

URBAN PICKS

COMPACT TRUCKS: AMERICA'S NEW LOVE AFFAIR

By Myron Stokes

Compact trucks, which were once sold primarily in rural areas have become the urban vehicle of choice. So naturally, the class of vehicle selected for this issue's Urban Pick, focuses on this new market trend.

At present, the shoot-out for the heart and mind of the 'urban cowboy' is between Ford Ranger and Chevy S-10, along with GMC stabmate Sonoma. The opening salvos are furious, leaving no doubt as to how serious the participants are at throttling the competition.

Toyota is making some headway with its Tacoma, but continues to encounter resistance from buyers loyal to American trucks. However, Toyota expects '96 to be a better year, and in fact, is betting the cost of a new truck assembly plant in Princeton, IN. Nissan, the inventor of the "urban pickup," expects that its share of the market will increase with the advent of its redesigned truck for the '97 model year.

Ford's efforts are exemplified by its offering of a passenger side air bag — the only manufacturer to do so in this category — complete with a de-activation switch for rear-facing infant seats not compatible with supplemental restraint systems (an airbag compatible infant seat, however, has been developed by GA International, of Colorado Springs); while Chevy and GMC offer an ingenious rear cab access panel with their extended cab models, a kind of third door, that is destined to be a runaway best seller in our view. Engineers report that installation of this feature actually contributes to the structural rigidity of the passenger compartment, thus enhancing safety. Add to this another GM exclusive; daytime running lights (DRL). Finally, the GM product continues to make great strides towards a "maintenance free" vehicle, as represented by 100,000 mile platinum-tipped spark plugs and engine coolant of the same longevity and transmission fluid that never needs changing.



Since off-road capability is not a primary consideration among this class of buyer, 4X2 rather than 4X4-based drivetrains get the lion's share of the sales mix. Dealers also report that young, single consumers are opting for sport truck packages that signify individuality, while maintaining a modicum of practicality. "One of our hottest sellers is a Ranger sport

package with 2.3 liter four-cylinder engine, with a 5-speed manual transmission, chrome wheels and pre-requisite features like cloth seats and a good sound system for under \$15,000," says Dwayne Horton, sales manager for Gorno Ford in Woodhaven, MI. "Amazingly, there are probably more women buying this 'Saturday night cruiser' package than men."

Dodge, however, can lay serious claim to the moniker of "muscle truck," since it is the only manufacturer to offer a V-8 (5.2 liters) for the compact class in conjunction with its sport package. With 220 hp on tap, the Dakota Sport is a stop light screamer worthy of the name.

Of course, these sport packages aren't what the average urban family would buy, but they are proof that pickups have come a long way from their traditional role as mechanical replacements for the horse.

With all the great truck products out there, choosing the best among them was difficult, especially when you take into consideration the urban assessment parameters like fuel efficiency; handling over a variety of road surfaces which are likely to include pot holes; initial and long-term affordability; insurance; ease of maintenance; durability and comfort. But choose we did, and based on subjective (our opinion) and objective (just the numbers) analysis, the nod goes to the GMC Sonoma and the Chevy S10 pickups, primarily due to that wonderful side access panel which allows these vehicles to go even further in terms of offering a realistic alternative to the traditional family car.

Make	Avg. transaction price	Engine Liters	Cylinders	Horsepower	Trans.	MPG (city)	Rec. gas (unloaded)	Wheel base	Length/width	Airbag
Ford Ranger XLT (regular cab)	\$15,140	4.0	V-6	160	Auto.	19	reg.	107.9	184.3/69.4	yes*
Ford Ranger XLT (super cab)	16,640	4.0	V-6	160	Auto.	19	reg.	125.2	198.2/69.4	yes*
GMC Sonoma SLS (regular cab)	15,500	4.3	V-6	170	Auto.	19	reg.	117.9	205.0/67.9	yes
GMC Sonoma SLS (club coupe)	16,900	4.3	V-6	170	Auto.	19	reg.	122.9	203.7/67.9	yes
Dakota SLT (regular cab)	14,674	3.9	V-6	175	Auto.	19	reg.	112.0	189.0/69.0	yes
Dakota SLT (extended cab)	15,600	3.9	V-6	175	Auto.	19	reg.	124.0	201.0/69.0	yes
Chevrolet S10 (regular cab)	15,200	4.3	V-6	170	Auto.	19	reg.	117.9	204.6/67.9	yes
Chevrolet S10 (extended cab)	16,700	4.3	V-6	170	Auto.	19	reg.	122.9	203.3/67.9	yes
Mazda B4000 (extended cab)	15,740	4.0	V-6	160	Auto.	19	reg.	125.2	184.3/69.4	yes
Nissan Pickup (King cab)	16,200 (est.)	3.0	V-6	153	Auto.	19	reg.	116.0	180.0/67.0	no
Toyota Tacoma (regular cab)	13,900	2.4	I-4	142	Auto.	20	reg.	103.0	175.0/67.0	yes
Toyota Tacoma (xtra cab)	15,983	2.4	I-4	142	Auto.	20	reg.	122.0	193.0/67.0	yes

Average transaction price includes tax, title, transfer and destination charges. All vehicles shown are 4x2 and equipped with V-6 engines and automatic transmissions, except for the Toyota Tacoma which features a 2.4L I-4. The 2.7L V-6 is only available on 4x4 models. Also, V-6 powered Nissan trucks will be in short supply since production of these engines ceases this month in preparation for the next generation truck with a new engine with OBD II diagnostics as required by law. Nissan did not want to spend the money upgrading the '96 engine knowing that the '97 was just around the corner.

* Passenger airbag available.