

## BOATS

### BOAT TESTS

## Spencer 87

By Dean Travis Clarke



### THE INFO

**Builder:** Spencer  
**Model:** Spencer 87  
**Year:** 2012  
**Boat Type:** Sportfisherman  
**LOA:** 91'0"  
**Beam:** 22'0"  
**Draft:** 6'0"

## Darwin's Darling

**The Spencer 87 proves how far convertible design and construction have evolved.**

Custom yachts by definition are born in that ineffable realm between what's been done before and what could still yet be accomplished. They push the envelope, and the results aren't always good. Sometimes owners go too far afield and their vision simply doesn't translate. Or a builder stretches its capabilities to the limit and the outcome can be a nasty, sordid affair with rooms full of lawyers and buckets of bad blood. I never know exactly what I'll find when I take a custom sportfish out for a sea trial—except when the boat is a Spencer Yacht. This North Carolina boatbuilder is renowned for being one of the most progressive custom sportfish builders in the land, as well as one of the best. Its newest and largest—the 87-foot *Betsy*—certainly reinforces that well-earned reputation.

*Betsy* is no shrinking violet, even when viewed from the dock. Her metallic Alexseal hull paint and matching Hell's Bay Marquesa



flats skiff mounted on the foredeck stopped me in my tracks. The flawless teak toerail and trim add a touch of class to this seagoing fishing machine. (You'd never guess this teak is really a fabric of sorts—more on that later.)

The heart of any sportfish is the cockpit, and the attention to design and execution on *Betsy's* is noteworthy. The full-width mezzanine seats conceal refrigeration, two grills, drink boxes, and bait stowage. Tuna tubes on the ends of the durably upholstered seats hold delicate live tuna, channeling copious sea water over their gills to keep them ready for service as lively bait.

The lid on the livewell seals so you can pressurize it, allowing the expensive and fragile baits to remain in virtual stasis rather than sloshing around getting bruised, losing scales, and dying. Engine room access is through a centerline hatch in the mezzanine. The compartment is an exceptional space with four 1,150-horsepower Caterpillar C18 ACERT diesels. That's a total of 4,600 horses! The engines are coupled to big, beefy ZF 4000 pods, yet the arrangement still allows sufficient space to work around each powerplant. Twin 38-kW Northern Lights generators reside on centerline on the forward end. Also on centerline is a retractable Furuno 360-degree scanning sonar transducer that automatically withdraws into its tube once *Betsy* exceeds 12 knots.

The 87's quad-pod Caterpillar installation qualifies her as the first boat in the world to sport four such units. Carbon-fiber jackshafts between pods and engines weigh a third of what comparable metal shafts would. Livos Technologies air handlers supply critical combustion air while eliminating salt-mist intrusion.

A new Willy Vac central vacuum system by Wallace Marine Services in the engine room has a 2,400-gallon per hour pump allowing you to suck dirty water out of the bilge in a hurry. Its valve system also sends contents either overboard or into a container. Moreover, it can be used to pump the bilge in an emergency; to extract coolant from an engine during maintenance; or to pump out a stopped-up head. Looking aft down the stern alley, you see two Atlantic Ice ice machines, one dumping into a large box under the mezzanine and the other into a large container abutting a cockpit fishbox. Three air-conditioning chillers cool the engine room, living spaces, mezzanine, and flying bridge.

I have always liked Paul Spencer's innovative trim-tab design, which incorporates quarter-inch stainless plates that will never break. Electric actuator motors are positioned inside the hull. This setup lets you swap out a motor without having to haul the boat or jump overboard to attempt an in-water fix.

All enclosed spaces are covered by a new Pyrogen fire-suppression system—an inert, nontoxic solid developed counterintuitively from rocket-fuel technology. This compound remains stable until it is electrically or thermally activated. Neither gas, liquid, nor solid, Pyrogen produces extremely fine potassium crystals that act as radical scavengers inhibiting the combination of hydrogen and oxygen, thereby chemically stopping the fire at the molecular level. Additionally, it produces no thermal shock to electronics or turbochargers.



