

F-150 gets Ford back in truck battle

WINFRED B. CROSS

Test Drive



Ford's need to hit a home run with its next generation F-150 is dire. The company's car sales have been eclipsed by Toyota and its trucks, at least critically, have given way to spiffy product by General Motors.

Ford should be breathing a bit easier. Not only is the 2004 F-150 a home run, it's a grand slam.

Why? Looks, quality, function - you name it, Ford has addressed the problem. The F-150 is more truck-looking, or to some more masculine. The rounded edges have been replaced with creases. It's a good look - not ground breaking, but obviously handsome.

The interior? This is where Ford knocks its competitors - domestic and foreign - on their ears. I've seen luxury

cars that don't have this kind of refinement. My test vehicle didn't have the slick nickel finish or wood grain, but I still impressed. Ford has about five different interiors which include a floor mounted, aluminum gear selector. In a truck? Yes sir.

The truck's interior isn't just good looking, it's luxury-car quiet. I've never been in a pickup with such an absence of wind and road noise. Even when speeds approach triple digits, noise is at a minimum.

This is one of the few pickups that really lives up to car-like handling. In two-wheel drive mode, the truck can be a bit squirrel, all pickups can be. Dial in the four wheel drive and that tricky stuff becomes more manageable. Cornering is good for a truck and it tracks straight and true.

The ride is comfortable, even in 4x4 mode. This isn't a car, but it's doing the best impression of a car I've seen.

My XLT was equipped with the optional 300 horsepower 5.4-liter Triton



Ford's new F-150 has the looks and features to help the automaker reclaim a bigger share of the lucrative U.S. truck market.

engine. It's not as powerful as some GM engines, but it's smoother and power comes on in a more linear fashion. Torque is plentiful at 365 pounds-feet.

Problems? The truck is heavier so gas mileage isn't great: 14/18. Despite giving the Explorer and independent rear suspension, the F-150 sticks with leaf springs.

The bed on the crew cab model is too short.

Those aside, I'd buy a crew cab with the big engine, 4x4, and upgraded interior without hesitation. My test vehicle was about \$37,000, pricey, especially without leather, but worth all you pay.

If this isn't truck of the year, the fix is in.

Former Division II standout the latest to prove college size no factor on NBA ability

By John Froschauer
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ronald Murray is from Shaw University, a member of the Division II CIAA and located in Raleigh, about a mile from N.C. State. He is one of 10 active players who entered the league from either a Division II, III or NAIA school or junior/community college.

"I feel like I can get around anybody in the league," said Murray, who is averaging 24.6 points, 5.2 rebounds and 4.8 assists. "It doesn't matter that no one in the arena knows who I am. They'll know who I am in time."

Fans are getting to know Murray, the 2002 Division II player of the year, while he is starting in place of Ray Allen, on the injured list with a surgically repaired ankle. Murray was a second-

round pick of the Milwaukee Bucks in the 2002 draft and a footnote in the five-player deal that sent Gary Payton to Milwaukee for Allen.

"A lot of you have never heard of him, but you better learn who he is," Minnesota Timberwolves coach Flip Saunders said. "He's for real."

Timberwolves guard Sam Cassell was a mentor for the 6-foot-4 Murray when the two were in Milwaukee last season.

"He was a guy that really looked to me for guidance," Cassell said, "and I showed him a lot of things to be successful on the basketball floor. Now he has an opportunity to play, and he's going to do well for (Seattle)."

Fewer players take the small-college road to the NBA than any other. There are 18 active players drafted out of high school and a

record 71 international players.

Active small-college alumni:

Division II
Eddie Robinson, Chicago, Central Oklahoma
Darrell Armstrong, New Orleans, Fayetteville State
Ronald Murray, Seattle, Shaw
Ben Wallace, Detroit, Virginia Union
Moochie Norris, Houston, West Florida

Division III
Devean George, L.A. Lakers, Augsburg (Minn.)

NAIA
Scottie Pippen, Chicago, Central Arkansas
Community/junior college
Chris Anderson, Denver, Blinn (Texas) JC
Qyntel Woods, Portland, Northeast Mississippi CC
Kedrick Brown, Boston, Okaloosa-Walton (Fla.) CC



Former Shaw standout Ronald Murray is making a big impression in his second NBA season.

Young Bulls look to turn corner

Continued from page 1C (1-2)

"I won't say where they are because I don't know if we're consistent yet," he said.

