

UTE-LYMPICS 2



Story & Photos: **Dean Evans**

It's back, and with three of the hottest contenders in the NZ ute market, we find out which is fittest for purpose, in our second-annual three-ute shootout, the LCV magazine Ute-lympics.

LAST YEAR, LCV MAGAZINE HELD ITS INAUGURAL Ute-lympics, a thorough ten-round test designed to find the top ute amongst the top-three sellers in NZ. Ford's Ranger Wildtrak was the winner of that event, and 12 months on, we're back for Ute-lympics 2.

With the same tests, the same rewards, and with the next batch of athletes (ute-letes?), including two proven advocates and a popular new facelift. While last year's trio was the top-three selling in NZ, 2019's contenders are effectively the 'next' best three. At least they were, with the Mitsubishi Triton's moving into third position and displacing Colorado in late 2018, and maintaining third in 2019.

Isuzu's tough, rugged D-Max finished fifth in 2018 sales, a workhorse is as a workhorse does, deserving a shot at the Ute-lympics title due to its persistent popularity and success.

And rounding out our three is Mazda's BT-50, which finished just behind the Isuzu in seventh. Loosely based on the Ford Ranger, that's a planned attack from our part, given the Ranger won our 2018 Ute-lympics. Can the Mazda carry the torch for its cousin in 2019? Can the bold new Triton prove its mettle in this proven company? Or does the D-Max do it all consistently just a little better? Time to find out, as we officially open Ute-lympics 2: let the games, challenges and 10 rounds of tests begin.



In 2018, LCV mag held the first Ute-lympics, with the three-best-selling utes of the year, Ford's Ranger Wildtrak, Toyota's Hilux SR5 and Holden's Colorado Z71. The Ranger's features and cabin comfort contributed to its win, closely followed by the well-equipped and fast Colorado, with the reliable and rugged Hilux in third. For back issues, www.lcv.co.nz.



A year on, we're back with three more athletes (ute-letes?) to see who will take the title over ten different tests.

Round 1 – Price

As the primary consideration for almost any buying decision, price carries a lot of weight. But it's not that simple. We consider entry price as well as top-spec pricing, along with the range and price span.

The Mazda BT-50 offers 11 models, from a 2WD single cab, through a Freestyle/extended cab, to a double-cab, which offers six variations, in either 2WD or 4WD, and three trim grades from GLX, GSX and



Mazda is the only one with a conventional 'key' to start the engine. D-Max and Triton are both keyless entry and starting.

Limited. The cheapest BT-50 is the 2WD GLX at \$35,295. Our Titanium Flash Mica 4WD Limited is priced at \$59,795 plus on-roads – though the 2WD GLX is \$41,895+, covering \$17,900 for the double-cab range. Every 4WD double cab is above \$50k, and to get under that magic number, it's the top-spec 2WD Limited, at \$49,795. Just over that mark, at \$51,895 is the entry GLX 4WD. Mazda is also running an offer until June 30 for \$6k worth of accessories on double-cabs.

With single, space and double cabs, the 12-model Isuzu D-Max range starts at \$34,774+GST and on-roads for the 2WD LX auto cab chassis. The double cab range starts at \$34,774+ for the low-ride 2WD manual, topping out at \$54,339+ for the LS-T automatic 4WD, which is the model we tested; meaning a range span of \$19,565. To get under the \$50k barrier, it needs to be

DOLLAR FOR DOLLAR		
MODEL	PRICE RANGE	SPAN
TRITON	\$31,990-\$49,990	\$18,000
D-MAX	\$34,774-\$54,339	\$19,565
BT-50	\$35,295-\$59,795	\$17,900

the mid-spec LS manual, at \$49,991.

So to the Mitsubishi Triton, with 14 models in its range. The headline is the \$49,990 plus on-roads price for the top-spec 4WD VRX, noting that Triton's prices are described as a "special offer". The entry Triton is a 2WD GLX single cab auto, at \$31,990, representing an \$18,000 span. In Sunflare Orange, our test VRX certainly stood out visually, and with a range that starts – and finishes – lower than its rivals, it's Mitsubishi's Triton that takes the gold for the round. The Isuzu scrapes in a little under the Mazda both in base model and top specs, while the Mazda still represents good value, but when talking purely price, it's a close third in this company.



