



Hold 'em or fold 'em

When buying a used truck, owner-operators need to know when to go for it – and when to walk away

By Jami Jones
senior editor

Fever feel like buying a used truck is like a high-stakes game of poker?

You're holding your cards close, eyeing some character across the table. You think you have the winning hand. But you're just not sure. Is that truck worth all the money you're going to have to lay out on the table for it?

You nonchalantly look over to your adversary, trying to determine if it's all a bluff. Do you call the bet and buy the truck, or fold 'em and walk away?

Squared off, steely-eyed stare matched by steely-eyed stare, you know you've got to make a decision.

Buying used has always been a tough proposition. The knowledgeable, nerves-of-steel buyers typically come out on top and don't get stuck with a lemon that leaves its tranny somewhere on I-80.

The weak – the quick to act – have oftentimes been sentenced to a lot of down time and a lot of repair bills.

No matter how good you've been at

buying used trucks in the past, you'd better brush up on your game – in 2006, the stakes are going up.

The game

Not unlike the phenomenal growth in popularity of Texas Hold 'Em, the used truck buying game is a booming business. And it will continue to be that way, at the very least, through 2006, fueled by the looming 2007 emission standards.

Given the early problems with the 10/02-compliant engines, it's only natural to assume that many new truck buyers will want to avoid the uncertainty – either real or perceived – of the '07 engine performance and buy 2006 model year trucks and engines.

Truckmakers can make only so many trucks without adding plant capacity and being stuck with it when sales drop back to normal levels. So, logically speaking, there will be only so many new trucks available.

If 2002 taught the industry anything, it's that if large fleets opt against the pre-buy frenzy, they most certainly will hang on to the newer used trucks in their fleets rather than trading them.

That isn't speculation; it's a lesson learned in 2002.

Bear Stearns, a banking, trading and brokerage firm, reported in mid-2002 leading up to the 10/02-emission standard that used-truck prices were firming. The company credited then-increasing demand for used trucks and fewer new truck orders. With new 10/02-emissions engines still months away from being tried and tested, the company said used-truck prices should continue to firm up for some time.

A Bear Stearns analysis later in 2002 pointed to an anticipated "drop off in orders and builds after the change in emissions policy based on increased uncertainty and costs related to the new engines. ... We expect both large and small truck fleets to increasingly run existing trucks longer, as well as to buy and hold on to late model used trucks."

Eddie Walker, president of the Used Truck Association, said that the used-truck segment of the industry is expecting a good 2006 – in terms of sales – and he expects the trend to continue well into 2007.

Walker said there more than likely will be a shortage of used trucks, probably for the rest of the year. However, even though there will be a shortage, Walker said that he sees better quality used trucks now than he did in the past and credits smart owner-operators who know the importance of good maintenance.

"Owner-operators are maintaining their trucks 80 to 90 percent better than they did five, 10 years ago," Walker said. "The buyers are better educated; they know the importance of maintenance for the overall good of their truck."

Walker said that because of the overall improvement in maintenance, it is very possible to have a 1-million-mile engine.

Owner-operators in the market for a truck come in now knowing what they want, Walker said.

"We've got buyers who insist on aerodynamics, good fuel mileage ... they know what they want. These buyers today want to know everything about these trucks. They're asking all the right questions."

An OOIDA member profile survey conducted in 2004 revealed that 52 percent of the respondents bought used trucks compared with 48 percent who bought new.

With the rising fuel costs – along with the already high cost of operating expenses – and fewer late model used trucks being traded in, owner-operators buying in 2006 will have to be ready to square off against some of the toughest competitors, ready to pay more to play. And more than anything, walk away from a bad hand.

The cards

Finding a good quality used truck takes a lot more than rolling onto the lot and finding a pretty, clean truck. It's time to dust off your overalls, crawl all over every inch of it and be ready to invest a little bit of money for some tests that can save you some big repair bills

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Depending on whom you ask, there's plenty to look for when buying a used truck. The following list was compiled from advice from Jerry Bartley of OOIDA's Member Assistance Department, Eddie Walker of the Used Truck Association and Rick Clark of National Truck Protection.

