

# THE NEW AND THE IMPROVED

by the Editors of Motor Trend

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETERSEN PHOTOGRAPHIC

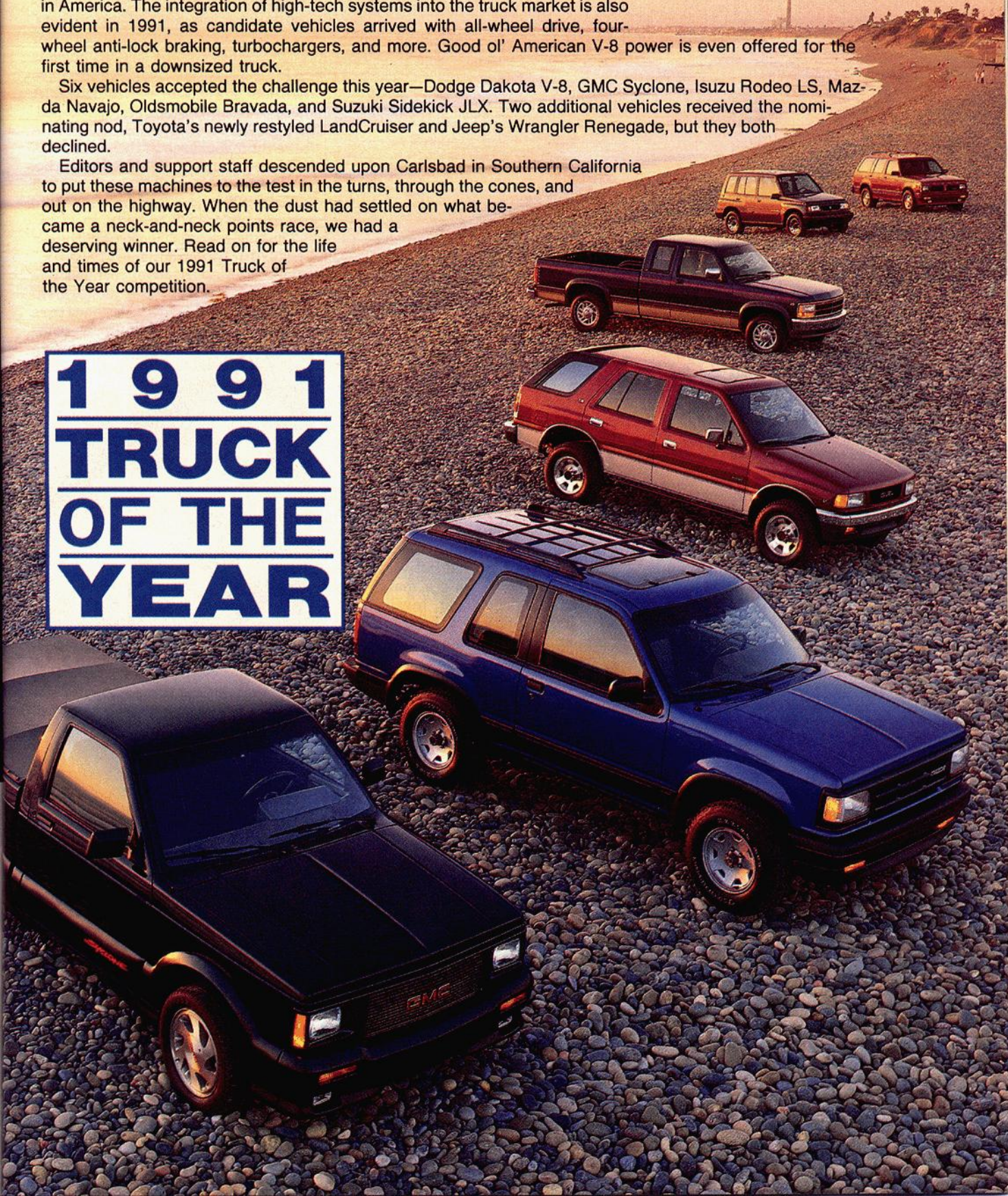
**M**otor Trend's annual Truck of the Year competition always brings its share of surprises. The light-truck market evolves in spurts and stops, with some years offering up myriad new vehicles, while others seem to make do with mild restyles and mediocre upgrades.