Round 2 – Specification

Prices may vary, but it's equipment that often dictates that, so for round two we need to analyse what each ute offers in bang for bucks. Sticking just with the double-cabs on test, we have the top-spec of each model: Triton VRX (\$49,990), D-Max LS-T (\$51,730) and BT-50 Limited (\$59,795), so there's a fair comparison for these respective range-toppers. And though there's a \$10k price span between them, the biggest bucks doesn't always buy the most gear.

The Triton is well equipped with heated, power leather seats, dual-zone climate control and LED headlights. A seven-inch touchscreen offers CarPlay/Auto, keyless entry/start, cruise control and auto LED headlights and wipers. Four USBs, six speakers and even an HDMI port are all offered, while the back seat scores two of those USB ports and a sizeable phone/storage bin, a centre fold-down arm-rest/cup-holders, and a rear air circulator, which makes rear passengers very happy. The steering wheel is coated with buttons, and everything is at hand, including trip computer, cruise and even shift paddles.

Moving up a few thousand to the Isuzu D-Max, there's an eight-inch touchscreen, though it misses out on CarPlay/Auto, but there is single-zone climate control. It doesn't get heated seats like the Triton, but does get leather, and trip computer, keyless entry/starting, and single USB port up front. In the back there's a unique 60/40 split folding seat, flip-down dual cup-holder on the floor and single USB port. There are eight-speakers for the audio system, including two roof-mounted 'Sky Sound' speakers which improve surround and rear audio. Oddly, almost inexplicably, the LS-T still carries the (mid-range) LS badge on the doors, meaning

the easiest way to pick it as the top-spec is by the roof rails and 18-inch wheels, but only fellow D-Max drivers will know that. The LS-T is crying out for an LS-T badge!

The Mazda carries the highest price here, suggesting a high spec level. There's dual-zone climate control, Bluetooth, power leather seats and cruise control, an eight-inch touchscreen with a multi info display that offers lots, along with a six-speaker audio system with CarPlay/Auto and satnav, and an HDMI input. Though it has remote central locking, it still requires a key to start, and rear passengers have only a 12v socket and flip-down armrest/cupholders. The Mazda is also unique offering the only truly 'correct' sequential shift orientation, forward to downshift (with inertia). The gauges are neat, though the central red-on-black display between them is looking a little dated, with trip computer resets via a good old fashioned button near the tach. Steering wheel controls are limited to audio and cruise controls, with the trip meter functions via the same button. A 3.5mm and USB socket sit up high on the dash. The Mazda's cabin is also full of black plastic, so while it's comfortable and accommodating, it's a bit monotone inside.

Mechanically, all use six-speed automatic gearboxes, with the capacity king being the BT-50's generation-old Ranger engine, a 3.2-litre five-cylinder; with a 3.0-litre in the D-Max and a 2.4-litre in the Triton. So they're all close on spec, though their respective performance will be decided in another test.

For specs, it's a close battle, but for its tech, features, colour screens and boxes ticked, and to a lesser extent, relation to price, the Triton just scrapes ahead of D-Max and the BT-50.

We're spoilt for choice, not just for utes, but models, with ranges spanning 11, 12 and 14 variants for the Mazda BT-50, Isuzu D-Max and Mitsubishi Triton.



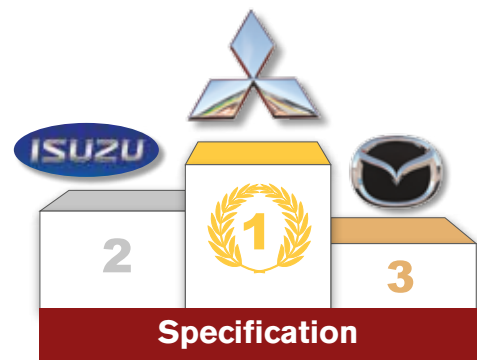
Isuzu D-Max LS-T cabin ticks most boxes, with stereo and cruise controls on the wheel, keyless entry/start, leather electric seats, touchscreen and navigation.



Mitsubishi Triton VRX interior is loaded, with dual-zone climate, lots of controls on the wheel including selection of camera, and even shift paddles.



Lots of black in Mazda BT-50 Limited interior, but it's still modern and well equipped, though starting to show its age with basic centre display.





Round 3 – Practicality

A city car is no good if its turning circle is huge, and a ute is worthless if its tray is tiny, and its owner satisfaction is diminished if there's nowhere to put a work phone, or basics like cabin ergonomics, rear passenger accommodation or gauge legibility, so it's these aspects that contribute to a vehicle's simple practicality.

