

Heavy duty gains mainstream appeal

BY JOE SAGE

We have a theory that the new round of mid-size pickups has a psychological impact on full-size truck buyers. In a world long dominated by full-size 150 (or 1500) and 250/350 (or 2500/3500) trucks, new midsize trucks are much closer in size and capability to full-size light trucks than in earlier generations. The wild card in our speculation is that rather than the market breaking between mid-size and full-size, for a lot of buyers it may break between midsize plus light full-size on the one hand, and heavy duty full-size on the other. The more casual buyer (as opposed to those with specific industrial needs) may increasingly be inspired to go with the heavy duties—go big or go home.

That brings us a truck like the one we have here—an F-350 with premium King Ranch materials, finishes and style, as well as top-level touchscreen interface and a full range of electronic driving aids. (Actually, it turns out all these things are welcome with traditional commercial drivers, too.)

This shift in patterns feeds itself from both ends. As a higher volume of buyers seek a more luxurious version of a heavy duty pickup—a truck best suited to special duty and produced in smaller volume not that long ago—it becomes more feasible to mass produce them.

All major pickups have ever higher payload and tow capacities, with many light pickups now sur-

passing heavy duties of a few years ago, while new heavy duties of course surpass their former selves even more so. The Ford F-350 we're driving here (diesel, 4x4, crew cab, longer bed, single rear wheels) can tow 20,000 pounds, or 22,000 with a fifth-wheel setup. If it were a dually, it could tow 34,700 pounds, or 35,400 if it were a regular cab dually, 35,750 if it were a 4x4 regular cab dually.

There are always tradeoffs in play. Two-row trucks are by far the most popular in today's market, but you might choose a full crew cab with shorter bed or a cab-and-a-half with a bit longer bed. Some single cabs even offer an eight-footer. Heavy duties often offer a longer wheelbase, thus more combinations. A dually is a lot to handle if your daily driving is around town and seldom specific to a heavy task (extreme livestock or boat, say). Four-wheel drive, by its own weight, reduces tow capacity in some builds, but not all. Some



might choose a particular build for a likely slight difference in fuel mileage, for long-term service complexity or even just to cut purchase cost.

We gave this F-350 a daily driver-style workout, given that we had it during one of the earliest weeks of the pandemic lockdown, during which nobody was quite sure what was even allowed. We didn't tow livestock, haul construction materials or go off-roading. (Nor did we go country clubbing.) But we ran it through duty that is representative of this newly expanded general appeal.

Drive-through windows—suddenly popular, or required—can challenge mirrors, wheels and corner overhangs, but it's not our first rodeo, and we eased in and out of quite a variety, unscathed. (A dually, though, might still be waiting for the lockdown to lift.) We squeezed through multi-level underground parking, with challenges from tight gates to columns throughout, all with bad lighting, easily conquering that, as well. Around town were the usual challenges of quick freeway lane changes, boulevard U-turns, parking spaces and such, all of which the F-350 conquered with the same basic ease as a lighter truck. And it earned an A-plus on speed bumps, though a tight low speed turn could generate some chattering from the rear wheels.

The truck's Power Stroke diesel powerplant is a big factor in its capabilities, and whereas its prodigious torque is ideally suited for those heavy-duty-specific tasks like towing 10 or 15 tons, it's welcome for its acceleration and general strength.

Not being sure what was allowed in early quarantine, but with media having been declared "essential" (even us?), we loaded a bag full of magazines into the truck, just in case we needed a solid explanation of our mission. We headed from the northeast Valley to the far East Valley, then up into the Apache Trail lakes, a chance to cover some miles, in turn a chance to enjoy one of the deluxe truck's great features—massaging seats, controlled (along with lumbar variables) via the center screen. That screen, along with steering wheel controls and binnacle readouts, is part of Ford's Sync 3 system, their best yet, with several details we noted as operational breakthroughs, where engineers clearly took a fresh look at things, while a few others were noted as "innovative but odd" (and that's the short version of very long notes).

The interior of this King Ranch-outfitted truck is

gorgeous, from leather (with stitched, embossed and debossed logos) to smooth koa-like insets, with all materials top-tier and appropriately used to convey both a premium cabin feel and truck toughness. Power running boards—a feature we're tall enough to usually wish were not in the way—can be set on automatic, or permanently deployed, or permanently retracted.

Over a week with lots of around-town stop-and-go, interspersed with long freeway stretches and open two-lane roads out of town, we averaged 17.5 mpg, quite good for a category that would have needed a long-miles, low-RPMs hypermiling special effort to achieve that a few years ago.

Task-duty buyers already know their needs and the purpose of the basic Ford F-350. For more general and diverse buyers—a huge and growing category—our particular truck here is built to the nines (and its price nudges into the eights, just barely, if you include delivery). You could shave many options off that and still have pretty much the same truck (especially if you don't require the diesel's torque). The fundamentals, though, as well as the King Ranch package, are pretty compelling. Next time you go F-150 shopping, you owe it to yourself to check these out, too. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| PLANTS |Kentucky Truck, Ohio Assembly |
| BUILD |fully-boxed high-strength steel frame, aluminum bed and cab |
| ENGINE |6.7L Power Stroke® diesel V8, compacted graphite iron block, aluminum heads |
| ALTERNATOR |std 240A (dual configs avail) |
| HP/TORQUE |475 hp / 1050 lb-ft |
| DRIVETRAIN |4x4 |
| TRANSMISSION |TorqShift® HD 10-spd auto w SelectShift |
| SUSPENSION |F: mono beam (narrow front track) w coils, HD gas shocks, stblzr bar; R: solid axle, leaf springs, HD gas shocks |
| STEERING |power hydraulic, adaptive |
| BRAKES |4-whl vented discs, ABS: F: 14.29; R: 14.29 |
| WHEELS |18" / LT275/65R18 123/120S M/S |
| LENGTH / WHEELBASE |250.0 / 159.8 in |
| TRACK (F/R) |68.3 / 67.2 |
| GROUND CLEARANCE |8.8 / 8.5 in |
| APPROACH-BREAKOVER-DEPARTURE: |17.5/16.7 - 17.5/20.9 - 18.2/20.1° |
| HEADROOM (F/R) |40.8 / 40.4 in |
| LEGROOM (F/R) |43.9 / 43.6 in |
| BED LENGTH AT FLOOR |(160" SWB) 81.9 in |
| WEIGHT |(F-350 6.7L SRW 4x4 SWB) 7303 lb |
| PAYLOAD |(11,500# GVWR pkg) 3940 lb |
| TOW CAPACITY: |(6.7L d, SRW 4x4, crew) 20,000 lb |
| |(5th wheel/gooseneck) 22,000 lb |
| FUEL CAPACITY |(160" wheelbase) 34.0 gal |
| MPG |na |

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------|
| BASE PRICE |\$62,220 |
| EQUIPMENT GROUP 710A |10,495 |
| 6.7L POWER STROKE V8 DIESEL |390 |
| 3.31 ELECTRONIC LOCKING AXLE |135 |
| ALL WEATHER FLOOR MAT |740 |
| ADAPTIVE CRUISE CONTROL |1000 |
| ADAPTIVE STEERING |325 |
| WHEEL WELL LINERS FRONT/REAR |595 |
| TOUGH SPRAY-IN BED LINER |3350 |
| KING RANCH ULTIMATE PACKAGE |1595 |
| DESTINATION CHARGE | |
| TOTAL |\$80,845 |