[Click here to see a virtual tour of the Spencer 87](#)

Pipewelders built the tower and the hydraulic outriggers (with LathamCam cameras) on either side of the open flying bridge. These new outriggers are a whopping 51 feet long with quad stays, and yet weigh only 45 pounds apiece. I liked the new integral rollers for the outrigger lines, negating the need to mount turning block pulleys on padeyes.

The bridge sports a horseshoe-shaped settee forward of the helm by the brow and a straight settee across the console front with loads of freezer storage beneath. At the helm, you can watch the props turning on the pods via underwater cameras—an amazing perspective. A joystick controls the pod drives and allows you to move the boat in absolutely any direction you wish—even sideways and diagonally. The OctoPlex electrical distribution system from Moritz Aerospace supplies touchscreen control for every system aboard *Betsy* with numerous control stations around the boat. If you build up salt on your enclosure, a freshwater washdown system cleans it off while running.

Looking forward you clearly see the Hell's Bay Marquesa on the bow. This technical poling skiff runs in almost no water and weighs a mere 650 pounds. And looking aft, you have a clear view of the after half of the cockpit.

Below, the surprises continue. Where you would normally find a guest stateroom, there's a full gym with elliptical machine, rubber floor, and weights—to keep the owner and crew fit for fighting big fish. The full-beam master stateroom showcases marble counters



with lighting underneath to make the counters glow.

The captain's sister, Beth Cole, did all the interior décor and it whispers understated elegance. Lightweight stone borders the carpets and there are high-end designer fixtures and lights. The look is finished with beautiful crown moldings and baseboards throughout.

Crew's quarters in the bow are actually civilized and a second crew stateroom provides over/under twin berths rather than narrow singles. Press a button in the forward cabin and a hefty hatch in the sole opens to reveal a massive "finished basement" for additional stowage. This boat makes use of almost every iota of dead space.

After walking sideways away from a bulkhead berth, we idled out of Hillsborough Inlet near Pompano, Florida. Seas running 3 to 4 feet out of the east posed nary a hiccup for *Betsy*. Despite the fact that we had four ample, buoyancy-robbing tunnels housing our pods, we experienced very little bow rise coming out of the hole thanks to a significant reduction in the amount of rocker Spencer typically puts into its running surfaces. The boat achieved plane in a mere seven seconds and hit top speed in 40—just under 40 knots (for a 91-foot LOA)! We cruised at 35 knots turning 2000 rpm while burning 198 gallons per hour—remember that's with four engines. She will also cruise comfortably at 25 knots on just two engines and at 30 with three.

Interestingly, despite having four pods that allow you to move the boat handily in any direction, *Betsy* also has a hydraulic bow thruster. Perhaps in a stiff crosswind or foul current, you might need it to augment the pods (though I doubt it). What that thruster does is allow you to spin this leviathan like a Bertram 31. Indeed, in SportFish mode you have unsurpassed fish-fighting maneuverability. And there's more: Cruising along at 32 knots, turn the wheel hard over, and you'll reverse course in two boat lengths. And press a button and you'll stay in place and on heading automatically.

*Betsy* represents the most advanced laminate schedule Spencer has created to date. The hull was built on a jig with Corecell composite foam sandwiched with layers of E-glass (some resin-infused) using all epoxy resins. The builder used carbon fiber and NidaCore composite in the deck and bulkheads. The composites combined with the underwater exhausts through the pods make the boat exceptionally quiet.

Remember the "teak" I mentioned earlier? It's a fascinating new product called AirTeak ([www.airteak.com](http://www.airteak.com)) introduced by noted yacht designer Steve French who, incidentally, designed the 87. This synthetic composite system makes surfaces look and feel exactly like real teak after application. It lasts far longer and requires infinitely less maintenance than varnished teak. I challenge you to look at it and tell the difference!

There are so many noteworthy and pioneering elements about the Spencer 87 that, had the owner not named her after his beloved wife, he says he would've called her *Game Changer*. He's right: I've been aboard countless boats in my life and I've liked many of them, but I know of no other boat like this one. And I might add that I've never felt like: *Man, I wish this was my boat!* quite this strongly before. Everything was designed and executed exactly the way I would have wanted it. The old envelope is shredded. And the new one sure looks good.