

JUST TRUCKS

Battle of the big boys

Truck owners among most loyal

Full-sized pickups among most popular

BY JIM GORZELANY

Full-size pickups are still among the most popular new vehicles in the U.S. As of February, the Ford F-150 takes the top spot, with the Chevrolet Silverado holding down the third position and the Dodge Ram ranking 15th in overall sales according to Autodata in Woodcliff Lake, N.J.

Dodge Ram

In their most-basic configurations, pickup trucks are the most purposeful vehicles on the road, and are built to tackle the toughest jobs. They've become increasingly refined over the last two decades, however, with top models offering sufficient comfort and amenities that allow them to double as family vehicles.

Competition in this segment is intense, with domestic pickup truck buyers among the most brand-loyal customers in the automobile business. Truth is, there are more similarities than differences among the Silverado, Ram and F-150 lines, with each offering a broad assortment of configurations to fit just about any truck buyer's needs. Let's see how these three truck titans stack up against each other:

Each comes wrapped in masculine-friendly, Tonka-toy-like styling that differs according to brand. All come in a choice of regular cab (with just a front seat and two doors), extended cab (with clamshell-opening, rear "access doors" and added space to accommodate small back seats) and crew cab versions (with conventional rear doors and seating for five adults). Generally, the longer the cab, the shorter the maximum size cargo bed; for example, eight-foot beds are not available with crew cab models.

Chevrolet Silverado

All offer a choice of V8 engines that top out at around 400 horsepower, though the Silverado and Ram offer anemic V6s as their standard powerplants, generating just 195 and 215 horses, respectively. All offer a choice of rear- or four-wheel-drive versions across their respective lines, with automatic transmissions standard. The Ram offers a four- or five-speed auto-



TRUCK TITANS SUCH as the Dodge Ram, Chevy Silverado and Ford F-150 are among the most popular in Montana. The Ram offers a four- or five-speed automatic



matic, while the Silverado and F-150 feature a four- or six-speed gearbox.

The Silverado is offered in a high-tech hybrid version for those willing to pay extra to save a few mpg; the truck is also sold with minor differences as the GMC Sierra.

One spec purposeful buyers heed is a model's towing capacity, which for the F-150 maxes out at 11,200 pounds; it's 10,600 pounds on the Silverado and 10,450 pounds on the Ram. However, these numbers depend on engine and drivetrain choices and can be considerably lower depending on how a truck is equipped.

While none of these full-size pickups will ever be mistaken for a luxury car in terms of ride and handling qualities, the Dodge Ram is arguably the most accommodating of the three in that regard; by comparison, the F-150 feels like a lumbering hulk, with the Silverado somewhere in between.

All come standard with stability control and side-curtain airbags, with myriad comfort and convenience features available, including leather seats, premium audio systems and GPS.

The Silverado and Ram

can be fitted with devices that turn them into rolling Internet hot spots, while the F-150 offers an in-dash computer and high-speed Web access. The F-150 offers both Ford's Sync voice-activated multimedia control system and Sirius Travel Link (which provides road warriors with real-time data on weather, traffic, gas prices and such). Crew cab versions of the Ram can be equipped with Sirius Backseat TV, which brings four kid-friendly channels to the optional entertainment system, or the FLO-TV system that offers up to 20 news and entertainment channels.

Ford F-150

The Ram and F-150 in particular offer several clever storage options. For example, the Dodge's optional "RamBox" cargo system features lockable, illuminated and drainable storage bins built into the cargo bed rails. The F-150 offers a "Midbox" that provides 26.3 cubic feet of protective, secured storage without sacrificing bed length.

So which of these full-size pickups gets the nod? This remains a tough call, which is likely one reason why so many full-size

pickup buyers stay loyal to a particular brand. All three offer enough choices to satisfy just about any pickup aficionado. Unless we were dead set on a particular feature, spec or styling element among the three, we'd choose the Dodge Ram, almost exclu-

sively for its smoother ride and more manageable handling.

It otherwise performs as expected, treats its occupants to a well-designed interior with novel features and looks good with its bold, broad-shouldered styling.