Starting from the outside, overall length and turning circle are two potential issues with site access and garage access, and at 5365mm, the Mazda is the longest truck here, but the second smallest turning circle, at 12.4m. A little larger, but shorter is the

little due to the slippery nature of the plastics. All three offer similar levels of storage: while the Isuzu's storage in front of the shifter is shallow, it offers two gloveboxes, dash-top storage and cupholders in the centre, as well as two more pop-outs in front of each side AC vents. Triton covers the essentials with enough storage and pockets for all the day-to-day personals. And only the Mazda offers an AC-cooled centre console for chocolates or drinks.

Across the rear, they're all remarkably comfortable in a similar way. The Triton's roof vents offer a big advantage, while the Isuzu

offers the most on paper, ahead of Triton and Mazda - but we'll cover fuel use in a separate test.

D-Max's 30/23 degree approach/departure angles are slightly under Triton's 31/23 degree equivalents, with BT-50's 28/26 degrees, so not a lot to separate them there.

With no real bad points, all three offer remarkably similar practicality, and beyond splitting hairs, this is one of the rounds where it's simply too close to call. It's a tough subjective/objective decision, but Triton just gets the nod; BT-50 and D-Max are equally impressive, so neither deserves a third place here.

Though there's a \$10,000 price span between these three respective range-toppers, the bugger bucks doesn't always buy the most gear.

Isuzu, at 5295mm and 12.6m. And the Triton's 5295cm is just 10cm longer than the Mazda (and 70mm shorter than D-Max), but offers the tightest turning circle, a class-leading 11.8m.

The Isuzu has the highest driving position of the three and tall drivers will feel too high, at least in comparison though it doesn't feel as bad in isolation. The storage war is won by the Mazda, just, with large pockets dotted around the cabin, though it loses a

feels a bit sparse. Shoulder room is plentiful front and rear, with the Isuzu's 1860mm, Mazda's 1850mm, Triton's 1815mm overall widths reflected in their cabin comfort, though even the Triton feels large enough for big blokes.

D-Max and Triton are both 1795mm tall, with BT-50 at 1821mm, if roof height is an issue for low underground sites.

With fuel tank sizes all within five litres, it gets down to l/100km, and here the D-Max



Below: Mazda has a car-like dual-zone climate control system, along with a handy rubber-lined pocket on top of the dash for a phone, handily with a USB and 3.5mm socket.



Above: Isuzu's pull-out can holders either side can free up the centre console cupholders, while secondary top glove also handy for odds and ends, with 12v socket.

AD
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Round 4 – Safety

We like to think safety ranks number one, but while price and features probably rank higher, safety is a good measure of owner reassurance and comfort: after all, a five-star crash rating is better than a one, even if it's never put to the test. All three utes get five star ANCAP ratings, so we have to delve deeper to split the differences both from an equipment view, and ANCAP safety scores (marked out of 37).

The D-Max offers Hill Start and Descent Control, ABS, EBD and Emergency Brake Assist, which increases brake pressure when it senses an emergency stop. There's also trailer-sway control, and six airbags. Its ANCAP score is marginally lower than the others here, with 33.58, so ranks third.

The Mazda offers four front airbags, two fewer than the Isuzu, but a suite of safety acronyms: Hill Descent Control (HDC); Hill Launch Assist (HLA), ABS, EBD and EBA (Emergency Brake Assist), in conjunction with ESS (Emergency Stop Signals), which flashes the hazards. There's also Trailer Sway Control (TSC), and RSC (Roll Stability Control), LAC (Load Adaptive Control) when a load raises the centre of gravity. With very similar offerings to the Isuzu, its ANCAP score of 35.72 puts it into second.

Which leaves Triton to claim another victory. Its ANCAP score of 36.22 may be highest, but its whiplash protection and pedestrian protection also put it just ahead in crash testing. Its features match the others, such as ESC, ABS and EBD, hill-start and hill descent; there are front side, curtain and knee airbags, plus Smart Brake and Brake Assist. Plus there's also FCM (Forward Collision Mitigation), Lane Departure Warning and Lane Change Assist, Rear Cross-Traffic Alert, Blind Spot Warning. Auto High Beam and an adjustable speed limiter seal its spot at the top of this safety table.



ANCAP testing provides a lot of structure and assessment for the safety angle, and the crash testing of all three models results in a star rating (out of five) and a numeric score. Pre-facelift Triton shown and at time of publishing, still current.