What we've got this year is astounding. Besides the introduction of several all-new vehicles, we're seeing the evolution of three already popular models as they become better attuned to the needs of the '90s. The birth of a corporate sistership sport/utility is also witnessed this year. Two of the "import" sport/utilities are actually made in America. The integration of high-tech systems into the truck market is also evident in 1991, as candidate vehicles arrived with all-wheel drive, four-wheel anti-lock braking, turbochargers, and more. Good ol' American V-8 power is even offered for the first time in a downsized truck.

Six vehicles accepted the challenge this year—Dodge Dakota V-8, GMC Syclone, Isuzu Rodeo LS, Mazda Navajo, Oldsmobile Bravada, and Suzuki Sidekick JLX. Two additional vehicles received the nominating nod, Toyota's newly restyled LandCruiser and Jeep's Wrangler Renegade, but they both declined.

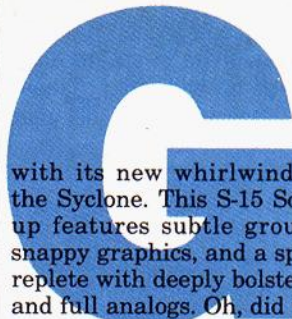
Editors and support staff descended upon Carlsbad in Southern California to put these machines to the test in the turns, through the cones, and out on the highway. When the dust had settled on what became a neck-and-neck points race, we had a deserving winner. Read on for the life and times of our 1991 Truck of the Year competition.

**1 9 9 1**  
**TRUCK**  
**OF THE**  
**YEAR**





**GMC**



MC has redefined the sport truck

with its new whirlwind-on-wheels, the Syclone. This S-15 Sonoma pickup features subtle ground effects, snappy graphics, and a sport interior replete with deeply bolstered buckets and full analogs. Oh, did we forget to mention power and performance? A mere oversight. Quick-stomp the pedal and you're treated to more brute force than you'd see in the stands at a Raiders game. Credit this to a turbo-charged 4.3-liter V-6 that nets an amazing 280 horsepower, enough to peg anyone's thrill meter.

"This is a better sports car than a Firebird or Camaro in most respects,"

penned one judge. Other editors drew comparisons to the 300ZX

• \$25,500 (est.)  
base price

• \$25,500 (est.)  
price as-tested

• 2-door,  
2-passenger

• front engine,  
all-wheel drive

• 4293 cc  
OHV V-6

• 280 hp @ 4200 rpm

• 360 lb-ft @ 3600 rpm

• 4-sp. auto.

• 108.3-in. wheelbase

• 3526-lb curb weight



## Dodge Dakota V-8



ffering a freshened front-end treatment and newly available 5.2-liter engine, the Dodge Dakota is a downsized pickup with multiple personalities. Sure, this candidate is a pickup truck, but it can seat a full complement of six. It has a large cargo box, but doesn't need to be heavily laden to ride well. The Dakota also offers remarkable fit and finish, an often elusive element in light trucks. And notably, this Dodge sports a small-block V-8 between the fenders, breaking new ground for downsized pickups.

Most editors noted appreciation of this V-8 power, but expressed surprise that it delivered less than expected. "Power is

good, but not overwhelming," said one judge. Ride and handling, both on the street and the road course, were consistently lauded. One judge indicated the Dakota was "smooth riding... as good or better than many cars." "It feels solid and serene, even at speed," added another.

Just as interesting as the many kudos paid the Dakota are the decided lack of complaints. The judges simply liked this pickup, a fact underscored by its high subjective rating. Among the few gripes: a marginally comfortable bench seat, tawdry faux wood dash, safety belts positioned too high, and window/door controls positioned too low.

One editor adds: "A good-looking truck with a torquey V-8 engine, the Dakota's primary strengths are a roomy cab and higher towing/cargo ratings than the compact pickups. If you want a larger truck at a compact truck price, this is the one."

