

# Pickups need dose of practicality



**JIL MCINTOSH**  
*Opinion*



JIL MCINTOSH PHOTOS FOR THE TORONTO ST.

Here are three consecutive generations of Ford trucks, each bigger than the last. When will this 'truck race' end

Some 17 years ago, I purchased my first brand spankin' new vehicle, a 1995 Dodge Ram half-tonne pickup truck. It was the biggest truck you could get that year: wider, taller and longer than a Chevrolet or Ford. I had to pay extra for a power seat to ensure I could reach the pedals.

I considered replacing it with a new model, but I've decided to keep it. Parked against the new half-tonne trucks, my full-size Ram looks like a mid-size Dakota. After driving several new trucks, I decided against spending my time climbing in, sliding out, and trying to see around my vehicle. For no reason other than bragging rights, trucks have become stupid big.

It isn't just my short legs. I put my 6-foot-plus neighbour in several of them, and even he complained about the climb up to the seat. And trucks are now so wide I can't easily reach the glovebox or even the controls on some models.

You can blame a lot of that on Texas, where the truck builders make much of their money. More than one of every four vehicles in the Lone Star State is a pickup. Texans want big trucks, and that's what the companies make.

Unlike cars, which are advertised by their horsepower, torque is the grunt that gets the load moving and it's the all-important number. Over the last year, there has been a goofy torque war among the Detroit automakers' heavy-duty trucks.

Dodge started it at 650 lb.-ft. of torque; Ford advertised 735 lb.-ft.; GM trumped them both with 765 lb.-ft. So Ford recalibrated its en-



Jil McIntosh's 1995 Dodge Ram is small compared with the 2011 model.

gine module to turn out 800 lb.-ft. Then Dodge, lest it be left behind, went back to its engineers, coaxed out 800 lb.-ft., and then announced a towing capacity of up to 10,296 kilograms.

That's the equivalent of towing more than five Dodge Grand Caravan minivans at once.

Of course, towing and payload capacity depends on several factors, and one is the size of the truck. In many cases, those ultra-high numbers blasted in the advertisements are actually for the smallest trucks – regular cabs, in

two-wheel-drive configuration. The truck's gross vehicle weight rating, or GVWR, is the maximum total allowable weight of the vehicle plus its load. The weight of extra doors, four-wheel-systems and features has to be subtracted from that, which is why heavily-optioned trucks are often able to carry less than their plain, lighter-weight siblings.

In Ontario, a "G" driver's licence – the one most people have – only allows you to tow a maximum of 4,989 kilos, providing that the trailer itself doesn't weigh more

than 2,086 kilos. If your truck and trailer are big enough, loading on an ATV or snowmobile could potentially put you over your licence limit.

Up against a comparably-equipped 2011 half-tonne, my "little" 1995 truck has a higher-rated towing and payload capacity. Its box will hold the ubiquitous 4x8-foot sheet of plywood. And unlike today's trucks, I can reach over the box sides and easily get up onto the tailgate. Ford's pull-out side steps and tailgate-mounted handle-and-ladder aren't just cool add-ons; for many drivers, they're essential if they're going to get over the way-too-high box sides.

In the battle to be the biggest, the auto companies have all but designed the practicality out of their trucks. Too high, too wide and too inaccessible, they're turning into muscle-bound bodybuilders who can't tie their own shoelaces.

I can hardly wait until the day when the first company blinks and once again builds a truck that most of us can actually use.

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