

# Rare Air

WE PUT FIVE HOT NEW  
TO THE TEST.

If there's one towable that has stood the test of time, it's the inflatable. Or, as those of us who grew up riding those literal truck-tire innards around the lake used to call them, tubes.

There's plenty of reasons for their long-term popularity. Unlike most tow sports, tubes have no real learning curve. The right inflatable can also satisfy a vast audience, young or old, large or small, timid or aggressive. And then there's the simple fun factor. No other towable elicits the volume-on-11 laughter (OK, and maybe nervous Level 12 scream) that a weirdly shaped, brightly colored bag of air can produce as it skids its passengers outside the wake in a turn or gets air off a wave. Just sit on the dock and listen. Tube-induced squeals and laughter are some of the most familiar songs of summer.

Ready to meet a few of our favorite inflatables from the class of '23? Read on. But don't forget to look and listen to the accompanying pictures. We swear you can almost hear the shrieks.



## Find the Sweet Spot

Underfilled tubes won't perform as intended, and gaps between the bladder and cover can entangle riders. Overfilled inflatables can pop seams when air expands in the hot sun. Most manufacturers recommend inflating to about 85 percent capacity to find a tube's sweet spot, firm enough to perform as intended but with wiggle room for expansion.

### WOW Wake Walker (\$449.99)

WOW's Wake Walker is a twofer: a 76-by-67-by-34-inch inflatable that you can ride like a great big comfy couch or, using a secondary tow point, Roman-style chariot. After many hours in the sun, our testers gravitated toward the tube-and-

chill mode to start, with backs reclined, legs stretched out, and the large inflated dividers keeping them from banging into each other (or exiting the ride) once the driver sent the tube walkin' across the wakes and into the flats. There, the tube was loose and playful because the tow

point elevates the leading edge out of the water. When it was time to mix things up, a secondary web strap sewn into the bottom cover switched the tube into Ben-Hur mode, with riders standing and skidding across their watery Colosseum. In both versions, soft EVA pads protect

wear points and add a touch of comfort.

With vibrant colors and graphics, WOW tubes are hard to miss on the water. It's both a safety feature and a marketing gimmick. For example, in chariot mode, the Wake Walker's bottom flips up to reveal a gigantic shark's

mouth, seemingly ready to take a bite out of the towrope. That eye-catching nylon cover protects multiple large PVC air bladders. All inflate via WOW's Speed Safety valves, which are covered with zippered access panels. Still, testers noted the occasional complication of the

Wake Walker's design. The towrope often went slack in turn-induced skids, jolting riders back into line once taut. Chariot mode also bent some riders awkwardly forward. But as an old gum commercial used to say, double your pleasure—and double your fun. [wowsports.com](http://wowsports.com)





**O'BRIEN New-U 2 (\$399.99)**

The name says it all. O'Brien's New-U is a gently curved, U-shaped deck tube that invites riders to lie atop its surface and take the ride head-on. As you might expect, the shape has less wetted surface than flatter tubes, so therefore less resistance. Crank a few S-turns, and your riders will be skidding back and forth across the wakes and sliding effortlessly into the flats. Yes, there's a little bit of rock 'n' roll compliments of that curved shape. Testers found it added to the fun, especially when they realized the

New-U's stabilizing outer sponsons—set back just slightly from the edge on the tube's bottom side—kept them from ejection if the tube rocked too far. A minor downside? Be prepared to roll into the rider next to you when rocking out.

The 57-by-61-inch New-U uses the classic combo of a heavy-duty 24/28-gauge PVC bladder covered in an 840D nylon cover, with a single soft EVA body pad where riders will likely prop their elbows (and scrape life-jacket buckles). Four padded grab handles with EVA knuckle guards align



along the leading edge to keep riders secure. Sponsons inflate and deflate via speed-style valves. The main body of the tube uses O'Brien's proprietary Lightning valve featuring an extra-large opening and simple, one-way flap. Fill with a tube inflator or Shop-Vac. Empty by simply pushing the large air-retention flap inward and letting all that air rapidly escape. [obrien.com](http://obrien.com)

**Parts Before Whole**  
If your inflatable has multiple bladders, inflate smaller components—backrests, dividers, bolsters, etc.—before larger parts. It's easier to get smaller items filled to their proper shape when not under pressure from a large, adjacent bladder.



**CONNELLY Racer 2 (\$259.99)**

Cross a deck-style tube with a touch of old-school doughnut in the seat area, add a backrest for comfort, and wrap it all in a sports-car-red cover, and you've got a rough picture of Connelly's Racer 2. Two riders sit side by side atop the Racer, but their butts sink into an oval-shaped interior cutout, leaving legs topside. The result is a seated tube with no real perimeter enclosure, giving riders the added sensation of speed that comes with being seated almost directly atop the water. That said, our test crew found the ergonomics of the 60-by-65-inch Racer fit smaller riders best. Be aware that the seam between the cover and

exposed bladder can chafe the back sides of legs, and the inflatable floor does not always adequately cushion the posterior in rough waters. But in calmer conditions, kids and smaller adults will find the Racer a legit speedster, with a flat bottom that loves to skid across the wake and continue far into the flats.