• \$14,453  
base price

• \$16,350  
price as-tested

• 2-door,  
6-passenger

• front engine,  
rear drive

• 5211 cc  
OHV V-8

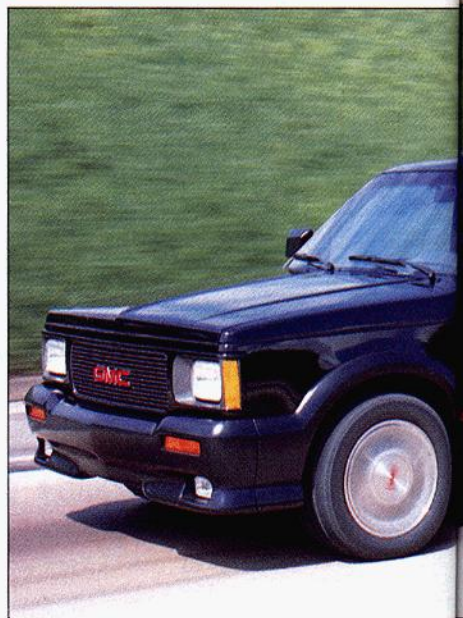
• 165 hp @ 4000 rpm

• 250 lb-ft @ 2400 rpm

• 4-sp. auto.

• 131.0-in. wheelbase

• 3895-lb curb weight



## Syclone

Turbo, 3000GT, and Stealth. All-wheel drive and anti-lock braking—good for a 133-foot 60-0 braking distance and a 62.9-mph slalom speed—make this sport truck stable and sticky on the road, while its substantial horsepower lends an unparalleled feeling of highway prowess. We're talking 0-60 mph in less than 5 seconds, folks. And a 13.6-second quarter mile at just under the century mark. Anyone for life at a blur?

For all its speed and road prowess, the Syclone does have its downside, reflected by low subjective scores. Judges complained about the GMC's uncomfortable fixed seatbacks, high level of interior noise, and substantial turbo lag. The most common criticism could be summed up by one judge's comment that "the Syclone sacrifices 'truckness' to go overboard on 'carness,' gleefully abandoning its truck heritage." With a lightweight 500-pound load rating and no rated towing capability, 'nuff said.



## Isuzu Rodeo LS

**T**he built-in America Isuzu Rodeo rounds out its sport/utility lineup, which includes the successful Trooper and Amigo. Entry-level buyers are targeted with the base four-cylinder two-wheel-drive S model at an affordable \$12,499; upscale buyers may opt for Rodeos in XS and LS trim. Both two- and four-wheel-drive variants are identical in appearance and ride height—so those wanting the rugged look of a 4x4, but don't want to pay the premium, have a real option.

Judges appreciated the Rodeo's style and accommodating demeanor. "This vehicle feels solid and well-built," wrote one editor, while a second called it "comfortable and pleasant." "Overall, this is a

nice family vehicle," opined another. Editors were particularly impressed with the Rodeo's supportive front seats and uncommon spaciousness of the rear seat. "Interior room is superior," noted one judge, "and fit and finish good." On the downside, several staffers cited radio placement and controls as being "terrible," and rear speakers as poorly integrated.

A too-soft suspension was criticized by several editors, who suggested the need for stiffer damping and bigger anti-roll bars. Isuzu's use of the GM-sourced 3.1-liter V-6, which propelled the Rodeo 0-60 mph in 12.8 seconds, also generated controversy. "The Rodeo is a good package in need of a real motor," mused one evaluator. Another stated that "the engine is really weak—big on noise, small on power." While several editors did express that the Rodeo's power seemed adequate for normal street driving, all felt a larger V-6 would make this a much better vehicle.

- \$16,799 base price
- \$19,278 price as-tested
- 4-door, 5-passenger
- front engine, four-wheel drive
- 3137 cc OHV V-6
- 120 hp @ 4400 rpm
- 165 lb-ft @ 2800 rpm
- 5-sp. man.
- 108.7-in. wheelbase
- 3725-lb curb weight





## Mazda Navajo

**M**azda's Navajo is smartly styled, well appointed, and hauntingly familiar. There's more than a passing resemblance to Ford's Explorer, because the Navajo is built for Mazda at Ford's Louisville, Kentucky, assembly plant. Like its domestically badged counterpart, the Navajo is powered by a sprightly 4-liter V-6 with either a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic transmission. Unlike its close cousin, the Navajo is offered only as a sporty two-door.

