

Nitro Sports Crossover Appeal

by Mark Maynard

Some girl in second grade sharing really ticked me off when she called my Tonka truck a "tinkle toy."

I sputtered for a snappy comeback but was too stunned by her hatchet to my heart. That was just a mean-spirited thing to say. It was jealousy, I decided, because I wouldn't let her hold the truck.

It was a red Ford pickup, early '60s fleet-style body and white cab. I can still see its chrome grille and headlights, whitewalls and the coarse tread of the heavy-duty rubber tires.

That truck slept in the bed with me.

DODGE NITRO - The Dodge Nitro has comic-hero attitude and real-world practicality. It has a crossover SUV stance with sedan comfort. The midrange SLT model is a desirable package of creative styling, comfortable ride and competitive price. Pricing ranges from \$19,885 to about \$30,000 with options. CNS Photo courtesy of Dodge. This all came back while testing the Dodge Nitro SUV.

Cool and hunky with bulges in the right places, it has a classic jut of Dick Tracy chin to the grille. The flat top, chopped roof and fenders combine for visual drama, while every line tracks around the vehicle to set an athletic stance.

It is contemporary and retro, practical and functional. Guys stop, drop and drool at the sight of it. What's even more stunning is that women will, too.

"I know women will buy this," says Courtney Caldwell, publisher of the online magazine www.RoadandTravel.com. "Older women buying retro-athletic vehicles are a throwback to their own youth when they couldn't have a car like that.

"They don't care if a vehicle is marketed to men. Nitro is athletic and strong-looking and that's exactly what women want," Caldwell says. "They want it to represent who they are today."

Dodge hopes to cut in on the action of the popular Nissan Xterra and other midsize SUVs. But Nitro is less truck and more crossover in its driving experience. It is built from the Jeep Liberty platform, but you'd

never know by looking at it.

Nitro is sold in three trim levels in two- and four-wheel drive with two V-6 engines and three transmissions. And, yes, the 5.7-liter Hemi V-8 will fit.

Pricing starts at \$19,885 for the entry level SXT that has a 210-horsepower, 3.7-liter V-6 and six-speed manual transmission, or at \$20,710 with a four-speed automatic. Four-wheel drive adds \$1,510.

Standard equipment includes remote locking, air conditioning, a reversible cargo floor, 16-inch steel wheels, power windows and locks, and a six-speaker CD-MP3 audio system. Safety features include four air bags and four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes with electronic stability control, all-speed traction control and brake assist.

The SLT is \$23,295 2WD or \$24,805 4WD, which has the automatic transmission and adds 17-inch aluminum wheels, more powerful audio, cruise control and front and rear floor mats.

The R/T -- \$24,970 to \$27,630 4WD -- is the hottie. It has a 260-hp, 4.0-liter V-6, six-speed AutoStick, a performance-tuned suspension and 20-inch, chrome-clad aluminum wheels.

It also gets more chrome, and the lower fascia, vinyl wheel arches and lower body trim are painted in the body color. The interior has two-tone seats with the R/T logo.

Although R/T is the head-turner, its sport suspension is so firm it may be too much for many drivers. And those 20-inch tires make a statement, but, oh, are they are expensive to replace.

But when you look this cool, does that really matter?

The beauty of Nitro is in the quality of interior elements and creativity of design that makes the midrange SLT an attractive value.

Step-in height is comfortable without the need for running boards. Headroom is a tall 40 1/2 inches and there is plenty of rear legroom. There is a little wind noise at the outside mirrors, but the interior is well-isolated from road harshness.

There are plenty of useful storage areas, including the door grab handle where I rested my cell phone. The center console may be deep enough to hold a purse. The front passenger seatback folds forward to extend cargo space and the 60/40 split back seats fold flat.

The dashboard is short, which eliminates glare and reflections, and sightlines are good for the driver from all angles. I appreciated the dot-matrix sunscreen behind the rearview mirror, the soft-top armrest and the three-blink lane-change turn signal.

The latter is an electronic extra from the association with the Daimler side of Chrysler. So, too, are electronic stability control with rollover mitigation, all-speed traction control and brake assist.

Nitro pivots into cramped parking spaces with a turning circle smaller than many sedans. And even with 20-inch tires, the steering force is compliant at low speeds. The 210-hp, 3.7-liter V-6 has good acceleration, doesn't lose power uphill and the four-speed automatic is quite effective, though less engaging than the five-speed AutoStick. Fuel economy isn't bad for 4,105 pounds: 18 mpg city, 24 highway on 87 octane, manual or automatic; 17/23 4WD automatic.

The 260-hp, 4.0-liter V-6 fits the R/T image of power, and fuel economy isn't terrible at 17/21 on 89 octane. I was getting 17.6 mpg on a run through the mountains. Nitro may look like a big toy, but there's real-world function in its comic-hero attitude.

Copley News Service

SPECS

2007 Dodge Nitro R/T 2WD
Body style: Midsize, four-door, five-passenger sport utility in rear- or all-wheel drive
Engine: Aluminum, SOHC 4.0 liter V-6
Horsepower: 260 at 6,000 rpm
Torque: 265 foot-pounds at 4,200 rpm
Transmission: 5-speed manual with AutoStick
EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 21 highway; 89 octane preferred

DIMENSIONS
Cargo space: 32.1 cubic feet to 65.2 rear seat folded
Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.6/40.8/57.2 inches
Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 40.8/37.7/56.4 inches
Length/wheelbase: 178.9/108.8 inches
Tow capacity: 5,000 pounds with tow package
Curb weight: 3,971 pounds

FEATURES
Standard equipment: remote locking, P245/50R 20-inch, V-rated all-season performance tires on chrome-clad aluminum, anti-lock four-wheel disc brakes, air conditioning, power windows-locks-mirrors, six-speaker CD-MP3 audio system
Safety equipment: multistage front air bags, side bags, tire-pressure monitoring system, four-wheel anti-lock disc brakes with electronic stability control, all-speed traction control and brake assist

CHASSIS
Brakes: four-wheel anti-lock discs with electronic stability
Steering: power rack and pinion; turning circle, 36.3 feet
Suspension: Front "A" arms, coil springs, low-pressure gas-charged shock absorbers, stabilizer bar, rear, live axle, upper and lower trailing arms, track bar, coil springs, stabilizer bar, low-pressure gas-charged shock absorbers

PRICING
Base: \$25,970, including \$660 freight; price as tested, \$28,840
Options on test car: trailer tow group, \$500; eight-speaker audio, \$550; U-connect hands-free telephone, \$275; power sunroof, \$850; 4.0 V-6,

\$695The competition: Nissan Xterra, Chevy Equinox, Ford EscapeWhere assembled: Toledo, Ohio

PLUSES: Comic-hero attitude, real-world function; load 'n' go sliding cargo floor; big-grab door handles; easy step-in

MINUSES: R/T suspension can be choppy on some surfaces; wiper blades intrude into lower windshield area (aero-style blades would reduce the hardware factor and look more contemporary); no lock on glove box.

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