

FORD BA FALCON FUTURA – HOLDEN VY COMMODORE ACCLAIM TOYOTA CAMRY ATEVA – MITSUBISHI MAGNA ADVANCE



The family car segment is one of the most fiercely contested of all, and in recent times it's been Holden leading the charge with its highly successful VT/VX Commodore range.

However, at least part of the Commodore's domination could be attributed to a lukewarm market response to the controversially styled AU Falcon. The AU failed to capture the hearts and minds of the Australian family car buyer, but now Ford has hit back with the extensively re-engineered and vastly improved BA Falcon.

Not only has Ford successfully addressed the styling issues with new exterior sheetmetal and a heavily revised interior, it has equipped the BA Falcon with new engines, a new manual shift function for the automatic transmission, bigger brakes, improved steering and a new 'Control Blade' independent rear suspension. Noise and harshness levels are significantly reduced and there's more standard equipment.

Holden's VY Commodore is relying on an exterior facelift, a new dash and instrument layout, plus reduced noise and harshness levels, enhanced safety, and steering and handling improvements, to maintain its position in the sales race. Holden has a new V6 engine coming, but not until after October 2003.

Meanwhile over at Toyota, the Camry is pretty much a brand new model. Built on Toyota's modular platform, the new Camry has a body and chassis that's unique for Australia, with claims of superior strength and torsional rigidity to the overseas models. Toyota has put a lot of development work into the suspension to provide the car with class-leading ride and handling qualities. The V6 engine carries over from before, but the 2.4 litre 'four' is a brand new unit. The new Camry is roomier and better equipped.

Toyota's other entry in the family car segment is the Avalon. It's a good car that's comfortable, well equipped and very well finished, but it hasn't cut it in the sales chase with the other locals.

Mitsubishi is between major model changes with the Magna, but has endeavoured to maintain the car's appeal by recently

delivering a facelifted TJ Series II model. One significant change is the adoption of sequential shift control for the automatic in Executive and Advance models. Previously, it was only fitted to the KJ Verada. Come January, Magna buyers will have the option of an all-wheel drive model.

In keeping with the preferred options of typical family or large car buyers, the models chosen for this comparison are the better-equipped and slightly more individual models, one step up from the entry level. For Holden this is the Commodore Acclaim, Ford has the Falcon Futura, Mitsubishi the Magna Advance and Toyota the Camry V6 Ateva.

BEHIND THE WHEEL:

Most pleasing is the substantial rework of the Falcon cockpit, the cleanliness of design and the quality and feel of the controls. For the first time in ages the Ford cabin has a sharp, uplifting and quality feel to it. The large, comfortable and well-shaped seats are now complemented by increased adjustability. In addition to regular adjustments, there's seat height control, steering reach as well as tilt, plus a first in pedal height adjustment (optional on most models).

Holden has sharpened the Commodore's already pleasing cabin with an effective restyle in VY rather than a dramatic upgrade. Unfortunately this has also led to some minor annoyances such as hard-to-read heater dials and some fiddly switchgear. Nevertheless, the seat shaping and support, including electric height and tilt, and the general layout and operation of driving controls remain particularly comfortable and familiar.

Magna's cabin is now the oldest of the group and starting to show its age in terms of dated trim and surface materials. The seats are comfortable but clearly narrower and less supportive than the newer opposition. You also start to miss the subtleties of things like steering wheel reach control.

The new Camry has a bright, clear, cleanly designed cabin with a clinical, but perhaps slightly impersonal presentation. While the layout is tidy and effective, this cannot be said

for some of the minor controls, which lack the precision of Falcon. While the seats initially appear well shaped, the bolstering is soft and leaves some questions over long-term support. The Camry also lacks steering reach control and we were more aware of general road noise intrusion such as when driving on gravel roads, than in the other three cars.

PERFORMANCE:

Falcon has made the most significant and demonstrable changes, though in this instance it is extending an existing advantage. Ford's 4.0 litre in-line 'six' now sports twin overhead camshafts and 24 valves, and displays a remarkable smoothness and flexibility that transcends its forebear. Most surprising is the performance strength and refinement across the entire rev range, which now makes the Commodore V6 seem coarse and gruff. Adding to the Ford's performance edge is its excellent touch-shift automatic, which is very smooth and quick to respond. The Falcon is easily the best all-round performer and it also retains its class-leading 2,300kg towing capacity.

Commodore's cast iron OHV V6 remains a strong and reliable performer. While it is comfortable in normal day-to-day duties and highway cruising, it becomes quite raucous and coarse sounding when worked hard. Likewise an auto that was considered amongst the best a couple of years ago now lacks the clean shift points and snappy precision of the newer Falcon or Camry transmissions.

While lacking the outright performance of the larger capacity cars, Toyota's new 3.0 litre V6 Camry is no slouch (thanks in part to its lighter kerb mass) and the engine still rates highly for its mechanical precision and refinement. Toyota's automatic transmission is also a mechanical work of art, remaining smooth and precise no matter how the vehicle is driven.