Driver and passenger comfort is this Mazda's hallmark. "I could really see going cross-country in this," admitted one staff member who is typically less than thrilled by truck and sport/util-

ity accoutrements. "The Navajo's interior is accommodating and well designed, and the suspension sops up bumps like Bounty towels sop up spills," offered another. All agreed that this is one soft ride, with one staffer suggesting it might border on being too compliant. Test track notes cited a theme of pitch and roll, bounce and chop. Several noted that better tires would help.

The Navajo scored second overall in both objective and subjective categories, topping all others in styling and design, quality control, and comfort and convenience. One editor summed it up by saying: "I like how integrated this vehicle feels. It accommodates all needs—passenger comfort, pleasing aesthetics, good towing and load handling ability, and reasonable performance from a V-6." Interestingly, one editor even mused that "the Navajo feels well-made... even Japanese, if you can believe that."



- \$17,560 base price
- \$19,970 price as-tested
- 2-door, 5-passenger
- front engine, four-wheel drive
- 4016 cc OHV V-6
- 155 hp @ 4200 rpm
- 220 lb-ft @ 2400 rpm
- 4-sp. auto.
- 102.1-in. wheelbase
- 3886-lb curb weight

## Oldsmobile

**S**port/utility fans who like their luxury well mixed with their utility are sure to take note of the Oldsmobile Bravada, upscale kin of GM's S-10 Blazer. This vehicle offers handsome styling and a bevy of important safety features—among them all-wheel drive and four-wheel anti-lock brakes—that distinguish it among its peers.

"The all-wheel-drive system and ABS work well together," enthused one judge, "and full ABS braking is a definite advantage." Editors agreed the Bravada's all-wheel drive excelled at getting power to the pavement, but that a relative lack of power was cause for concern.

"Steering is good, and while there is some body

- \$23,795 base price
- \$24,896 price as-tested
- 4-door, 5-passenger
- front engine, four-wheel drive
- 4293 cc OHV V-6
- 160 hp @ 4000 rpm
- 230 lb-ft @ 2800 rpm
- 4-sp. auto.
- 107.0-in. wheelbase
- 3939-lb curb weight



## Bravada

roll, this sport/utility can be hustled around the test track quickly," one evaluator confided. Others were less than thrilled with its handling capabilities. Opined another judge: "The Bravada's suspension is noticeably short on rebound damping, enough so that the vehicle recoils off some bumps with authority. It's tiring and quite out of character with the Bravada's prestigious pretensions."

Other gripes about the Bravada: Editors felt the seats lack lateral support, and the digital instrument cluster is just as visually confusing as it was in the original Blazer. The good news: "People like the looks of this sport/utility," an editor advises. Continues another: "Its leather interior is stylish and handsome . . . the Bravada should appeal to the upscale sport/utility buyer who can't, or won't, step up to the likes of the more expensive Range Rover."



## Suzuki Sidekick JLX

**S**uzuki has set out to extend the success of its Sidekick by adding 11 inches of wheelbase and two more doors. This family-oriented Sidekick is aimed at the entry-level buyer and is, at a base price of \$11,999 for the JX model, the least expensive four-door sport/utility on the market.

Like its two-door sibling, the four-door Sidekick offers true kick-in-the-pants, high-winding, foot-to-the-floor driving. "The Sidekick is a lot of fun to drive, provided you whip the engine aggressively," noted one editor. "It feels planted in the corners," enthused one judge, "with little of the undamped floaty-tire feel of the other sport/utilities. Power, or the lack of it, is the main prob-

lem here."

And power is the Sidekick's true shortcoming. "The motor seems more willing than 80 horsepower might tell you," penned an enthusiastic staffer. But another stated the obvious: "80 horsepower is just unsatisfactory." "There's simply not much power here," complained one editor, "and unless you've got the revs well up, nothing will be left in reserve for sudden boosts of acceleration." In addition, the Sidekick's short gearing creates an annoying engine drone at cruise speed. One editor's suggestion: "It needs a good 125-horsepower 2-liter."

Overall, the Sidekick is a capable little vehicle at a reasonable price. It's quick, responsive, and offers a simple but comfortable interior that accommodates four. "The idea of a mini-sport/utility four-door is a good one," offered one editor. "This vehicle simply needs more horsepower to be competitive."

