





Fully

Charger's new-for-'06 396 TF offers bass anglers a tournament-ready layout with electrifying performance

Charged

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Photos by Mike Engelmeyer



There's an urban myth that we media types are "Very Important People", and setting up a boat test is simply a matter of making a couple of phone calls and, *voila*, it's a done deal. Let me tell you: Nothing could be further from the truth.

The reality is that we stand in line like everyone else, and arranging an on-water evaluation involves coordinating the boat and engine manufacturers' schedules with scribe availability so that all parties show up at the dock at about the right time. The whole thing usually congeals without major complications, weather excluded, of course.

However, when a new engine hits the market, demand often exceeds supply and delays can occur as the manufacturer transitions from prototype to production mode. As news of the Evinrude E-Tec 225 H.O. spread, the marketplace went into a feeding frenzy, craving Evinrude's latest and greatest *immediately*. Yet, despite Evinrude's best efforts, a rationing situation soon developed, with units shipped to those most in need first.

Our impassioned pleas and outright groveling fell on deaf Evinrude ears; we had to wait in line like everyone else.

Typical for the marine industry, the 225 H.O. arrived toward the end of the week and the Charger Boats team worked feverishly to get its 396 TF rigged and out the door to make it to the lake on time. We must say that the crews at the Charger plant really do give it their all.



■ *Riding shotgun in the Charger 396 TF is ergonomically exciting. The passenger side (left) has two “here-we-go” grab handles and a sleek console/windscreen to direct the slipstream up and over your favorite fishing hat. The boat’s helm station is an exercise in futuristic function, influenced by a fighter plane’s cockpit. Ready for takeoff? Slide on your shades, pop off a snappy salute to the dock dwellers and hit the juice. You are the captain.*

MIGHTY FINE

To the casual observer, all bass boats seem to look alike, but the Charger 396 TF’s sweeping lines, switchblade-sharp bow, top-shelf gelcoat, and ultimate upholstery leave an indelibly positive aesthetic imprint deep in the psyche of those fortunate enough to behold its visage.

The Charger 396 TF we tested wasn’t pimped-out or gaudy; no flame job or chain steering wheel. Just tasteful gold tones over a white hull with light tan seats that contrasted perfectly with the tan marine carpet blanketing the deck from stem to stern.

Our test boat looked like James Bond sauntering up to the baccarat table: tailored suit, pressed shirt with the necktie tied just so; polished shoes and not a hair out of place. Very classy... but you get the feeling that this guy’s a ringer and could win every time if he wanted to. We got the same vibe from the 396 TF: an impeccable appearance, yet if necessary, having the muscle to whip on its tournament adversaries, should the need arise.

OH, SO GOOD

What do you do when you go for a bass boat ride? Sit down and hang on, right? Let’s talk about the sit down part for a minute.

Three very, very close friends could enjoy the 396’s seating, but the middle seat’s kinda narrow; it’d be a tight fit for your average-sized, corn-fed basser, but would be ideal for taking one of the young ‘uns out fishing.

The Charger’s cockpit features a wrap-around, lumbar-support couch (not seats, *couch*) that’s shamefully comfortable. As you ease yourself down onto the couch-seat, the high-density foam upholstery conforms to your personal body contours to support and secure you in decadent luxury during your high-speed excursions. You can look tough and pamper yourself at the same time. We won’t tell.

EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS

Charger’s been making go-fast bass boats for decades and has a reputation for consistent quality and eye-watering performance. So we approached the Charger 396 TF/Evinrude E-Tec boat test with high hopes and, to say the least, we weren’t disappointed.

Though the local meteorologists promoted their premonitions of pending precipitation



and the clouds seemed so low you could’ve poked ‘em with a broom handle, Mother Nature granted us a reprieve from the drizzle that’d badgered us for the past several days.

While loading our test gear into the Charger and otherwise getting the boat squared away for the test, the sun peeked through a fissure in the overcast, bathing the cockpit with a warm radiance that literally lit up the polyflake gelcoat, making the 396 sparkle like a floating jewel.

Once we got situated in the boat, the driver clipped the lanyard to his life jacket and

turned the key. Predictably, the Evinrude lit without protest and quietly burbled as we backed out of the slip and negotiated the post-ed no-wake zone surrounding the docks.

With the go-slow area behind us, the Charger rep scanned the lake for other boats, lowered the CMC jackplate, shoved the throttle forward, and off we went.

Because this was the maiden voyage for

■ *The stand-up pedestal (left) adjusts for the perfect fishing posture for anglers of any size. The Plano tackle tray system (below) eliminates on-board treasure hunts by stowing your lures where you can find ‘em in a hurry.*



the 396 TF/225 E-Tec, we took more time experimenting with jackplate height and trim angles to find the optimum combination of planing ability, handling and speed. Fiddling with the setup paid off, with the net results showing we were able to get on plane in less than 4 seconds and at a top speed of more than 74 mph on radar. More than respectable — downright exciting, if you ask us.

They say you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. We were impressed.