All three utes offer the maximum five-star crash safety ratings, so we have to delve in a bit deeper to split the differences, such as airbags and ANCAP scores.

Round 5 – The Drive

All the specs safety and equipment could be right on the money, but it also needs to be nice to drive. An overly harsh ride, large tuning circle or poor ergonomics could mean a minor daily disaster. So we loaded up each ute with four occupants, to get a front and rear seat opinion during our individual 20km drive loop with each car over the same road. Then it was a 150km driver-only stint in convoy, swapping cars every 50km, evaluating engine performance, ride, steering and handling, general comfort and subjective driver opinion.

Into the Isuzu first, and LS-T's high-mounted leather electric driver's seat offers a good view, and could be good or bad, depending on personal height and preference. In fact every seat is comfortable and spacious. The 3.0-litre feels quite effortless, particularly around its 1500-2000rpm range, and that's before its peak torque range between 2000-2200rpm. But it's also the noisiest, with the loudest diesel rattle and highest cabin decibel reading at 100km/h: measured over the same strip of motorway, we recorded 86dB. Steering is a little heavy at low speeds, but overall ride and handling is impressive.

Cars often feel impressive in isolation, hence the importance of these comparisons, and into the Mazda, a few factors are obvious. The BT-50's steering is very heavy, especially at low speeds. Higher front tyres pressures would help, but ride would suffer. And

ride quality is one of the Mazda's virtues, with a real supple ride, absorbing lots of little bumps and lumps that were more obvious in the D-Max, making it a very comfortable daily driver. Oddly, it's not as sorted over speedhumps, but it is substantially quieter, measuring a relatively hushed 82dB at 100km/h. The seats are similarly comfortable, and the sequential shifter is correctly oriented. Dual-zone climate control and similar pulling power to the Isuzu make it a very similar package, and despite the heavy steering, it just manages to edge ahead of the D-Max in our subjective opinions. Though it's very close.

Which, again, leaves the Triton. The cabin is the tightest, but it's only really noticeable when compared. It's the only one with telescopic steering adjustment, heated seats, Apple CarPlay/Auto and rear seat entry/egress grab-handles. Its

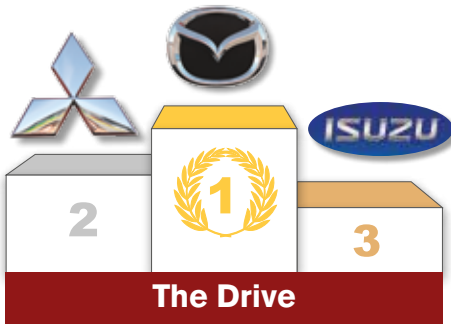


steering is well weighted, and the engine just feels the most eager of the trio: it may be slower against the stopwatch, but the Triton's 2.4-litre spins freely and easily, almost more petrol-like than diesel. Where it isn't as nice as the others is ride quality: in isolation, it's great, and never does it prove bad, but in comparison to the others, it feels firm, stiff and jittery. And in this comparo, that's all it needs. So for its supple ride quality, comfort, quiet cabin and



torquey engine, the Mazda just scrapes in with the round win, over the Triton, with the D-Max a very close third. The reality is, all three are all very good, and others may have different rankings, but in our tests, on these roads, on this day, that's what we judged.

The Triton is fully loaded with gear, offers fantastic value, is quick and comfortable. On its own it was impressive, but how does it stack up against these two?





Round 6 - Acceleration

Double-cab utes are not performance cars, but the daily grind as a workhorse still requires a minimum level of performance, whether it's power, torque, pulling the boat or carting the kids – and who ever complained about too much speed? So we lined them up for a series of challenges befitting of any ute-lympian. Last year the Holden Colorado set the pace, so we've put that into the table purely for comparison. But the basic challenge of 0-60km/h tests its ability to not just accelerate fast, but its response time, which often directly relates to ease of driveability.

