

FOUR WHEELER

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Winner!
NISSAN TITAN



2004 PICKUP TRUCK OF THE YEAR

2004 Pickup Truck of the Year:

Three of a Kind



Huge trucks, huge surprise

By Craig Perronne

Photography: *Four Wheeler* Staff

It is 114 degrees out, and do you know where your *Four Wheeler* staffers have been? We've been out testing trucks in the depths of the California desert. Why? Because we love trucks, and we especially love to find out which ones work well in the most grueling conditions. Nothing beats having a truck that can play hard but still tow and haul whatever we want. Today's trucks are better than they have ever been. Unlike many SUVs, they are not being diluted into cars. Trucks, while becoming more refined, remain true to their work-like



Toyota Tundra Double Cab



Nissan Titan Crew Cab



nature to provide plenty of horsepower and capability. So it's hard not to get excited about spending a few days in the latest trucks.

For a truck to be eligible for competition in our Pickup Truck of the Year test, it has to be either new or significantly changed—that means, it's been altered enough for the new year to affect its performance on and off the road. Once we figure out who can compete, invitations are sent out to the manufacturers. That doesn't mean a truck that is allowed to compete will always show up. Sometimes a manufac-

turer cannot get us a truck in time or simply chooses not to compete. That was the case this year with the Chevrolet Colorado, which arrived a day too late to be included. Stay tuned for a future test of this interesting new vehicle.

This year, what showed up in time and ready for battle were the Ford

F-150, the Nissan Titan and the Toyota Tundra Double Cab. What did we discover about them? The answer is, in short, plenty. To find out what, read on.



Ford F-150 Super Cab FX4

Third Place

Toyota Tundra Double Cab

What's New

While the new Tundra Double Cab might appear to be simply a Tundra with a cab that's been stretched to accommodate four fullsize doors, it is actually built on a different platform than the regular Tundra, and uses sheetmetal that's almost completely new. First, the Double Cab rides on a 140.5-inch-long wheelbase, compared to the 128.3-inch wheelbase of the regular Tundra. The longer wheelbase allows for a 74.3-inch bed, making it only $\frac{1}{2}$ inch shorter than a normal Tundra bed. Another unique feature to the Double Cab's bed is it is nearly 4 inches deeper than those of the other Tundra models. Finally, the Double Cab Tundra is also 3 inches higher and more than 4 inches wider than a conventional Tundra. All this extra girth makes the Tundra, finally and at last, a true fullsize pickup.

The additional length and width of the Double Cab allows for a new rear seat, pulled from the Sequoia parts bin, in which adults can now sit in comfort. Access is through large doors that allow for easy entry. Under the hood is found the familiar 4.7L i-Force V-8 that puts out 240 hp and 315 lb-ft of torque. Likewise, the rest of the drivetrain and components remain unchanged from those found under the Tundra last year.

What We Liked

Every judge appreciated the refined nature of the Tundra Double Cab. On the highway, it was very quiet and the ride was plush, but well controlled. The upscale

Check It Out If:

You are looking for an extremely versatile truck that you can drive every day.

Avoid It If:

You are planning to tow or haul heavy loads on a normal basis.

leather interior makes for a very comfortable place to spend time. The build quality and the fit and finish of our Tundra Double Cab also were excellent.

On the trail, the soft nature of the Tundra's suspension afforded a comfy ride while poking along in low range. Even as speeds picked up on desert washboard roads, the Tundra still sucked up the bumps like a champ. Plus, the Tundra also sits up nice and high like a good pickup, which gives it clearance on the trail.

What We Didn't Like

At the top of our judge's gripe list is the Tundra's power. For normal cruising the 4.7L does just fine. However, in situations where the engine was taxed, such as mountain

grades and in sand, the i-Force V-8's relatively small capacity and resulting relative lack of horsepower was apparent. It isn't horrible, mind you, but the Toyota could use some more ponies under the hood—and trust us, they're on the way, down the road a year or two, in the form of a much larger engine.

The Toyota's steering was also a sore spot for the judges. It was simply too light in effort, and it provided very poor feedback. This made it hard to push the Tundra through mountain roads, as there was zero feel.

Another gripe could be found in the interior of the Toyota. While very comfortable, instead of folding up and back, or flat and out of the way, the rear seats tumble forward, up against the front seats. This odd configuration, a legacy of the Sequoia origins of those seats, made it difficult to load bigger items into the rear cab as the seats tended to partially block access.

Final Verdict

Overall, the new Tundra Double Cab is a solid, well-built truck that makes for a comfortable everyday truck. The fact that it finished third in our test should not scare you off from buying one. If you are a fan of the original Tundra, you will like the new Double Cab as this new configuration adds to the versatility of a great truck. However, we think with some more horsepower under the hood, the Tundra would be able to handle an even wider range of tasks with greater ease.

