming commitments where time, tide, sunrise or sunset is a complicating factor.

We've wanted to upgrade to a 20hp engine for a long time, but knew this new model was coming through, so we were quite prepared to wait for it to be released.

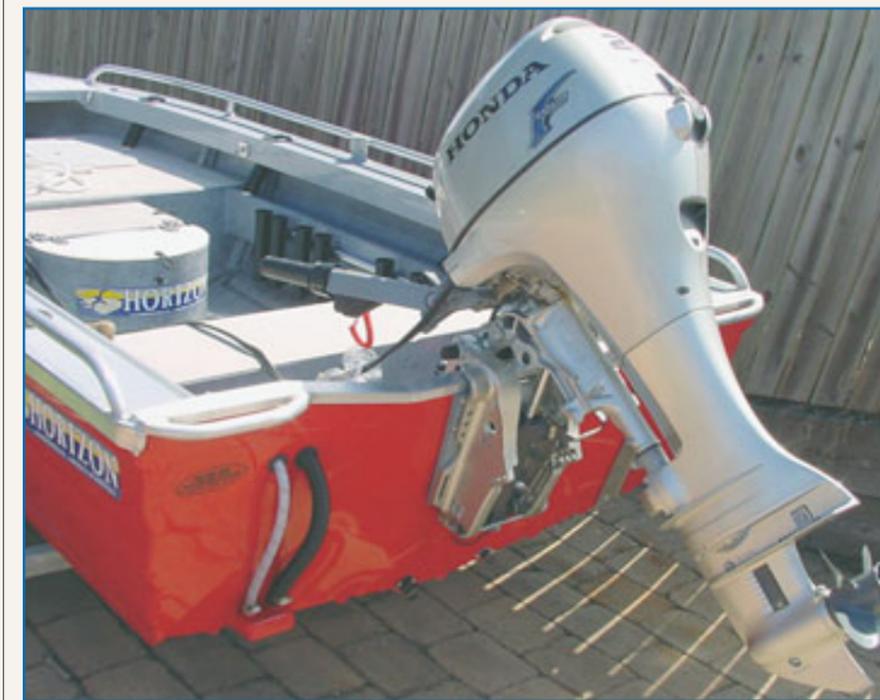
Readers who have studied outboards in the 15hp-25hp range will appreciate that this range is particularly difficult to deal with. Weight is a critical factor, and achieving a balance between power to weight ratio, fuel economy (and thus range) and the grunt required to move a reasonable sort of boat, often involves a compromise.

Why? Because the jump between the 9.9/15hp engines (which commonly share the same block and weight) and the 20/25hp outboard engines is

sometimes enormous.

This is especially so when you are comparing 2-strokes to 4-strokes. And even worse if you have to physically manhandle the engines from the back of the car or 4WD, down to the water's edge. There's a huge difference in picking up (say) a 34kg Mercury/Mariner 15hp short shaft 2-stroke, than picking up our 15hp long shaft Honda 4-stroke – this comes in at just under 47kg.

In our case, we sneakily got around the problem by installing our own crane on *Dusty Rover* just to manhandle the Honda 4-stroke outboard! I kid you not, this was the principle reason why *Dusty* has a



special davit mounted on the roof.

It's there is to make light work of lifting the Honda 15 on and off the Stessl 3.4's transom, before we swing the Honda 15 around through 180 degrees, to and from its special bracket in the cockpit of *Dusty Rover*.

The whole exercise takes about 60 seconds, protects my back, and makes safe one of the most difficult things you can do in boating – that is, to bend down from a swimming board, lift up an outboard off a tender's transom and then lift it back up as you stand back up on the swimming board.

To do this on a joggly sea when you're over 50 is a seriously dangerous manoeuvre, and apart from the ever

present risk of going overboard with the outboard, it is, quite simply, one of the worst possible "lifts" the human body can be asked to do. Hence our davit – and it solves the problem completely.

Okay, that's fine you say, but you don't have a davit on the back of your 4WD or the Holden? Funny that – neither do we, so on dry land we live with the issue of moving these big 4-strokes around on an almost daily basis. And yes, we certainly do appreciate that there is a significant weight penalty in having to hump a 15/20hp 4-stroke compared to heaving a 15/20hp 2-stroke back up into the 4WD. Especially if it's one of the

4WDs (like our new Ford F-250) where the tailgate drops down to a horizontal position – they're a bloody disaster. Again, it's an "up, over and down" lift. It's miles easier if you can just walk the outboard 'into' the back of the vehicle as you can with the 'ambulance doors' most commonly fitted to many of the Landcruisers, Patrols and Pajeros.

The New 20 With this background, you can understand why we've been more than a little curious about the new Honda 20hp 4-stroke.

At a promised 46.5kg the long shaft manual held out the potential of offering the needed 33% boost in