Outdoor activities heat up

As the days grow shorter and Old Man Winter makes his appearance, many of us are tempted to bundle up and stay indoors. But don't let the changing weather keep you from nature's beauty and the potential of outdoor adventure.

Gear up and go

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Quick adventures for short days

The shorter days of the 'brrr' months, starting with 'Septembrr,' need not keep you from longer treks. Take advantage of modern technology like an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) to get you out and back quickly and safely. Industry sources report more than 200,000 new ATVs registered in 2011 and millions more in use today.

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When's an S.U.V. Not an S.U.V.?

A 'crossover' combines the best of S.U.V. and car elements

BY JIM GORZELANY
To underscore its tough-stuff image, the 2007 Wrangler made its debut under 6 tons of mud earlier this year, pictured at right. By contrast, Jeep's new crossover, the Compass, outfitted with amenities like premium speakers that swing down from the liftgate for tailgate partying, is a refined vehicle aimed at younger drivers who might never have considered a Jeep.



Jeep Wrangler, above, was the original mud machine. Below is Jeep's new Compass.

Once an afterthought in automakers' lineups, viewed as low-volume enclosed pickup trucks primarily of interest to contractors and outdoor enthusiasts, sport utility vehicles have over the last two decades become the quintessential American mode of transportation.

Buyers young and old, with and without families have been drawn to sport-utility vehicles for their rugged personalities, go-anywhere abilities and overall versatility in seating and cargo-carrying abilities. They provide an upright and unobstructed command of the road, robust engines and are perceived by many owners to be safer than other vehicle types.

But buyers have been growing increasingly weary of traditional S.U.V.s' truck-like ride height, rougher ride and handling qualities, and gas-guzzling fuel consumption. Their image as "safer"

vehicles also has come under fire by advocacy groups. Automakers have been countering in recent years with so-called "crossover" vehicles that offer S.U.V.-like attributes in more driver-friendly packages. Large S.U.V. sales are currently stuck in a downward spiral, but crossovers are burgeoning in popularity, with sales in the segment more than doubling last year to a record 671,000 units, according to Business Week.

Because crossovers are built on automobile, rather than truck platforms, they sit closer to the ground. That makes for easier



access and greater on-road stability, allowing for a smoother ride with car-like handling. And, because they weigh much less than truck-based models, crossover vehicles get fuel economy that's on a par with some midsize cars. Best of all they still offer a full range of amenities, tailgate cargo access and up to three rows of flexible seating. A few, including the Ford Escape, Mercury Mariner, Lexus RX and

Confidence is key when driving in winter weather

Harsh winter conditions can have crippling effects for drivers in locations often affected by snowy and icy weather during the cold months. Hauling the kids to hockey practice or even a quick trip to the grocery store could prove to be a difficult task, especially if a vehicle is not ready for challenging conditions that may come with the cold weather.

Just as consumers spend hours winterizing



their homes, it is important to winterize your vehicle.

Traction is key: With hazardous winter weather ahead, now is not the time to ignore your tires. Many vehicles need superior performing winter tires for optimum traction to navigate harsh winter conditions with confidence. The Goodyear Ultra Grip family of tires covers the winter driving needs of virtually every consumer. This line leverages innovative technology to help provide superior traction in challenging winter conditions. Winter driving experts such as the ILR Winter

Feel the pressure: As temperatures change, so does tire pressure. Proper tire inflation is essential for increased automotive safety, optimum driving performance and even good fuel mileage. Tires should be inflated to the vehicle manufacturer recommendations printed on a placard on the driver's side door jamb or in the glove box, and should be checked at least monthly.

Take the lead out of your foot: Remember, just because you have superior traction doesn't mean you can speed in snowy and icy conditions. With temperatures dropping, any precipitation can cause the roadway to become dangerously slick. When approaching intersections, stop signs, turns or any area where you have to decelerate, take your foot off the gas, apply the brakes gently and give yourself a cushion in case of slippery conditions. You can't get to your destination quickly if your car is off the road.