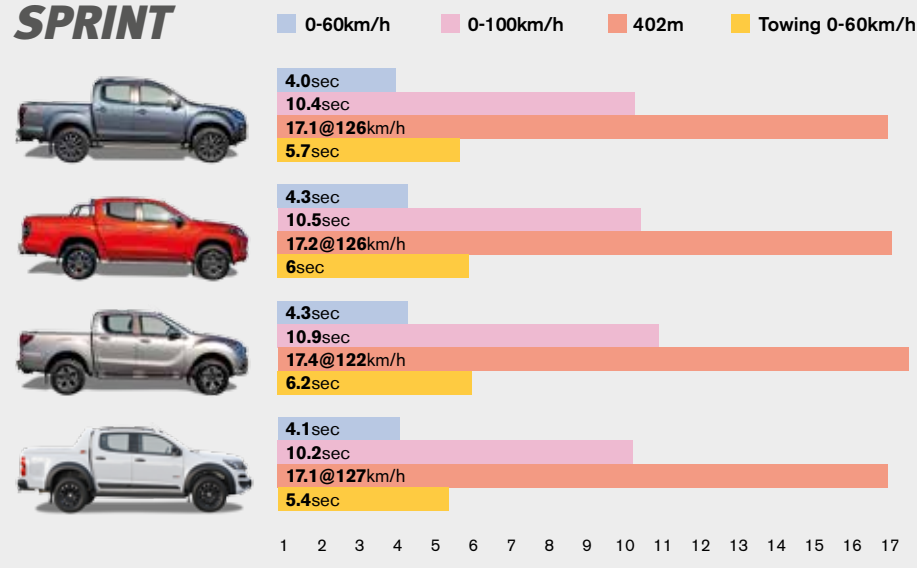
All our performance tests are done with the brake and accelerator loaded up a little to minimise lash, throttle lag and response time, and measured with a Racelogic VBOX, the global standard for time testing.

Only the Mazda proved a little light

in the rear end and prone to wheelspin, but a trial between 2WD and 4H modes eliminated slip without hurting times. And probably the most remarkable fact was how close these three utes were. Its ability to jump off the line gave the Isuzu D-Max an advantage to 60km/h (faster than even Colorado!); Triton closed the gap to 100km/h, but the D-Max was in its stride and it held a car-length gap all the way to the quarter-mile marker, where both the Isuzu and Mitsubishi were traveling at identical speeds.

The Mazda not surprisingly mimicks the Ranger and though the Mazda is lighter and faster, it's still the slowest here. It matched the Triton to 60km/h, but faded to 100km/h and beyond, slower on both time and speed - but it can take comfort that it's faster than the Ford Ranger, Mercedes-Benz X-Class and Toyota Hilux.

SPRINT



All three trays offer similar cargo space, with slightly different payloads (which is a minefield of info and variables itself), but Triton's wheelarches are least intrusive, partly thanks to the shortest wheelbase of 3000mm, versus Isuzu's 3095mm, and Mazda's 3220mm.



Round 7 - Towing

All three 4WD double-cabs offer a tow rating of 750kg/3500kg un/braked across their 2WD/4WD ranges, so on paper it's an easy three-way tie, but it's the way each manages the load that offers subtle differences, along with how the three different capacity four-cylinder engines perform and consume.

So the test was to collect three identical moving trailers from our friends at Kennards Hire, Hamilton, supplier of just about anything work-related, from pressure washers to trailers and even a Ford Ranger ute. Kennards supplied us with three trailers, each just under one-tonne. Not a huge challenge, but typical, and most importantly, identical for all three utes. Keen eyes will notice the gold Triton wasn't fitted with a tow bar, so we returned with a grey tow-bar-equipped Triton a few days later to run the identical roads and tests.

It's here where the D-Max excelled just that little more, and its 3.0-litre engine was not only quick, it was frugal. Its 0-60km/h doesn't mean it's a drag racer, but it does offer insight into lugging and passing ability and a time of 5.7 seconds proved fastest, and a 42 percent time increase over its unladen 0-60. Its reverse camera offers a central hitch guide which is handy when reversing to the trailer, and after our 50km road loop, on which



all three utes drove in convoy, it used the least fuel, at 13.3l/100km. With the largest payload, at 1085kg, this LS-T is a tough customer to top.

Second place was a little tighter to call. The Triton proved next quickest to 60km/h, at 6.0 seconds (and just 36 percent slower while towing), and turned in fuel figures of 13.7l/100km. Its reverse camera offers not just a bird's eye 360 degree view, but the camera can be selected as full screen via a button on the steering wheel. Its ride quality settled and it rode better with a load on, but it was still a little choppy at times. And its 2WD models downgrade the tow limit to 3000kg. VRX 4WD's payload is also the smallest here at 930kg – though that's still 5kg more than a top-spec Hilux.

