

Nailed it.

BY JOE SAGE

Grip a piece of 8.5x11 paper by the shorter side, hold it horizontally out into thin air, and it will maintain its shape. Now cut out a big chunk of it, so it's L-shaped, and you'll find that long part starts to lose its stability. This is a rough comparison of a unibody SUV to a unibody pickup, and it's a scenario that most manufacturers address by adding a buttress of some sort, whether streamlined or fundamental, to triangulate from cab to bed. It

works, but it detracts from that pure pickup look. Trust Ford to solve this to their high truck-building standards, with all that additional strength built into a classic pickup profile.

There are now a few companies producing unibody vehicles with a pickup bed, some more truck-like than others (some avoid saying the P word at all). Ford could have gone in any direction with this—after all, they had the car-based Ranchero years ago—but true to their bones, they have built a small truck that is unmistakably all pickup.

Our new Ford Maverick XLT is the middle of three trim levels. It's well built, period, but without keyless entry and start, power seats or a few other niceties. The beauty of this is that these decisions are in the product planning category, not the corner-cutting cat-

egory. One look at the lineup (lower right), and it's easy to see that they set out to keep the base model under \$20 grand and the top model under \$30 grand. Basic mission accomplished.

The basic truck starts out as a front-driver, with a hybrid powertrain standard—a first for pickups in the US. This drivetrain also has a continuously variable transmission (CVT).

They don't automatically include a lot of fluff, and we take this as a plus—you get the low price, and you're not forced to buy features. There are options, though, at all levels. Notably, ours includes the higher-output EcoBoost engine, which is bundled with all-wheel drive and a switch to an 8-speed automatic. This brings our price from lower-mid \$20s to mid-20s—and even if applied to the top model Lariat stays under \$30,000.

Ours also includes the FX4 off-road package. Though these trucks are presented as AWD, not 4x4, and do not have transfer cases, this affordable kit opens up some great back country terrain.

Of many options available, a notable one we do not have is an XLT Luxury Package (\$2500), which brings a long list of features including keyless entry and start, heated power seats and power mirrors, even a full size spare. We'd like all of that, and the truck would still be under \$30 grand.

This is right about where, on the one hand, you start reminding yourself that you can get one for under \$20 grand. Or, on the other hand, you start liking all the niceties and might think about moving up to the Lariat, as long as \$30ish is looming.

Lariat of course includes many of these features already. It also offers a Luxury Package (\$3750, but requires Ford Co-Pilot360, thus totaling \$4400). The list of inclusions on this one is lengthy, with one irresistible detail for us—B&O audio, to replace the

standard AM-FM unit. (Then again there are always custom installers to replace the base unit.)

Performance is solid. Unless absolutely seeking minimum purchase price, the engine (and drivetrain) in ours seems the clear choice—250 hp with the EcoBoost (including AWD and an 8-speed) versus 162 hp (with FWD and CVT).

The EcoBoost is one quiet, smooth-running engine—in fact, we did a doubletake at first, while parked, thinking it must be the hybrid, as it was running so silently. Even auto start-stop, a feature we generally disable, was so smooth we often didn't bother or flat out forgot about it.

We took our Maverick on a healthy run up I-17, a great situation for appreciating the basic safety and flexibility of the EcoBoost and 8-speed, even beyond its healthy performance in town. And we took it on some back country dirt roads, where its firm gear selections also equal specific control (as would a manual, if available). Of note, we never

(cont'd)



2022
TRUCK
OF THE YEAR™



SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY.....	Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico
CONSTRUCTION.....	unibody SuperCrew pickup, high-strength steel frame, mild steel body
ENGINE.....	Cleveland OH or Valencia, Spain
ENGINE.....	2.0L EcoBoost DOHC TI-VCT, alum
COMPRESSION RATIO.....	9.3:1
HP/TORQUE.....	250 hp / 277 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION.....	(w 2.5L) 8-spd auto
DRIVETRAIN.....	intelligent AWD
SUSPENSION.....	F: indep MacPherson w coils, twin-tube hydraulic gas shocks, stblz bars, alum lower control arm, steel subframe & cast knuckle; R: (AWD/FX4) indep multi-link trailing arm w monotube hydraulic gas dampers, coils, stblz bar, steel subframe & cast knuckle
STEERING.....	electronic pwr assist
BRAKES.....	4-wheel disc
WHEELS.....	17-in alum (FX4 pkg)
TIRES.....	(AWD) 235/65R17 all-terrain
LENGTH / WHEELBASE.....	199.7 / 121.1 in
HEIGHT / WIDTH.....	68.7 / not incl mirrors 72.6 in
OVERHANG (F/R).....	34.1 / 44.5 in
APPR / DEP / BRKOVER.....	21.6 / 21.2 / 18.1°
GROUND CLEARANCE.....	8.6 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....	40.0 ft
HEADROOM (F/R).....	(w/o moonrf) 40.3 / 39.6 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....	(w 2.0L EB) 42.8 / 36.9 in
BED LENGTH.....	54.4 in
CARGO WIDTH.....	(wheelhouse) 42.6 in
CARGO VOLUME.....	33.3 cu.ft
WEIGHT.....	3731 lb
MAX PAYLOAD.....	1500 lb
TOW CAPACITY.....	2000 lb (4k pkg avail)
FUEL CAPACITY.....	(2.0L) 16.5 gal
MPG.....	tbd (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE.....	\$22,280
EQUIPMENT GROUP 300A: XLT w 2.0L EcoBoost, 8-spd auto, AWD.....	3305
PAINT: Hot Pepper Red TC Metallic.....	390
FX4 OFF-ROAD PACKAGE: (AWD only) 17" alum wheels, A/T tires, 6.5" productivity screen in cluster, front tow hooks, FX4 Off-Road decals, Hill Descent Control, skid plates, hitch receiver with 4-pin harness.....	800
FORD CO-PILOT360: Blind Spot Info w Cross-Traffic Alert; full-size spare (incl on hybrid); Lane Keep Alert/Aid.....	540
FLOOR LINERS: w/o carpeted mats.....	135
17" WHEELS.....	795
SPRAY-IN BEDLINER.....	495
DESTINATION CHARGE.....	1495