The Short Version

Rather like a Silverado, it's comfortable, car-like. Tight, well built, refined; beautifully finished.



Second Place

Ford F-150 FX4 SuperCab

What's New

Ford enters 2004 with a long-awaited and completely new F-150. Highlights include a new exterior and a completely redesigned interior. However, the changes are not just limited to seats, dash and sheet-metal. A new frame is used that is fully boxed and nine times stiffer in torsion and 50 percent stiffer longitudinally. Attached to that frame is a new IFS suspension that uses a coilover shock, along with lower control arms that are made of aluminum. A new rack-and-pinion steering system guides the front wheels. In the rear a new solid-axle suspension features 3-inch-wider leaf springs and outboard-mounted shocks for a claimed increase in lateral stability.

The drivetrain of the new F-150 was also upgraded. A new Triton 5.4L V-8 uses three valves per cylinder and variable cam timing to make a claimed 300 hp and 365 lb-ft of torque. Attached to the new Triton is a 4R75E four-speed automatic transmission that is a strengthened version of the previous transmission. Bringing the new truck to a stop are disc brakes at every corner.

What We Liked

Every one of our judges loved the new interior of the F-150, which is a dramatic departure from the previous generation's interior. It is handsome and well organized, with brushed-aluminum-looking parts and, on our FX4 package, carbon mesh inserts.

Check It Out If:

You are looking for a truck with a great interior that has excellent brakes.

Avoid It If:

You need to haul or tow heavy loads.

Easy-to-read gauges with brushed aluminum rings also spruce up the interior. The new leather seats are also very comfortable and the inside of the F-150 is very quiet.

Hats off to the Ford engineers for the new four-wheel disc brakes. Found on the F-150 are new rotors that are larger and thicker, combined with twin-piston calipers up front and single-piston calipers out back. While the Ford's 60-0 mph stopping distance was not the shortest, the brakes felt the best, with the pedal giving a nice initial bite and a powerful feel that made it easy to modulate them during crawling.

What We Didn't Like

Tops on everybody's list of complaints for the F-150 was its lack of power. Whether it was cruising along the highway, going up a mountain grade or blasting through the

sand dunes, the Triton 5.4L did not provide the kind of oomph its engine specifications suggested that it should produce. This was readily apparent when the F-150 and Tundra produced similar acceleration times on the dragstrip. The fact that the Tundra could produce almost the same times in the quarter-mile and 0-60 mph testing with an engine that produces 60 less horsepower and 50 less lb-ft of torque left us scratching our heads.

On the trail the F-150 had the least ground clearance of the bunch, with the smallest approach angle. This left it rubbing its belly on many obstacles unless extreme care was taken. The giant hood with its large center bulge of the F-150 also made forward vision difficult. Creeping along in low-range, the Ford's new suspension yielded a firm ride that did not improve much at speed. Also, at speed on pavement, the F-150 offered an alarming amount of under-steer around corners.

Final Verdict

The new Ford F-150 is a workable truck, except for a powerplant that produces marginal power, low ground clearance, and marginal pavement handling. While the engine, especially, looks great on paper, our testing found that it was not up to the task of powering the F-150. This is unfortunate, as the rest of the truck is a dramatic step forward from the previous F-150.

The Short Version

Great styling, terrific interior and seats, but a chassis that doesn't satisfy and an engine that doesn't pull nearly as hard as it should.



The Winner!

Nissan Titan Crew Cab

What's New

Nissan enters the extremely competitive and brand-loyal fullsize truck market with its all-new Titan fullsize pickup. The new truck features the 5.6L Endurance V-8 that produces 305 hp and 379 lb-ft of torque. It is an all-aluminum DOHC design that features six-bolt main bearing caps. Coupled to the V-8 is a smooth-shifting five-speed automatic transmission that also comes with a tow/haul mode. Both fit inside of a fully boxed ladder frame that is the backbone of the Titan.

The new Titan's suspension consists of a double-wishbone IFS and a solid-axle/leaf-spring rear. Rancho shocks are also available

as an option for those who plan to spend some time in the dirt. Other goodies for the trail include an optional rear electric locker, which our test truck did not have, and 285/70-17 BFGoodrich tires. Bringing things to a stop are disc brakes at every corner.

What We Liked

The heart of any truck is its engine, and the Titan has one that beats hard and strong. Every one of our judges raved about the power of the Endurance V-8. There's lots of power on tap here, and this was evident at the dragstrip, where the Titan smoked the other two trucks during acceleration testing. The power also translat-

ed well into the real world, as the big Nissan could power through dunes and up mountain grades without any problem.