But based purely on towing, the decision falls in a split decision to the Mazda BT-50. The Mazda's big 3.2-litre just does it all so effortlessly, and the warbly five-cylinder just

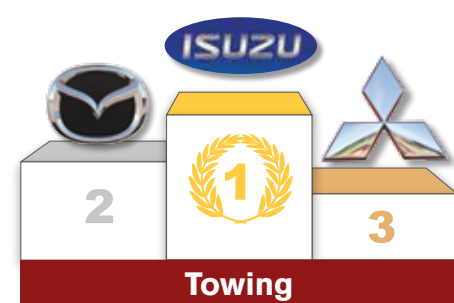
grunts along with ease. The reverse camera is very large on this Alpine unit, though other models we've tested had a smaller camera display in the interior mirror, and there are both coloured guide lines and a black central marker for the hitch.

BT-50 is fractionally slower to 60km/h, at 6.2 seconds (a 44 percent increase), and it also had the highest thirst, at 14.9l/100km. But it offers the most torque here, at 470Nm, which does help if easy, effortless grunt is the game. It also offers a 1082kg payload in this Limited model, basically identical to the D-Max. And all that's probably the point: the Mazda is very impressive at towing and hauling, and while it's a little less zippy and a little more thirsty than the Triton, its overall performance is enough to push it fractionally ahead.

Thanks to:

Kennard's Hire, Hamilton
www.kennardshire.co.nz

The ride quality and quietness of the Mazda BT-50's cabin really stands out, as does the initial suppleness of its ride quality.



Above: Mazda's Alpine unit offered a larger display than the smaller screen normally found in the BT-50's mirror. The Isuzu's is most conventional, with a big screen and guide lines – nothing arguably the best display, not just for the

around-view and the hitch guide, but also the ability to full screen selected cameras. The Isuzu's is most conventional, with a big screen and guide lines – nothing wrong with that at all!

Round 8 – Economy

Power and torque are great, but fuel use is always a concern as prices continue to creep. With all three utes offering a tank size within five-litres of each other, it got more down to actual fuel use than theoretical tank range. So before we departed from our start base camp, all the trip meters were reset; all three utes travelled the exact same route, over the same distance, with drivers swapping to minimise differences in driving style. With a near-500km test loop, over a combination of motorway, suburban and B-roads, there's also a driving style that is maybe a little less considered towards ultimate fuel economy. And while manufacturer claims are nice, we wanted to see not just our fuel use on test, but the difference between our real-world driving, and the claim. With the lowest claim of 7.9-litres, the



Fuel use varied between all three utes, as expected with a 2.4-litre four-cylinder, 3.0-litre four-cylinder and 3.2-litre five-cylinder, but there were some surprises, particularly with the towing component.

3.0-litre engine in the Isuzu D-Max offered impressive economy, and at 9.8-litres on our test, it used 24 percent more fuel than the claim – again remembering it's more about comparison between these utes than against the claim. Triton used just nine-percent more fuel than its claim, and at 2.4-litres, its small capacity proved itself as the fuel-use champion on our test - just. There's also consideration for the towing result, and while the D-Max used less, we've focussed the majority of the

judging on the unladen figures here. With the largest engine here, it's no real surprise the Mazda used the most fuel. With a factory claim of 10.0l/100km, it was an uphill battle to even compete with the two others, and its 19 percent increase over the claim, combined with its surprisingly efficient towing figures, it's a close third in this test for the BT-50.



FUEL USE (l/100km)	Claim	On Test	Towing	Tank/Range
D-Max	7.9	9.8	13.3	76l/962km
BT-50	10.0	11.9	13.7	80l/800km
Triton	8.6	9.4	14.9	75l/872km

Round 9 – She Said

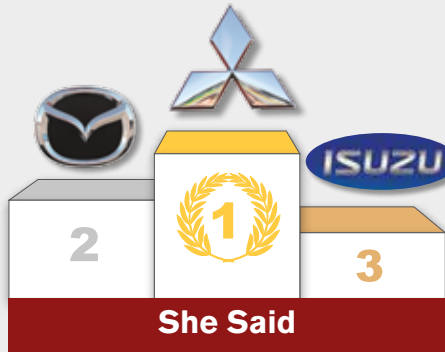
TALKING ABOUT COLOURS IS SUCH A 'chick thing', but it's hard to ignore when the Triton greets you in its golden hue. But looking deeper, it was easy to fall in favour with the Mitsubishi. It's the most 'car-like' of the three, loaded with more mod-cons, and it's easiest to simply get in and drive – made partly easier by the keyless entry and the start button on the right side, so I'm not peering around steering wheels looking for the semi-hidden start button. Couple it with the ventilation system that the kids loved while in the rear seat, plus the dual USB ports in the back, and the smooth way it drives, and it's one of the easiest decisions to make. The ride quality is a bit bouncy for my liking, but I'll live with that for everything else the Triton