Outside the truck

- Look for visible fiberglass repair or damage – could indicate a wrecked truck
- Inspect the body and chrome for dents, rust, etc.
- Check all braces and straps
- Check for loose bolts – anywhere
- Check the frame thoroughly for cracks, improper welds and defects
- See if the frame was improperly stretched, repaired, welded
- The windows should be free from cracks
- Doors shut tight and line up
- Identify corrosion on the chassis, under the battery box, corroded wires, brakes and connections
- Brake linings – make sure there's 50 percent visible lining
- Oil leaks
- Grease build-up
- Spliced wires
- Tires
 - Look for irregular wear, bulges, cuts
 - Look for mismatched brands
 - Look for recaps and original tread mismatches
 - Minimum half tread

Engine

- Look at fan belts for wear and cracks
- Check for corrosion of bolts, the frame, etc.
- Make sure the radiator is free from cracks, fatigue and corrosion
- Check hoses for signs of fatigue
- Look for grease build-up
- Look the engine over, top to bottom for signs of oil leaks
- See if there are any spliced wires
- Remove the oil dipstick and check the oil level and viscosity
- Remove the oil filler cap and look for water contamination
- Check coolant level
- Check coolant condition for fuel and oil contamination
- Check the intake system for cracks and holes bypassing the air filter
- Check the exhaust system for cracks and broken studs
- Remove the intake hose nearest the turbocharger

✓ Checklist

- Check the turbocharger for oil, a broken shaft, and fins hitting the housing (get a mechanic to pull it out and do this for you)
- Have the batteries checked for a charge

Interior

- Is it clean, well-kept
- How does the seat feel, is it worn out
- Carpet wear
- See if all the interior lights work
- Does the steering wheel, seat adjust to fit you
- Check cabinet doors
- Look for spliced wires under the dash
- Check the extras – fridge, stereo, etc.
- Are the seat belts, clean, operational and free of snags, rips and rubs?

Test drive

See if you can hook it up to a load for a “real world” test drive.

- Run the engine, listen for noise and check for visible smoke
- Feel for any pull indicating alignment problems
- Watch for loss of power, surges, irregularities
- Shift through all the gears, numerous times – up and down
- Apply several different braking scenarios – find a safe place to do this
- Is there any play in the steering
- Run the heat and air (in the winter, get the AC checked by a technician)
- Check all lights, lighting
- Check all gauges
- Operate all toggles
- Watch the oil pressure; coolant temp and pressure; fuel pressure and rail pressure
- Look for oil and coolant leaks upon return

Diagnostics, records

- Ask and get maintenance records (check with OEM dealer too)
- Ask for and get engine history from OEM (might see frequent problems, repairs)
- Get an ECM printout
 - Engine serial number – make sure number on engine matches the report
 - Average fuel mileage
 - Average speed driven
 - Total miles
 - Rated horsepower
 - Rated RPM
 - Logged fault codes
 - Hook it up to a dynamometer
 - Check coolant system compression – this is a big one
 - Check blow-by and make sure it's acceptable to the engine OEM ratings
 - Listen for rattles, misses and watch the smoke

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on down the road.

“I’m a firm believer in: ‘Don’t buy the first truck you like,’ ” said Jerry Bartley of OOIDA’s Member Assistance Department. “It can mean the difference between buying one that you like and one that does the job. Pretty doesn’t get you down the road.”

Bartley said you’ve got to get down and dirty when looking over a used truck.

“Put on your overalls and grab a good flashlight,” he said. “You’ve got to get underneath it and give it a good, hard look.”

Even if you’re not mechanically inclined, Bartley said there are plenty of common-sense things any potential used-truck buyer can look for.