A clean vehicle is a safe vehicle: Do not drive without removing snow from the entire vehicle. If snow is left on the hood, it can blow onto the windshield, obstructing your view and if left on the roof or tailgate, snow can fly off the car, especially at high speeds, hitting other cars and causing accidents and swerving. Driving with snow on your car, obstructing your vision, is dangerous.

Lines blur over sports utility vehicles

BY JIM GORZELANY
Not too long ago, vehicle categories were well defined. You had cars, you had trucks, you had vans. And aside from an occasional novelty like the 1960s-era Chevrolet El Camino - a marriage of car and pickup - the categories stayed separate.

But that simple age ended about 15 years ago with the advent of the sport utility vehicle, which fit into none of the above categories. Since then, the lines have blurred still further with the unveiling of the sports utility truck, which offers the ride and interior comfort of an S.U.V., combined with the very useful rear bed of a pickup.

The first sport-utility truck arrived in 2001 with the introduction of the Ford Explorer Sport Trac, which will soon be renamed the Ford Sport Trac, says James Bell, publisher of Los Angeles-based IntelliChoice, an automotive Web site.

Since then, the Chevy Avalanche, Cadillac Escalade EXT, Honda Ridgeline and Hummer H2 S.U.T.'s have been added to the small but attention-getting field.

S.U.T.'s are unlikely to ever come close to outpacing sales of cars, trucks, vans or S.U.V.'s. But they do have many advantages. For the right kind of buyer, they represent the best of both worlds, says Mark Williams, editor of Los Angeles-based Truck Trend Magazine. If an S.U.T. owner faces a weekend camping trip or a big rehabbing job around the house, his vehicle's spacious open bed provides plenty of room for tents, camping equipment, tools



FORD HAS THE Escape, at right, as one of its SUVs. Chevy, above, has the Avalanche. The first sport-utility truck arrived in 2001 with the introduction of the Ford Explorer Sport Trac, soon to be the Ford Sport Trac.



or building materials, much as would a big V-8 pickup truck.

Yet for day-to-day living, like commuting or running errands around town, the S.U.T. provides a comfortable ride and excellent driving experience, and does so without the heavy fuel costs generally incurred by a V-8 pickup truck, Williams says.

Moreover, the S.U.T.'s interior represents a definite upgrade over a typical pickup. "Their cabins are usually of a higher grade as far as materials, sound deadening and other amenities," Bell says. "The cabins are just really a little

more civilized."

For some buyers, another benefit is that these vehicles don't look like anything else on the road. That means if you like attention from other motorists, you're sure to receive it while driving an S.U.T., said Chip Perry, CEO of Atlanta-based Autotrader.

"People like to have their cars looked at and ogled," he says. "[S.U.T.'s] are big and impressive with big wheels, and attract a lot of attention. That's a positive." Taken together, these advan-

tages have helped S.U.T.'s gain a lot of admirers. But that doesn't mean sports utility trucks are right for everyone. SUTs are built on SUV, not truck, platforms. For example, the Chevy Avalanche is built on the Chevy Suburban platform, the Ford Explorer Sport Trac on the Explorer platform. As a result, they don't have the carrying capacity of a conventional pickup, Williams notes.

Though it's still too early to truly gauge, S.U.T.'s also may offer less from a resale value perspective. "Come resale time, because there's a smaller market for these vehicles than there is for traditional pickups, it may be a little more difficult to find a buyer who appreciates the virtues of these vehicles the way you did," Bell says.

The emerging superstar of the S.U.T. category may be the Honda Ridgeline, launched in 2005 and named MotorTrend's 2006 Truck of the Year. The Ridgeline, priced from the low \$30,000 range and most typically found around \$35,000, offers four full-sized doors, passenger seating for five adults, and such clever features as a fold-up rear seat and a tailgate that can drop down like a typical tailgate, or swing open like a door, depending on which handle is used, according to Williams.

In effect, Honda has created an unconventional truck unlikely to be accepted by truck lovers, but embraced by folks who formerly owned and drove cars and S.U.V.'s, and are likely to savor its very comfortable and stable driving characteristics, Williams says.

"Honda has created a truck for people who don't like trucks," he notes.

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