that's what She Said



offers, and it gets my choice. The Mazda comes second by default. To me, it's a reasonably good looking ute. The interior's a bit bland and basic, but it's fine, and seems to do everything well. No major complaints, though the price does seem a bit high when compared. I didn't gel with the Isuzu, and it's largely down to it feeling most like a big, noisy truck. For me that overrides it as a part-time family vehicles. I like its looks, but it all feels a bit too plasticky inside, especially the rear seat. I can see why it's popular, but I'm asked to vote on my opinion as a female driver, part-time

ute driver, and the Isuzu's a little too masculine for me. - Arna Evans



The D-Max is not only quick, it's frugal, offering the fastest times and the least fuel used during our test drive and towing challenge.

Isuzu D-Max, Mitsubishi Triton, Mazda BT-50. All three are strong-selling double-cabs in New Zealand, subtle in their differences.



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Round 10 - Ownership

After-sales support, servicing and warranty are all issues that become important once you leave the showroom floor.

The Isuzu offers a three-year/100,000km warranty, plus 24/7 roadside assistance for the term. Or it did until March, when it upped the kilometres to an industry first 'unlimited' kilometre/three-year warranty. At 33,333km per year, that's on the higher side even for a work ute, so it's admirable, if a little narrow in its appeal.

Mazda's 'free' Commercial Care programme includes a three-year/100,000km warranty, plus three years of roadside assistance. It also includes three years of fixed price servicing at \$200 each, including GST, every six months/10,000km. And that is a tough act to beat.

Or is it? And not by the sub-\$50k Mitsubishi Triton? Nope, Mitsubishi has that covered, too, with its Diamond Advantage warranty, which includes a five-year/130,000km warranty, plus a 10-year/160,000km powertrain warranty. There is no roadside support, but with a new vehicle, there's a certain hope and desire that it's never used anyway.

Right top row: Isuzu's rear seat feels more basic, and armrest is clean, with the cup-holders on the floor in a flip-down drawer, and a single USB port.

Right middle row: Triton's rear seat offers comfy seats, a flip-down centre armrest with cup-holders and a handy pocket in the console for phones, right alongside two USB ports.

Right bottom row: Mazda's rear seat offers flip-down armrest with cupholders, and a 12v socket.



We've said at last year's Ute-lympics, but there are no losers in this comparo. It's an all-stars event and each ute firmly deserves its place in the top ute sales chart.



Counterpoint

WHEN IT FIRST ARRIVED, MITSUBISHI'S Triton was the odd one out in a segment dominated by boxy, angular pick-ups. Its styling swooped and curved, and there was a curious line at the rear of the cabin that gave the cockpit exterior a Cinderella's



coach flavour. The styling was too radical for many buyers, and Triton sales never achieved the heights they might have. Once Mazda introduced its new BT-50 with equally polarising/swoopy styling, the two Japanese trucks battled for sixth place.

Things improved for the Triton in 2015 with the new models' toned-down styling and a new potent and smooth 2.4-litre turbodiesel. Canny marketing, aggressive pricing, extra kit at no cost, and sharp advertising boosted sales. And then along came the fully-restyled model which went on sale in numbers this January.

Attractive run-out deals on the outgoing model, the new Triton's more angular, muscular styling, sweetheart introductory

prices and effective TV advertising catapulted the Mitsubishi up to third place.

It steers and handles well, the engine is gutsy, and the new six-speed automatic transmission shifts gears almost imperceptibly. There's very little to dislike – perhaps the diesel rattle from the engine at low revs, or the jolt as the truck comes down off a speed hump, or the somewhat fussy ride over very bumpy roads. Contrast that with a sublime chassis that gives this 4x4 a handling balance and feeling of lightness evocative of a rear-wheel drive vehicle.

The Triton is now very much 21st century, rugged enough for the rough but refined enough for the school run, and the clear winner of our shootout.