Check the belts and hoses. Especially with any engine meeting the 10/02 standard, underhood heat can take a real toll on the rubber.

“When you’re underneath, look for grease buildup, oil leaks, spliced wires,” Bartley said. “That can tell you a lot about the care of the truck.”

Another very simple, common-sense thing to look at is the carpet. How clean is it?

“If they took enough time to clean the carpet, they probably took good care of the engine,” he said.

The pocket cam

Consider this peeking at your opponent’s hand – kind of like when you get to see what everyone is holding in the finals of the World Poker Tour. Is it pocket aces, or a hand not even worth the energy to fold?

While taking a look at the surface of a truck can tell you bits and pieces about its previous life, it certainly won’t tell the

entire story.

A lot of times, problems can arise from what you don’t see. That’s where “insider” information from an electronic control module – ECM – report and a dynamometer test can come in handy.

An ECM report can tell you a lot about the truck. It will tell you the actual miles on the engine, average fuel mileage and average speed driven, among other things, Bartley explained.

“Basically, you’re going to know how it was driven, what kind of abuse it suffered,” Bartley said. “Face it, the harder it was driven, the more wear and tear it will have. That’s just the facts. Hitting a bump at 80 is going to be a lot harder on the truck than hitting it at 60.”

When you’re looking over the ECM report, make sure the information matches the serial number on the engine. Call the engine manufacturer, and see what kind of history the company has on the engine from repairs and such.

“Two or three days investigating the truck and engine is time well spent,” Bartley said.

Taking your prospective purchase to an independent shop for a dynamometer test is cheap compared with what you’re about to spend on the truck.

“A hundred now is better than thousands later because of breakdown,” Bartley said.

Walker explained in the UTA’s monthly newsletter why the dynamometer test can be invaluable.

Basically, the dynamometer simulates a load that the tractor would be pulling. It gives you actual workload without moving the vehicle.

Walker said there are a few tests you want run and reported back to you. First is engine performance – which is rated horsepower compared with wheel horsepower or horsepower to the ground. The wheel horsepower should be no less than 80 percent of rated horsepower, according to Walker.

“While the tractor is running on the dynamometer, a blow-by gauge and compression (bottle test) testing tool is attached to the vehicle,” he said in the newsletter. “Blow-by is a way to measure the amount of wear internally in the engine – particularly the piston rings, valves and valve guides. Sometimes a bad turbocharger and/or air compressor will give you high blow-by readings as well.”

The coolant compression test is really good and not used that much, according to Walker.

“There should be zero bubbles in the coolant system when the engine is being operated. If bubbles are found in the coolant system while under load, there’s a problem.” he wrote.

Walker said the most common problem is a head gasket failure. Other problems that might cause the bubbles in the system are injector coppers being pitted or cracked, air compressor and heater core – all pretty costly repairs.

If you can hang around while the dynamometer is being run, look for any vibrations, noises, misses and color of exhaust smoke.

Up the ante

It takes two to play in the used truck buying game – you and the dealer or person selling the truck.

Bartley said there is no reason not to outline your terms of purchase instead of just signing their deal.

“If the truck has mismatched tires, tell them you want new tires,” he said. “If the batteries test low, ask for new batteries.”

Bartley said anything that is sub-par on the truck should be brought to the attention of the salesperson.

“There is money to play with when negotiating the deal,” he said. “I’ve been able to get new seats, new tires, new mattresses, new batteries – all kinds of stuff without ever raising the asking price. It can be done.”

Some of the easiest things to get tacked on are service-related tasks such as alignments, tightening up a loose fifth wheel, etc. Whatever it is, Bartley said it never hurts to ask.

“No matter what you have agreed to – getting maintenance records, getting an alignment, whatever – do not, do not sign the papers until the job is done. Once you sign on the dotted line, the deal is done, and you could face an uphill battle getting what you need,” Bartley said. **LL**

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