Whether Hino’s new 300-series range of light-duty trucks is the best in the business remains to be seen. Ultimately, buyers will decide. What can be concluded without any doubt though is that Hino’s new ‘little league’ perfectly reflects the astonishing advances made in Japanese light-duty trucks over the last few years.

**STEVE BROOKS** takes a close look at just one automatic example.

Japanese domination of the light and medium-duty truck markets is no fluke. They dominate because they continue to be the best in the business and more to the point, their trucks today are the best they’ve ever been.

But that said, there was a time when the prospect of road testing a new Japanese light-duty truck had all the appeal of a three inch nail through your best Blundstones. Seriously, they were once that bad, and the decades have not diminished the memory of some severe inadequacies.

Like, it’s not easy to forget – as much as some of us might wish we could – those cramped, noisy, hot cabs with seats as hard as floorboards and obviously designed for bums of far smaller dimension.

Likewise, packs of short leaf springs designed to carry loads far greater than the truck’s rated capacity were unforgiving and on anything other than a super-smooth road surface, delivered a ride almost capable of bashing the braces off your kids’ teeth.

Then there were the engines and gearboxes, the former with all the responsiveness and pulling power of a three-toed sloth, and the latter with ratios so far apart that it was common practice to wring the engine out to ‘flight’ revs in one gear before changing up to the next. Meanwhile, a downshift made too early – that is, without letting revs fall to the point where the engine was about to choke to death – could send the tacho needle into orbit.

And in an era when some minds thought an emission was something done by missionaries, Japanese light trucks weren’t bashful about belching black smoke by the bucketful. To be fair though, back then the Japanese certainly weren’t alone in this department.

Simply put, it’s not exaggerating to state that by today’s standards those early Japanese light-duty trucks were bloody awful things. But despite everything, they lived, and lived and lived. Indeed, if one word defined the reason for Japan’s absolute and still unchallenged ascendancy in Australia’s light truck business (and for that matter, the medium truck business as well) it would be most certainly

**BETTER than ever**
‘durability’. They were as tough as teak and coupled with a price then reflecting a highly attractive and largely under-valued Japanese Yen, they contributed hugely to the demise of once iconic brands such as Bedford and International Harvester.

Thus, with the established competition evicted to oblivion, the Japanese for a long time didn’t need to do much else other than reap the rewards of market domination. In short, glaciers moved faster than Japanese product development.

Fortunately though, competition between Japanese brands steadily intensified as each maker vied for a bigger slice of the slab, with engineering evolution over many years eventually leading to slow, subtle and sometimes almost insignificant improvements. Sure, some new models would exhibit an occasional burst of development bravado but overall, mediocrity ruled. Still, they were better than before and that was something to be grateful for, no matter how marginal the improvement.

Then in what still seems a heartbeat, a few years back evolution turned into revolution with a sudden barrage of bold new initiatives and smart designs.

It’s perhaps appropriate that market leader Isuzu fired the first highly charged salvo in what has quickly become an entirely new age in Japanese truck design. With its new light-duty N-series and medium-duty F-series models, and with a substantially tougher emissions regime as a motivating factor, Isuzu effectively rewrote the book on Japanese light truck development by delivering a swathe of performance, driver, safety and environmental features which surprised everyone, not least the trepidation of times past. In fact, it’s fair to suggest that the 616 Auto didn’t hold quite the trepidation of times past. In fact, it’s fair to suggest that the 616 Auto has the potential to be a particularly popular model for all that the only similarity between Japanese light trucks of yesteryear and those of today is the name badge.

SLICK SHIFTER
While all 45 derivatives in the 300 line-up are undoubtedly important to Hino, it’s perhaps fair to suggest that the 616 Auto has the potential to be a particularly popular model due to its somewhat obvious appeal to rental companies. For starters, it’s a truck available at gross vehicle weights (GVW) of either 4495 kg or 5500 kg, allowing the lighter of the two to be driven on a car licence. Second, the auto option is sure to appeal to the quickly increasing number of car drivers whose skill
Light truck test

or liking for stick-shifts is negligible.

Additionally, safety factors are typically strong with dual SRS airbags, ABS disc brakes, traction control and vehicle stability control heading the list of standard items while on the inside, the 300-series provides a notably improved environment. For instance, wide cab models such as the 616 Auto have a suspension seat and while it’s a basic mechanical affair, considerably less effective than its air-sprung contemporaries, it’s at least a bigger and far better arrangement than the fixed seat of before. Still, given the advances in so many other areas, it’s somewhat surprising that Hino didn’t go all out with an air seat for the new range.

But the seat is just the start and in terms of driver convenience and overall practicality, there’s a lot to commend the new Hino. The dash layout is well designed and includes a digital ‘accumulation’ gauge highlighting the level of contaminants in the diesel particulate filter and more importantly, displaying the system’s self-cleaning (regenerative) ability once particulates have reached a certain level. Indeed, during the five or six hours behind the wheel in this exercise, watching the build-up of contaminants in the diesel particulate filter and the system’s subsequent ability to return the gauge to zero after automatically burning off the accumulated soot was as intriguing as it was impressive.

All-round vision is another strong point and according to Hino product planner Daniel Petrovski, a great deal of design effort and development expense went into the creation of a thin A-pillar to greatly enhance driver vision. Add a deep windscreen along with ample sized and electrically adjustable side and spotter mirrors, the 300-series rates well in the sight stakes. At this point it’s also worth mentioning the turning circle of the 616 Auto is exceptionally tight and rates as another highly favourable feature of the new range.

However, it’s perhaps a sign of the times that when it came to explaining the various features of the test truck, Petrovski spent most time demonstrating the extraordinary capabilities of the standard multimedia system. Yet even though he was dealing with a dinosaur in the understanding of these hi-tech information and entertainment systems, even I could comprehend and be amazed at their immense potential to improve a driver’s daily routine. The optional inclusion of up to three reversing cameras is just one example but as Daniel Petrovski explained, there are many elements to be considered.

“THE CUSTOMER BENEFITS FROM THE INTRODUCTION OF MULTIMEDIA SYSTEMS ARE MANY.”

“...”

Punching the 300-series is a new 4.0 litre common-rail diesel with good standards of response and fuel economy. With emissions driving technology, engines have come a long way in this class of vehicle.
Little has been heard of the eight-wheeler version of Hino’s heavy-duty 700-series since the company first outlined plans for its introduction mid-way through last year. However, as this photo snapped in the backyard of Hino’s Sydney headquarters shows, the eight-legger is now here and ready to do business. In fact, our enquiries reveal that despite the lack of a loadsharing twin-steer suspension, interest is increasing and several have already been sold. Meanwhile, we also understand an eight-wheeler version of Hino’s top-weight 500-series model is under local development for a specialist application. At this stage though, it’s unknown if it will become broadly available.

More Legs

May the revolution continue!