TOTAL..... \$30,235
(Note: Our sample's price varies from info below.)

MAVERICK LINEUP.....	FWD.....	AWD.....
	2.5L hyb.....	2.0L EB.....
XL.....	\$19,995.....	+3305
XLT.....	22,360.....	+3305
Lariat.....	25,860.....	+3305

Base configuration for each. Variables include:
 • **ENGINE/TRANSMISSION:** 2.5L Full Hybrid w electronic CVT; or 2.0L EcoBoost w 8-spd automatic
 • **DRIVETRAIN:** FWD or Intelligent AWD

noted any downsides to its unibody build versus cab-and-bed-on-frame, even on the roughest stuff.

Steering is an electronic unit, as is common, but has been engineered for a particularly solid and connected feel. Suspension (the AWD build includes advanced independent multi-link rear, and the FX4 package upgrades this additionally) is top-notch both on the trail and in town. Even the harshest parking lot speedbumps were smooth sailing.

The bed is four and a half feet long, almost exactly as wide, though three and a half between wheelwells. It includes recesses to use 2x4s to cleverly achieve a four-foot-wide flat load above the wheelwells. The tailgate (which locks) lowers and raises manually, and it's fairly substantial in heft. A number of other tricks and accessories augment load capabilities, from eight-foot building materials to outdoor gear, whether big and cumbersome or loose and plentiful, as well as those Home Depot runs for anything and everything—all while keeping dirt, mud and splinters outdoors, as only a pickup can.

The interior is equal parts stylish and utilitarian, with door liners kept simple and clean, following the contours of the doors' outer shell. Also novel here are the door grabs, more of a canti-

levered stub, stylish but not exactly ergonomic.

If there's one thing we would change inside, it's the screen tilt—it seems perfectly vertical, even forward-leaning, though it actually does lean back just three degrees. It makes for an uncomfortable glance, with head height almost inevitably well above the screen. There seems to be nothing that would keep it from being more like a 10-degree angle, as every monitor we measured in our office turned out to be, plus or minus one degree or less.

One tradeoff between engines is fuel mileage. The FWD hybrid is rated 42 mpg city, 33 highway, 37 combined, while the EcoBoost is 23/30/26 with FWD or 22/29/25 with AWD. Our readout stayed around 24 mpg through our highway-speed drive through I-17's elevation changes and our off-pavement session, right in range. If you're mostly doing city driving, the hybrid is rated notably higher (42 vs 22/23). For highway driving, the difference seems negligible (33 vs 30/29). For those aiming for that \$20 grand price position, along with ongoing fuel savings, the hybrid is a win-win. If performance and features are priorities, then the EcoBoost and upper trims are a win-win. The lineup's formula is right on target throughout.

Rear legroom is pretty tight, which is just one

factor that led to our thinking that it would be great to see a single-cab version of the Maverick. There are a number of small hints in the wider full-size pickup market that this, with an eight-foot bed, might be a very welcome return as one build option. A single cab, with a six-foot bed, could be great here, too. Everything's a tradeoff, but with that, building materials would not exceed the tailgate, and you could sleep in a closed bed (perhaps with camper shell to fend off the grizzlies).

It's clear that Ford wanted to establish the Maverick's affordability, above all, and they have succeeded. The product planners will keep a close eye on where most buying decisions fall, as always, but we wonder whether—especially if higher trims and options sell well—there will be Platinum Limited, even King Ranch versions in the future. If the \$19,995 models sells best, perhaps not. But every other trend in the pickup market suggests yes.

One interesting perception we had in the Maverick was that it does not generate any particular envy for the bigger trucks, nor disdain from them—you can share the roads with no shame about your small size. It's tough and strong and powerful (as equipped), and it serves its own purposes. And it is most decidedly trucklike. ■