The Racer 2 requires a three-step process to inflate because the main deck, floor and backrest all use separate bladders. The deck uses a two-part Boston valve; the floor and backrest are pool-float-style. Bladders are heavy-duty PVC, and the cover is constructed of 420D nylon. (Be careful of exposed zippers on your clothing or objects because the

bladder is fully exposed in the seating area.) Padded grab handles with knuckle guards are located to port and starboard topside; inside, hands will find webbed straps on the floor. A mesh bottom drain funnels away water that makes its way into the interior. [connellyskis.com](http://connellyskis.com)

**Chill Before You Fill**  
Take a moment to make sure all valves line up with access holes in the cover. If a bladder starts to fill and take on a weird shape (typical of smaller bladders that may be folded or not properly positioned within their cover), look for zippered access to reposition.







topside cover, is soft and comfortable to lie on and eliminates the need for additional sewn-on material in contact and higher-wear areas. Padded gray handles with knuckle guards offer secure handholds. Those who have to do the grunt work will also appreciate that, despite the intricate shape, Radar uses just one single 30-gauge PVC bladder. Blowing up and deflating the 82-by-68-inch tube is accomplished through a single two-way Boston valve, greatly simplifying both processes. [radarskis.com](http://radarskis.com)

### **RADAR Edge 2 (\$249.99)**

Radar's Edge 2 sports a new unique design for 2023. Formerly your basic U-shaped deck tube, the Edge now features a relatively flat deck-style base, with a rounded front and less-aggressively curved trailing edge. In addition to the artsy colors and graphics, two angled wings catch the eye as they point skyward on each side. The combined effect gives this tube a stylish, futuristic look, but the latter features playful dividends while underway, giving riders more security than the traditional flat deck tube when

the Edge skids outside the wake. And skid it does. Radar's Spoon-O-Vation bottom is slightly convex in shape, giving it less resistance than flat shapes as it moves across the water's surface. The sporty personality, a similarly shaped topside that didn't push riders into each other as those skids happened, and the security provided by those wings during high-speed slides all combined to make this one of our test team's favorite rides.

Other less obvious features also play a role in the Edge's success. Radar's Marshmallow Soft Top, a full neoprene



**Watch Your Valves**  
When deflating tubes, it's easy to misplace screw-in valves that remove for quick deflation. Many screw-in valves feature a retaining ring that fits over the threaded female end in the bladder. Use it.



### **HO Neo 3 (\$479.99)**

HO's Neo 3 veers from traditional inflatable construction by employing what HO calls EXO Frame technology. The trapezoidal topside perimeter tube provides the strength of a traditional tube, but HO eschews inflatable sides for linking that tube to the inflatable floor below. Instead, it substitutes a heavy-duty, snag-resistant mesh. One advantage? With less material, the tube is lighter and easier to lug around the dock or shore. Water that makes it into the interior of this tub-style tube also quickly drains away rather than forming a puddle within. And then there's the coolness factor. Riders feel closer to the water when they see it whizzing past.

Blowing up the 82-by-67-inch three-passenger Neo takes a little extra time. The top perimeter ring, backrest, floor and two individual passenger bolsters/dividers within all require separate inflation. The main pieces use two-way Boston valves; the bolsters feature pool-float-style valves. Once inflated, riders will enjoy compartmentalized seating from neoprene bottom panels added to the floor for comfort and wear prevention; convenient and soft foam handles with padded knuckle guards on both dividers and the outer ring; and the security and separation the dividers provide. Our teen testers found the Neo quick and stable, and gave high marks to its easy-gliding personality. The only drawback they noted was leg

length in the cockpit. While kids will be fine, adult passengers—particularly if they're on the outside—can feel a little cramped due to the tube's tapered shape forward. [hosports.com](http://hosports.com)







### STARCRRAFT MVX Surf

A lot goes into choosing which boat gets to do towing duties for our annual tow-toy roundup. For this big, splashy feature, we want a boat with enough power to pull a large, four-person tube without stress. It must also boast enough amenities to keep a large crew of riders, photographers, videographers and editors happy for a sunup-to-sundown workday. The boat's aesthetics represent another criteria we use: It must look cool. If the boat is moderately priced, so much the better.

Full disclosure: The editorial team chooses which boat gets selected. It is not a paid-for inclusion.

This year, we hit a home run by selecting the Starcraft MVX Surf. Powered by a 300 hp forward-facing Mercury Bravo Four S sterndrive, this boat offers enough power to bring a large crew out to tow big tubes. At 23 feet long and carrying an 8-foot-6-inch beam, the MVX Surf offers the seating and stowage space for that crew and all their gear.

Fitted with ballast, a wake tower and other specialty accessories, the MVX Surf delivers wakesurfing fun and thrills. The forward-facing Bravo Four S makes wakesurfing safer.

At the helm, we found a Simrad touchscreen, enabling us to monitor engine functions and operate many special features. For instance, not only could we read fuel burn, speed and rpm, but the screen also allowed using Auto

Trim and Tow Mode—features that make operation easier, especially with a large crew to manage. The JL Audio system rocked, featuring amp, sub and

tower speakers.

With the 6.2L 300 hp Bravo Four S, we hit 37.5 mph and achieved plane in just 4 seconds. The price is \$114,999.