To an extent, its win isn't surprising. The D-Max and the BT-50 are at the end of their model cycles, both due for replacement next year by new utes based on a platform developed jointly by Isuzu and Mazda.

I voted the D-Max the narrow runner-up.



There's not much between them, but for me the Isuzu edges out the Mazda on two counts. Its ride quality remains muscular but soaks up rough road surfaces and sudden jolts very effectively. And strong yet creamy torque helps the Isuzu to be the fastest of our trio.

Some of us thought the Mazda's steering a bit heavy but I found it more



than acceptable. The BT-50 also has well-shaped and comfortable seats and, riding as front-seat passenger, there was plenty of lateral support. The Mazda was also the quietest of the trio, and had the typically-stylish interior and dashboard design for which the brand is noted.

It's probably a little friendlier to drive than the Isuzu which requires more effort to get the most from the vehicle. You have to almost monster it to some extent – it won't do the driving for you – but once you take a firm hand the drive is rewarding.

Mike Stock

AD
1/4p

Conclusion

We said this last year, but there are no losers in the Ute-lympics. It's an all-stars style event and individually, all three are very good vehicles befitting of their places in the top 10 NZ ute sales chart. It takes an overly critical eye to separate them, and we've focussed on what's better in comparison, so the consumer can make an informed choice to suit their needs.

But like the real Olympics, after the final medal count is tallied, we have a clear podium for 2019.

In third place is Mazda's BT-50 Limited, a minor surprise given it's based on last year's winner. It's surprising because the BT-50 is a classic case of it being a very, very good ute. Its big engine, comfortable, quiet cabin, combined with suspension that offers both day-to-day comfort, and depth of firmness for doing jobs it was designed for, the Mazda's high price, heavy steering and thirst are aspects that hurt its overall score.



It's a consistently good package, evidenced by it earning the most second-places, but just one round win.

The Isuzu D-Max took a very solid second-place, with three wins. It's easy to see why it sells well, and though a little noisy, is rugged, fastest of the group, tows

best, hauls the most load, rides and handles exceptionally well, it's the most 'masculine' drive of the group, another element which could be both good or bad. Its interior feels a little more basic than the other two, but, like the Mazda, we would be appreciate that others would have ranked the D-Max higher in tests and personal opinion. One request: Isuzu, please add a simple T to the LS badge for the top-spec LS-T model.

So the gold medal, atop the podium, is Mitsubishi's Triton VRX. Remembering this is a facelift, not an all-new model, that's an impressive feat, and for the equipment, engine, power, economy, comfort and technology all underlined by its sharp price, it's simply too good a package to ignore.

Any of these three utes are winners, but in Ute-lympics 2, it's the Mitsubishi Triton VRX that takes the overall win. Let the flags fly and the national anthem begin.

LCU

Thanks to:
Kennards Hire Hamilton
www.kennardshire.co.nz

AD
FPC



FINAL MEDAL COUNT	GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE	TOTAL
MITSUBISHI TRITON	6	3	1	25pts
ISUZU D-MAX	3	3	4	19pts
MAZDA BT-50	1	5	4	17pts

Gold = 3pts, Silver=2pts, Bronze=1pt

TRITON	
Mitsubishi Triton VRX	
Engine	2.4-litre turbo diesel four
Power	135kW/437Nm
Gearbox	Six-speed auto
Economy	8.6l/100km
Weight	1995kg
0-60/100km/h	4.4sec/10.5sec
0-400m	17.2 @ 126km/h
Price	\$49,990
Rating (/5)	★★★★★
Verdict	Great value, best on test despite minor flaws

BT-50	
Mazda BT-50 Limited	
Engine:	3.2-litre turbo diesel five-cyl
Power/torque:	147kW/470Nm
Gearbox:	Six-speed auto
Economy:	10.0l/100km
Weight:	2118kg
0-60/100km/h:	4.3sec/10.9sec
0-400m:	17.4 @ 122km/h
Price:	\$53,995
Rating (/5)	★★★★★
Verdict	Solid and effective, if a little plain & pricey

ISUZU D-MAX	
Isuzu D-Max LS-T	
Engine:	3.0-litre turbo diesel four
Power/torque:	130kW/430Nm
Gearbox:	Six-speed auto
Economy:	7.9l/100km
Weight:	1960kg
0-60/100km/h:	4.0sec/10.4sec
0-400m:	17.1 @ 126km/h
Price:	\$51,730
Rating (/5)	★★★★★
Verdict	Masculine, rugged and impressively good