•
\$12,999
base price
•
\$14,016
price as-tested
•
4-door,
4-passenger
•
front engine,
four-wheel drive
•
1590 cc
SOHC I-4
•
80 hp @ 5400 rpm
•
94 lb-ft @ 3000 rpm
•
5-sp. man.
•
97.6-in. wheelbase
•
2650-lb curb weight



### BRAKING IN FEET (60-0 MPH)

GMC SYCLONE	133		
OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA	142		
DODGE DAKOTA V-8	153		
ISUZU RODEO LS	154		
SUZUKI SIDEKICK JLX	155		
MAZDA NAVAJO		171	



### SLALOM IN MILES PER HOUR

GMC SYCLONE	62.9		
SUZUKI SIDEKICK JLX	57.5		
OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA	56.8		
MAZDA NAVAJO	54.6		
DODGE DAKOTA V-8	54.5		
ISUZU RODEO LS	53.6		

### LATERAL ACCELERATION IN Gs

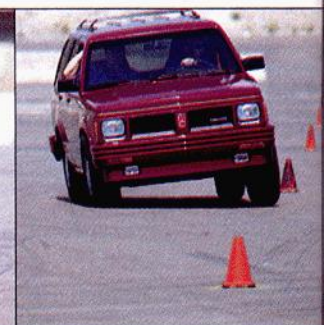
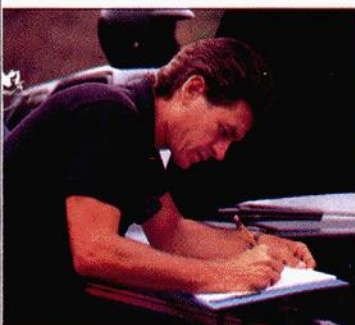
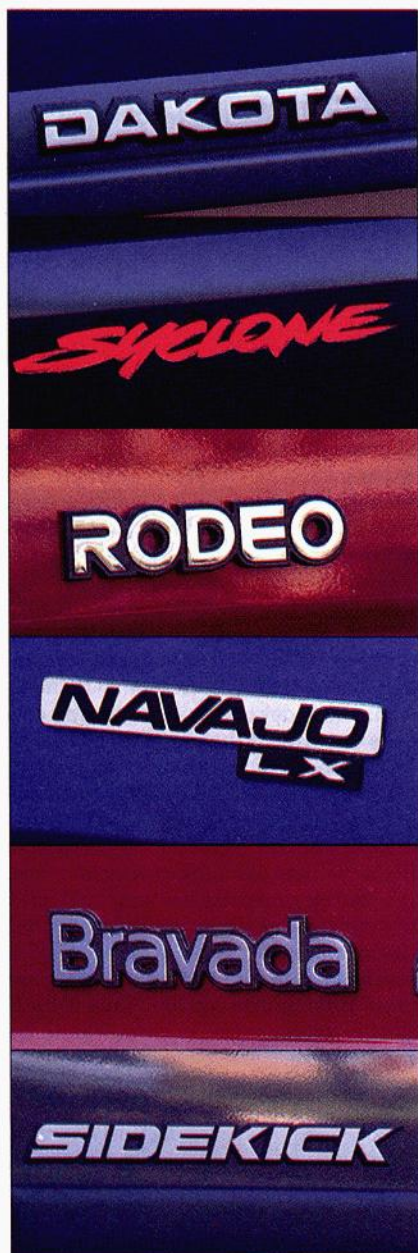
GMC SYCLONE	0.82		
OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA	0.76		
DODGE DAKOTA V-8	0.71		
SUZUKI SIDEKICK JLX	0.70		
ISUZU RODEO LS	0.69		
MAZDA NAVAJO	0.64		

### FUEL ECONOMY IN MILES PER GALLON

SUZUKI SIDEKICK JLX	24		
OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA	20		
GMC SYCLONE	19		
MAZDA NAVAJO	18		
ISUZU RODEO LS	17		
DODGE DAKOTA V-8	17		