A DRIVER'S BOAT

One of the beauties of the 396 TF is that you can crawl out of another boat, jump into the Charger and drive it fast, without any seat time at all. This is a really big deal because unlike a lot of other bass boats, the 396 TF is extremely forgiving of less-than-polished driver input. In other words, the boat works



■ **A nifty rod organizer in the port rod box (left) keeps your favorite weapons from getting all tangled up during transport. A handy bungee strap on the foredeck (above) holds your rods tight until you get to the next fishin' hole.**

with you, not against you, even in rough water or at wide-open throttle. No chine-walk and no bad manners that show up at the most inopportune time. Just good, solid performance, no matter who's at the wheel.

Executing turns is a routine exercise; the boat goes where you ask it to go with unquestioning obedience. Attaining max speed involves giving the engine all the fuel you can, tapping the trim up a bit and keeping an eye out for other boats or debris in the water. The ride's good, the boat is well behaved and, without a doubt, one of the most user-friendly go-fast bass boats we've driven in a while.

Sure, you can get in trouble driving the 396 TF, but it'd be your fault, not the boat's.

FISHIN' FEATURES

So it's fast, but can it fish? Heck yeah, you can fish out of it. This is *Charger* we're talking about. These guys didn't just fall off the turnip truck; they know what serious anglers need to get the job done.

■ **Pop-up cleats and courtesy lights are just a few niceties on the 396.**



For instance, the trolling motor pedal is recessed into the front deck so you can keep both feet on the same plane when you're steering the trolling motor and casting. It's a setup that significantly reduces strain on your back and legs, especially when the waves kick up during a long day on the water.

The electronics at the bow are flush-mount-

ed as well, so you don't have to worry about tripping over them while you're working that lunker up to the side of the boat. The 396 TF's rod lockers will accommodate just about any kind of bass fishing rod you'll ever need. A nifty rod organizer is standard in the port rod box to keep up to 10 of your favorite weapons from getting all tangled up with each other during transport. If you need to, you can slide a few more rods in the rod holder tucked in the port side, next to the passenger's left arm.

Front and center on the foredeck are two large (14,784 cubic inches, to be exact) miscellaneous storage compartments that give you plenty of room to stow all kinds of tackle, trays or whatever else you wanna put in there. By the way, the Charger's compartments have gas-assist struts that help you open the hatches and keep them upright while you retrieve your gear.

On the aft casting deck, you'll find two generous storage boxes (port and starboard, behind the passenger and driver's seats, respectively). Two 15-gallon livewells are a little farther back, on either side of the aft fishing seat. The livewells feature dual controls so you can run them independently as you see fit.

At the very back of the boat, open the big lid to access the rigging, plumbing, and some of the other internal systems' components. And if you're a real pack rat, you can hide even more stuff in this aft-most compartment.

THE VERDICT

The Charger 396 TF is a well-made bass boat that has nearly everything you need to terrorize the tournament circuit. Combine the Charger's easy-to-drive, proven hull with Evinrude's 225 E-Tec H.O. and you have a boat that has the right stuff to kick bass. The rest is up to you. **BWB**

Charger 396 TF

Base Price

(w/Mercury 200 OptiMax, trailer): \$44,900

Price as Tested

(w/Evinrude E-Tec 225 H.O., trailer): \$49,900

Top Speed: 74.2 mph

0-to-30 mph: 6.9 seconds

Construction: Fiberglass

Console Type: Dual

Length: 19' 9"

Beam: 7' 11 1/2"

Hull Weight: 1600 lbs.

Rigged Weight: 3700 lbs.

Trailer Weight: 4700 lbs.

Fuel Capacity: 44 gals.

Livewell Capacity: 30 gals.

Maximum Horsepower: 225

Standard Equipment: Choice of colors; 7 storage compartments; 2 rod lockers; OEM instrumentation; equipment and accessories switch panel; Dual Pro-Charger; Lowrance X-51 w/surface temp; time-delay livewell system; 750-gph bilge pump; Sea Star hydraulic steering; 6-gauge trolling motor harness w/40-amp breaker

Optional Equipment as Tested: Jackplate; electronics upgrades; choice of engine; Hot Foot; starboard rod organizer; trailer upgrades

Engine Tested: Evinrude E-Tec 225 H.O.

Type: 90-degree V-6

Displacement: 3.3L(200 cid)

Weight (per mfg.): 509 lbs.

Recommended WOT RPM: 5800

Gear Ratio: 1.85:1

Propeller: 14 1/2x26" 3-blade stainless steel

BRP Raker

Jackplate: CMC hydraulic

Setback: 10"

Weather Conditions:

Air Temperature: 49F

Water Temperature: 45F

Wind: 5-10 mph

Water Conditions: Light chop

TEST RESULTS

Engine (rpm)	Speed (mph)	Fuel (gph)	MPG (mpg)	Range ¹ (miles)
1000	5.1	1.2	4.2	166
1500	6.6	2.9	2.3	91
2000	7.5	4.9	1.5	59
2500	20.0	6.6	3.0	119
3000²	28.3	7.8	3.6	143
3500	36.1	10.2	3.5	139
4000	40.4	12.0	3.4	135
4500	49.2	14.4	3.4	135
5000	58.3	17.0	3.4	135
5500	66.1	19.2	3.4	135
5850 (WOT)	74.2	22.2	3.3	131

¹ Based on 90% fuel capacity

² Optimum cruise speed

Charger Boats

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