Mitsubishi's strong 3.5 litre V6 is only just shy of the Commodore's power and torque figures and although this is not a new engine, it remains highly competitive in both performance and refinement. All Magnas now benefit from the four-speed "tiptronic" style

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auto, previously only available in Veradas.

FUEL CONSUMPTION:

In the BA Falcon, more power and more weight can only add up to one thing - higher fuel consumption. As in the Commodore, good fuel economy can be achieved on the open road, where the engine is barely ticking over, but in general use the Falcon is clearly the thirstiest of the group. The Falcon has the smallest fuel tank capacity of the group, thus limiting its range.

Next thirstiest is Commodore, yet there is less variation between easy to hard driving. The 3.5 litre Magna rated second best on economy, while the Camry benefited from having a smaller capacity (3.0 litre) engine to be the most economical of the four.

RIDE AND HANDLING:

Both the Falcon and the Camry have received a significant rework of their ride and handling set-ups, effectively bringing them back into the competition rather than leaping ahead. That said, the Falcon now has the best overall package with a supple well-controlled



ride on virtually any surface and with excellent cornering grip, and a more precise and accurate feel through the steering.

The gap to the Commodore is marginal; it rides slightly firmer than the Falcon and is more likely to skip on bumps. Commodore also has slightly heavier steering, yet overall it continues to provide very good on-road dynamics.

The surprise package for control and accuracy under extreme road conditions is the Camry, which will maintain its composure and response to driver input even when subjected to the worst dirt road corrugations. Generally, the front wheel drive Camry is the most nimble around town and the easiest vehicle of the group to handle.

Magna has been applauded for its ride quality over recent years and while that continues, it lacks the control now demonstrated by Falcon. The Magna is well insulated from road shock and has a light and responsive feel, but tends to be slightly spongy in the corners.

SPACE AND COMFORT:

Amongst this group of cars, there are a number of subtle differences in their interior designs, their comfort levels, and their



passenger and luggage space.

Up front, it's the Commodore slightly ahead of the Falcon, sharing the honours of most legroom, both clearly better than Magna or Camry. Magna has a significant advantage in front headroom as a result of a low seating position, but there is little separating the other three.

Rear seat occupants must contend with a large transmission tunnel hump in the floor of the rear drive Commodore and Falcon, yet these cars still provide the best rear seating for three adults because they have the best shoulder space. Magna remains narrowest overall and the tightest in rear seat width. Camry offers surprisingly good rear seat space, particularly in leg and headroom, but while the seat width is comparable to Commodore and Falcon, it is clearly tighter across the shoulders.

All four cars provide good boot space with minimal irregularities in shape. Both front wheel drive cars (Camry and Magna) are able to accommodate slightly deeper boots, with Magna arguably being best overall. All bar the Falcon, which offers a useful 60/40 split fold rear seat, have a porthole-only extension for the boot.

SUMMARY:

Whilst not suggesting that Holden had become complacent after dominating the family car segment for so long, the incentive to try harder is no doubt stronger when you're coming from behind. That certainly seems to be what's happened in the long-running and on-going Ford v Holden battle.

Virtually facing a make-or-break situation, Ford delved deep and made the big spend to turn its mediocre AU Falcon into a worthy competitor for the VY Commodore. The extensive re-engineering and re-vitalization of the Falcon that's evident in the new BA model was essential in order to close the gap to Commodore. But the fact that the Falcon has surpassed the Commodore in many areas is clear testament to the determination and dedication of all involved.

Toyota's new Camry V6 is the other great improver, notable for its mechanical and



suspension refinement rather than its attractive styling. The Camry remains an excellent choice for buyers who don't need, or want, a car as big or as powerful as a Falcon or a Commodore.

In this hotly contested category, Magna soldiers on as a good value package that



continues to score well across most areas, however on some aspects it's starting to show its age.

COSTS:	VY Commodore Acclaim	BA Falcon Futura	Camry Ateva V6	Magna Advance
List price	\$ 37,510	\$ 37,750	\$ 35,990	\$ 36,840
On road costs	\$ 2,989	\$ 2,997	\$ 2,925	\$ 2,965
Model price range	\$ 30,880 to 49,320	\$ 33,640 to 49,980	\$30,990 to \$48,990	\$31,390 to 40,680
Warranty	3 years/100,000 km	3 years/100,000 km	3 years/100,000 km	3 years/100,000 km
Service intervals	15,000 km	15,000 km	15,000 km	15,000 km