### ACCELERATION IN SEC (0-60/QUARTER MILE)

GMC SYCLONE	4.9	13.6/98.6 mph	
DODGE DAKOTA V-8	9.6	17.2/79.8 mph	
MAZDA NAVAJO	10.4	17.6/77.2 mph	
OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA	10.5	17.8/75.1 mph	
ISUZU RODEO LS	12.8	18.8/71.9 mph	
SUZUKI SIDEKICK JLX	15.8	20.1/66.3 mph	



**O**ur Truck of the Year evaluation procedure encompasses both subjective and objective elements. Each of our seven judges assesses each competing vehicle in seven major subjective categories. The current best-in-class is given 100 points as a baseline rating. Competitors then receive a score that reflects how each judge feels it stacks up with respect to that established bogey. For example, a score of 105 points would indicate an entry was deemed 5 percent better than the current best-in-class.

Objective scores are generated in the Performance and Handling categories. Performance is made up of three ele-

ments: 0-60-mph time, quarter-mile time, and combined EPA fuel economy numbers. Handling consists of lateral acceleration, slalom speed, and 60-0-mph braking distance. The figures a candidate generates in each of these objective categories are compared to those for the best-selling vehicle in its class to determine its final score. Here, as in the subjective arena, a rating of 110 would indicate the candidate is 10 percent better in a particular area than its best-selling peer.

The accounting firm of Ernst & Young oversees the testing of all competitor and peer vehicles, and then conducts the final tabulation and auditing of the results.



## SCORING

	Styling & Design	Quality Control	Comfort & Convenience	Ride & Drive	Chassis Dynamics	Dollar Value/Market Significance	Utility & Function	Performance	Handling	Final Score
<b>MAZDA NAVAJO</b>	103.64	105.29	104.04	97.96	92.18	97.14	99.86	107.28	93.72	901.11
<b>GMC SYCLONE</b>	98.61	94.54	94.74	114.82	107.92	85.71	58.81	134.31	110.44	899.90
<b>DODGE DAKOTA V-8</b>	103.18	98.43	99.96	101.20	97.51	94.71	107.95	92.34	95.77	891.06
<b>OLDSMOBILE BRAVADA</b>	97.43	97.40	96.56	94.00	93.31	93.64	100.57	100.25	95.84	869.00
<b>ISUZU RODEO LS</b>	102.07	102.37	100.43	91.84	93.84	101.29	94.43	87.43	88.60	862.29
<b>SUZUKI SIDEKICK JLX</b>	94.54	96.17	97.73	91.59	95.51	104.21	83.81	94.66	91.00	849.22



# The Winner

According to many leading automotive analysts, the sport/utility market will be the hottest segment of the '90s. Attesting to that fact is the presence of no fewer than four of these dual-purpose vehicles in our '91 Truck of the Year field. Hoping to attract many first-time buyers who demand a generous

measure of civility along with basic ruggedness in their sport/utilities, Mazda has introduced the new Navajo.

Developed in conjunction with longtime partner Ford Motor Company and built in Ford's Louisville, Kentucky, assembly plant, the two-door Navajo is based on mechanicals from the successful Ford Explorer. But the creative staff of Mazda's Irvine, California, R&D Center gave the newest family member its own unique interior and exterior styling treatments. Along with enthusiast-

oriented looks, the roomy Navajo boasts a strong, torquey 4-liter V-6 engine that gives it sufficient power to handle any day-to-day driving chore, whether matched with the standard five-speed manual gearbox or optional four-speed automatic. And the base 3500-pound trailering capacity can be augmented to 5000 pounds with the optional towing package.

Priced at \$17,560, the Navajo enjoys a significant cost advantage over virtually all of its comparably equipped competitors. Despite this key edge, it boasts an impressive array of standard features including a full spectrum of power-assisted amenities, cloth and carpet interior coverings, sport seats, power disc/drum brakes with rear ABS, full-size spare tire, and four-speaker AM/FM sound system. And thoughtful items like Touch Drive shift-on-the-fly four-wheel drive and a dual-range transfer case make it as at home off-road as on. Factor in Mazda's 3-year/36,000-mile zero-deductible limited warranty and several high-value option packages, and you can see why the Navajo emerged as the top pick of four of our seven TOY judges. Congratulations, Mazda, on a job well done. **MF**



# Mazda Navajo