’Line in the Sand

Honda doubles down on its revolutionary Ridgeline. _by Jared Gall

JUST BECAUSE A VEHICLE TURNED OUT to be a sales Hinden- burg doesn’t mean it was a bad idea. Or one that doesn’t merit further development. The Honda Ridgeline, which made its debut in 2005, was a radical rethinking of the mid-size truck, a unibody revolution for the most proletarian of pickup segments. In 2008, after Toyota and GMC unveiled similar unibody-truck concepts just one month apart, GMC’s then general manager told us that he expected the entire compact-truck market to go unibody. And yet, the bed-bearing Honda nabbed just 7 percent of mid-size-truck buyers over its nine-year run. In its worst year, 2011, the Ridgeline’s market share slipped to just 3 percent. The other 97 percent of buyers weren’t asking for reinvention, they just wanted a truck.

Maybe now, in this era of car-based SUVs, the mildly machismoed can be persuaded to take another look. The ride-quality chasm between the Ridgeline and its competitors is so wide that medieval mappmakers would have scribbled “Here Be Dragons” in the general vicinity of GM, Nissan, and Toyota headquarters. The Honda delivers a ride that no live-axle, body-on-frame vehicle can manage. It’s all lightness and composure, with carlike body control and smoothness. Impacts that would have a solid axle tossing occupants around register as brief, light shudders.

As for capability, the new Ridgeline’s 1584-pound payload is one of the highest in the segment (e.g., Chevy Colorado/GMC Canyon, Nissan Frontier, Toyota Tacoma). While its 5000-pound maximum towing capacity is among the lowest, Honda’s research suggests that just 6 percent of mid-size-truck buyers ever tow more than that.

[+] Unparalleled ride, endless clever storage options.

[–] Below-average tow rating, minivan nose.

2017 HONDA RIDGELINE

VEHICLE TYPE: front-engine, front- or all-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door pickup
BASE PRICE: $30,375–$43,770
ENGINE TYPE: SOHC 24-valve V-6 aluminum block and heads, direct fuel injection
DISPLACEMENT: 3.5L
POWER: 280 hp @ 6000 rpm
TORQUE: 251 lb ft @ 4700 rpm
TRANSMISSION: 6-speed automatic
DIMENSIONS

WHEELBASE: 125.2 in
LENGTH: 210.6 in
WIDTH: 78.6 in
HEIGHT: 70.5–70.8 in
PASSENGER VOLUME: 110 cu ft
CURB WEIGHT: 4200–4500 lb
PERFORMANCE (C/D EST)
ZERO TO 60 MPH: 6.4–6.7 sec
ZERO TO 100 MPH: 16.6–17.4 sec
1/4-MILE: 15.0–15.3 sec
TOP SPEED: 120 mph
FUEL ECONOMY

EPA COMBINED/CITY/ HWY: 12/17/18/ 25–26 mpg
To assuage the aesthetic concerns of those who really want to tow stuff someday but just haven’t found the right opportunity, the rebooted Ridgeline looks like a regular pickup. Well, a regular pickup melded with a minivan. Honda representatives tell us that the previous generation’s appearance is what dissuaded most shoppers, that the brutalist flying-buttress cab and sloping bedsides visually shortened the bed. Even though it was competitively sized, most shoppers assumed it wouldn’t suit their needs and looked elsewhere. Now, not only is the bed visually lengthened, it’s also physically lengthened. Honda stretched it four more inches, to 64, longer than the short boxes on the crew-cab Colorado and Tacoma (it is, however, about 10 inches shorter than the available long beds on those trucks). And Honda’s is the only truck in the class that can accommodate a four-by-eight-foot sheet of building material flat between the wheel wells.

Original Ridgeline ideas that carry over include the lockable underbed trunk and the dual-action tailgate that either drops or swings to the side. Honda ups the weirdness by making the bed into one gigantic speaker in top-trim levels. It uses six exciters, which are small electric actuators capable of vibrating at thousands of oscillations per second. Mounted behind the bedsides, they act as speaker magnets that use the panels they’re mounted to as cones. The upside is that they’re protected against water and impacts. The downside is the system’s low-fi sound with nonexistent bass.