FEATURES:	Commodore Acclaim	Falcon Futura	Camry Ateva V6	Magna Advance
Automatic transmission	Std	Std	Std	Std
Air conditioning	Std	Std	Std	Std
Central locking	Std / remote	Std / remote	Std / remote	Std / remote
Electric windows	Std	Std	Std	Std
Safety airbag				
Drive/ Passenger/ Side	Std / Std / Std	Std / Std / \$500	Std / Std / Std	Std / Std / N/a.
Antilock Braking System	Std	Std	Std	Std
Security system	Immobiliser / Alarm	Immobiliser / Alarm	Immobiliser / Alarm	Immobiliser / Alarm
Cruise control	Std	Std	Std	Std
CD player	Std / single	Std / single	Std / six	Std / single

SPECIFICATIONS:	Commodore Acclaim	BA Falcon Futura	Camry Ateva V6	Magna Advance
Engine capacity	3.8 litre	4.0 litre	3.0 litre	3.5 litre
Engine type	V6	In line six	V6	V6
Maximum power	152 kW @ 5,200 rpm	182 kW @ 5,000 rpm	141 kW @ 5,200 rpm	155 kW @ 5,000 rpm
Maximum torque	305 Nm @ 3,600 rpm	380 Nm @ 3,250 rpm	279 Nm @ 4,400 rpm	316 Nm @ 4,000 rpm
Transmission / drive	4 speed auto / rear	4 speed auto / rear	4 speed auto / front	4 speed auto / front
Kerb mass	1,558 kg	1,692 kg	1505 kg	1491 kg

PERFORMANCE:		Commodore Acclaim	Falcon Futura	Camry Ateva V6	Magna Advance
Acceleration (in Drive)	0-60 km/h	4.1 seconds	4.1 seconds	4.3 seconds	n/a seconds
	0-80 km/h	6.3 seconds	5.9 seconds	6.8 seconds	6.6 seconds
	0-100 km/h	9.2 seconds	8.4 seconds	9.6 seconds	9.4 seconds
	0-400 metres	16.6 seconds	16.1 seconds	17.0 seconds	16.8 seconds
	50-80 km/h	4.2 seconds	3.0 seconds	4.1 seconds	4.8 seconds
	60-100 km/h	5.8 seconds	5.0 seconds	5.8 seconds	6.1 seconds
Fuel consumption	Overall	12.3 litres/100 km	12.9 litres/100 km	11.5 litres/100 km	11.8 litres/100 km
	Variation	10.0-13.0 l/100 km	9.6-13.9 l/100 km	9.6-12.5 l/100 km	10.2-12.3 l/100 km
Fuel tank capacity		75 litres	68 litres	70 litres	71 litres
Braking distance from 80 km/h		28.1 metres	28.0 metres	28.4 metres	29.0 metres
Maximum braked trailer mass		2100 kg	2300 kg	1600 kg	1500 kg

DIMENSIONS:	Commodore Acclaim	Falcon Futura	Camry Ateva V6	Magna Advance
Length	4891 mm	4917 mm	4805 mm	4808 mm
Width (inc. mirrors)	2040 mm	2130 mm	2005 mm	1990 mm
Height	1450 mm	1444 mm	1490 mm	1435 mm
Wheelbase	2788 mm	2829 mm	2720 mm	2722 mm
Tyres	205/65 R15	215/60 R16	205/65 R15	205/65 R15
Turning circle	11.0 metres	11.0 metres	11.6 metres	11.2 metres

Retail Parts Prices as at October 2002

ITEM	Commodore Acclaim	Falcon Futura	Camry Ateva V6	Magna Advance
Alternator belt	\$ 47.30	\$ 42.57	\$ 37.95	\$ 23.10
Air filter	\$ 19.36	\$ 29.92	\$ 26.13	\$ 43.78
Fuel filter	\$ 15.84	\$ 34.50	\$ 62.15	\$ 29.92
Front brake pads	\$ 127.60	\$ 178.94	\$ 83.60	\$ 104.50
Front brake rotors (pair)	\$ 148.50	\$ 183.92	\$ 231.00	\$ 356.40
Radiator hoses (pair)	\$ 25.30	\$ 77.55	\$ 35.75	\$ 32.12
Radiator	\$ 324.50	\$ 313.50	\$ 286.00	\$ 501.60
Rear exhaust muffler	\$ 182.60	\$ 233.20	\$ 193.60	\$ 298.10
Head light assembly	\$ 205.70	\$ 214.50	\$ 220.00	\$ 162.80
Tail light assembly	\$ 141.90	\$ 108.90	\$ 154.00	\$ 264.00
Windscreen	\$ 247.50	\$ 287.10	\$ 242.00	\$ 272.80
Original wheel	<u>\$ 224.40</u>	<u>\$ 88.22</u>	<u>\$ 224.40</u>	<u>\$ 78.10</u>
TOTAL	\$ 1,710.50	\$ 1,792.82	\$ 1,796.58	\$ 2,167.22

Vehicles supplied by:	Holden Limited	Ford Motor Company	Toyota Motor Corporation	Mitsubishi Motors
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