Our testers also liked the interior of the Titan Crew Cab. It is big and spacious and features lots of storage areas throughout. The cloth interior that came in our tester was also very comfortable, with seats that provided support but are also cushy at the same time. In the rear there was plenty of legroom and with the seats folded up, the Titan could hold plenty of gear in its cab.

The praise also continued once the Titan got in the dirt. All of the trucks were fairly evenly ranked when it came to trail performance, but the Nissan is able to crawl slightly better than the others, and its big tires and height give it decent clearance. The Rancho shocks that came on our model also sucked up the bumps well, even though they are a bit on the firm side. With the addition of the optional locker, the Titan likely would have scored more highly in the dirt than it did.

The steering on the Nissan also





Check It Out If:

You are a fan of a truck with lots of power and the ability to carry both gear and people.

Avoid It If:

Your driveway or garage doesn't provide room for a truck that is truly fullsize.

received high marks from our judges. It is perfectly weighted and very crisp, allowing for a good feel for the road. The steering, when combined with the firmer ride given by the Rancho shocks, made the Titan a blast to push over twisty pavement. Also the fact that it rides nicely on the highway let it rack up major points in our highway section of scoring.

What We Didn't Like

First off, the A-pillars on the Nissan are massive. This made visibility in the city and on twisty roads somewhat of a pain as try-



The Short Version

Great motor and transmission, bold styling, lusty exhaust note, lots of clever interior touches, good clearance and load capability.

ing to see around the A-pillars in corners could be difficult.

Our Titan came with big mirrors that are similar to those found on the Super Duty,

with a regular mirror up top and a convex mirror on the bottom. This can be an effective arrangement, but in this case, the bottom mirrors are not independently adjustable. That means that we had to manually adjust the whole mirror assembly to set up the bottom mirrors properly.

We also did not like the transfer-case shifter knob on the Titan—it looked and felt like it had been robbed off of an air-conditioning system. A shift lever would have been much better.

Final Verdict

Nissan has hit a home run with the Titan. It is hard to find fault with the Titan as it has gobs of power, handles well, rides nicely and does well off in the dirt. The Crew Cab format also makes it a very versatile truck as we can still haul all of our friends and their gear in the back. All of these strong points let it rack up the most points and cruise to an easy victory to be named *Four Wheeler's* Pickup Truck of the



How We Test Them

We spend a few days on the road for our Pickup Truck of the Year test. On the first day we



hit the dragstrip to find out which truck is the quickest and which one can stop the fastest. Then from there we head out into the desert and run all of the vehicles over our rock-infested test loop. The next two days find us in Borrego Springs putting the trucks through their paces. On the last day we head out to Gorman for more off-roading. In between, we spend plenty of time on the highway to get a good feel for how the trucks do on the pavement.

Along the way we are constantly evaluating the vehicles and making notes on their performance. Finally it comes time to score the vehicles in five separate categories. The Mechanical category is where the judges evaluate all the mechanical

components such as the engine, transmission, suspension, etc. It accounts for 25 percent of the total score. Plenty of trail time makes it easy to score the Trail section of scoring which accounts for 30 percent of the total score. The Highway section makes up 20 percent of the final score and it is here that the ride and handling of each truck while on pavement is evaluated. Next is the Interior section (15 percent) where the execution of each vehicle's interior is judged. Finally comes the Exterior section, which accounts for 10 percent, where the fit and finish of each vehicle, along with the quality of its tow hooks and skidplates, is evaluated. Once the scoring is finished, we add up the points and a winner is declared.

Final Scores

	Mechanical	Interior	Exterior	Highway	Trail	Total
Ford	89.24	66.30	37.39	74.80	93.84	361.57
Nissan	106.84	61.20	40.18	91.80	111.18	411.21
Toyota	88.02	53.55	30.02	68.00	115.26	354.86

Crawl Test: Slow is Good!

One of the things we're most curious about with respect to 4x4 trucks is this: Which of them will crawl the most slowly? Sure, we could get our slide rules (remember them?) out and figure out crawl ratios, but that's not real-world, in that it doesn't

take engine management computer settings for things like low-speed ignition retard, idle speed and such into account.

So what we do is this: We line our contestants up together at the top of a hill in low gear, low range, engines running. Then we step off the

brakes. First truck down the hill loses, last truck down wins.

This year, the Ford F-150 was the slowest crawler, the Tundra Double Cab was the next slowest, and the Titan was the quickest. But in developing the slow time, the Ford's fuel-injected engine was loading

up, running ever more slowly. If we left it alone, in fact, it would die soon after we brought the truck to a halt. We're not sure what this means, except that perhaps the F-150's engine management software might not yet be fully sorted.

—Jon Thompson