"We're a much different team than we were last night hopefully on Tuesday night, we'll be much like we were tonight and not like we were

Friday night. We're still developing still looking for consistency and we're still looking to understand in terms of what we try to do."

All eyes on Charlotte freshman

Continued from page 1C

"Three days a week Martin's in the gym at 7 o'clock in the morning, by himself, working out. He works hard. He's going to come around it's just a matter of time."

While the eyes are definitely on Iti and the 49ers basketball program they won't stay there for long if there's not success. The 49ers

are coming off a tough year where they finished under .500 and this is the last season that Charlotte will be only major basketball in town. Next year is the Bobcats inaugural season and if the fans don't have a reason to get excited about the 49ers they may lose a large part of their fan base to the new team in town.

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Report: AL MVP Rodriguez OK with trade to Boston or Yankees

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — American League MVP Alex Rodriguez would accept a trade to either the Boston Red Sox or the New York Yankees, The Dallas Morning News reported Sunday.

Rodriguez informed the Rangers of his choices, and the newspaper, citing an unidentified major league source, reported the short-stop chose Boston and New



Rodriguez

York.

Rodriguez has seven years left on a 10-year, \$250 million contract. A clause in his contract prohibits the Rangers from trading him unless he agrees.

Rodriguez said at a news conference Friday in the Dominican Republic that Rangers owner Tom Hicks told him there were three possible scenarios: sticking with his contract, restructuring it or shopping him around.

The newspaper said that numerous baseball officials have confirmed the Rangers' claims that there are no serious talks for Rodriguez

because of his contract.

Rangers general manager John Hart has said a few inquiries about Rodriguez got no further than "kicking the tires," the newspaper reported. Hart did not immediately return a telephone call to The Associated Press.

This season Rodriguez hit .298, tied for the major league lead with 47 homers, and led the AL in runs (124) and slugging percentage (.600). He had 118 RBIs.

Regarded by many as the league's best all-around player, Rodriguez became the first AL player to win the MVP while playing for a last-place team.

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NOTICE OF TWO CITIZENS INFORMATIONAL WORKSHOPS FOR THE PROPOSED GASTON EAST-WEST CONNECTOR STUDY

WBS No. 34922.1.1 U-3321 Gaston/Mecklenburg Counties

The North Carolina Department of Transportation will hold the above Citizens Informational Workshop on Tuesday, December 9, 2003 between the hours of 4:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. at South Point High School, 902 South Point Road, Belmont and on Wednesday, December 10, 2003 between the hours of 4:30p.m. and 8:30 p.m. at Hunter Huss High School, 1518 Edgefield Avenue, Gastonia. These workshops will be in the same format as the workshop held on September 30th at Ashbrook High School.

Interested individuals may attend this informal workshop at their convenience during the above stated hours. Department of Transportation representatives will be present to answer questions and receive comments relative to the proposed project.

The purpose of this workshop is to present information, answer questions, and receive comments regarding this project. This project proposes to improve to improve east-west travel between I-85 west of Gastonia in Gaston County and I-485/NC 160 in Mecklenburg County. The proposed study boundary will be I-85 to the north, the South Carolina State line to the south, the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport to the east, and the I-85 and US 29-74 junction to the west.

Anyone desiring additional information may contact Kristina Solberg, P.E. Project Development and Environmental Analysis Branch at 1548 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-1548, phone 919-733-7844 ext. 310, or email ksolberg@dot.state.nc.us.

NCDOT will provide auxiliary aids and services for disabled persons who wish to participate in this workshop to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. To receive special services, please contact Kristina Solberg at the above address or phone number or fax 919-733-9794 as early as possible so that arrangements can be made.

How **"WE HAVE NOTHING TO EAT"** became **"DAD, CAN I BORROW THE CONVERTIBLE?"**

Millions of Americans can trace their roots back to an ancestor who came to the new world with a hunger. Metaphorically speaking, it was a desire for freedom. But more often than not, this noble goal was directly tied to a powerful physical need for a good, hot meal.

They came from countries around the globe, yet their stories were remarkably similar. They had left behind hard times, oppression and just about everyone they knew and loved to seek out a better life in the land of opportunity. And while it wasn't necessarily easy, they found

that with a little hard work, perseverance and good old-fashioned gumption, they could achieve a quality of life far beyond what they had known before. They were free to live their own lives and prosper by their own hands. In fact, perhaps the greatest testament to the power of freedom is that, simply by working hard and educating their children, the world's tired, poor and hungry have become the nation with the highest standard of living on earth. To learn more, visit rememberfreedom.org.

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