Which, if you have any friends who like techno, is not a downside at all. But for doing what one does with a truck bed—standing around it, leaning on it—it’s a good means of reproducing country music. Honda expects that you’ll use the bed’s available 400-watt inverter to power a big-screen TV during tailgate parties, in which case your inebriated neighbors will surely be wowed. Just watch that they don’t spill their beer on your TV.

**Knuckle Sandwich**

Nearly every component in the Ridgeline’s suspension is beefed up compared with its Pilot counterpart, from control arms and knuckles to struts and bearings. For the steering knuckle shown here, the Ridgeline gets a hollow-cast part that is stronger than the Pilot’s I-beam piece, but nearly as light. The hub bearing is larger in both diameter and width to handle heavier loads.

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<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>RIDGELINE</th>
<th>PILOT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strength of the front suspension</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength of the rear suspension</td>
<td></td>
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The last of the bed's tricks is that it is constructed of dent- and scratch-resistant composite plastic, meaning you can toss whatever you want in the back and not worry. Honda proved its point by inviting us to attack the bed with a garden rake and then dumping a load of football-sized rocks into the bed from a tractor. By straining mightily on the rake, we were able to see the slightest lines in the bed finish, but the rocks left no marks of note.

While the Ridgeline's suspension is similar to the Pilot's, and therefore related to the suspension in the upcoming next-generation Odyssey minivan, nearly every major component is beefed up to handle pickup duty (see tech highlight). Engineers tell us the front is 17 percent stronger than the Pilot's while the rear is engineered to handle loads 31 percent higher. The difference doesn't just manifest in the Ridgeline's greater workload ratings. On the road, where the Pilot wallows and feels a little sloppy, the Ridgeline's firmer bushing and damper tuning gives it a more controlled ride. As in the Pilot, the Ridgeline's soft brake pedal and light steering are a little too squishy, but in this class, vague controls are the norm from which only the well-handling Colorado/Canyon twins deviate.

Another critical difference between Pilot and Ridgeline is the transmission. In our experience, shifts from the Pilot's nine-speed vary in speed and smoothness as you climb through the ratios. The Ridgeline's six-speed, though, is consistently quick and seamless.

With 280 horsepower and 262 pound-feet of torque, the new 3.5-liter V-6 tops the outgoing engine by 30 horsepower and 15 pound-feet. It's smooth and unobtrusive, a perfectly acceptable if uninspiring engine for a mid-size pickup.

Honda predicts best-in-class acceleration, but we'll see. The Ridgeline is proof that "unibody" doesn't mean light as much as "sturdy" generally means heavy. Honda claims—and our experience bears out—that the Ridgeline is more rigid than either the Colorado or the Tacoma. But its 4500-pound curb weight is also greater. And while Honda claims best-in-class fuel economy, that's only true if your definition of "class" omits GM's gas and diesel four-cylinders. Front-drive Ridgelines are rated at 22 mpg combined with 19/26 mpg ratings city/highway. All-wheel-drivers see 21 mpg combined and 18/25 city/highway.

As before, the Ridgeline's interior positively embarrasses the competition. It feels enormous, its lack of a frame allowing for a comfortable seating position and a tall, spacious cabin. The flip-up rear seat remains from the previous generation, opening up yet another yawn, weather-protected storage cavity when raised. The seat also hides up to 2.9 cubic feet of space, or enough for at least one golf bag, beneath seated passengers.

As with other Honda vehicles, there's an available tech package that, in addition to lane-keeping assist and blind-spot monitors, offers adaptive cruise control with forward-collision warning and automated emergency braking. Honda expects that the tech package, with the braking, will help it score a Top Safety Pick Plus rating from the IIHS, which would make it the only mid-size truck to do so.

But no matter how much tech Honda packs in, we're a long way from accepting the company's touchscreen infotainment system. The menu structure must have been designed by someone either vastly smarter or vastly less intelligent than us, because it simply does not make sense. There be the dragons.

The 2017 Ridgeline goes on sale this summer at a base price of $30,375 for a front-drive RT. All-wheel drive is an $1800 option on all but the top two trims, and a fully loaded Ridgeline will surpass $40,000. At that point, as with all less-than-huge pickups, the question becomes why not just get a full-size truck? For us, it's a no-brainer, as no other pickup of any size is as refined and civilized as the Ridgeline. Here's to hoping that more Americans start giving a damn about civility.