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Sweet new Accord does Honda proud

Roomy, zippy sedan has some nice extras

Test Drive



What stands out

- ▶ **Bigger.** A few inches here and there, and now it's full size, not midsize.
- ▶ **Quicker.** More power equals more fun and more safety when passing and merging.
- ▶ **Crisper.** Stiffer suspension on EX is tight-corner capable.

By James R Healey
USA TODAY

BOSTON — Honda has stretched its mainstay Accord sedan enough that the redesigned 2008 model moves up, barely, to full size from midsize.

It's the biggest Honda car, and the automaker hopes it now will compete against the full-size Toyota Avalon as well as the midsize Toyota Camry.

The '08 Accord, on sale Sept. 12, is roughly an inch wider, an inch taller and 3 inches longer than before.

"As our customers grew up, Accord grew with them," and the latest move is "in the right direction" to keep up with buyer

preferences, says Dan Bonawitz, vice president of corporate planning and logistics for American Honda.

Also of note:

- ▶ The optional V-6 engine has a cylinder-cutoff feature designed to run on three cylinders, four, or all six. Previously, it was a choice between three and six.

There hasn't been a three-mode cylinder deactivation system since the 1981 Cadillac V-8-6-4, which proved unreliable and was discontinued after a year.

Honda says there's no chance of that.

Turns out the previous Honda V-6-3 wasn't spending much time in three-cylinder mode, but tests show it will spend a lot of time running as a V-4, up to about 70 mph, time that it previously would have been back into full V-6 mode.

Honda figures that the new version of VCM, or variable cylinder management,

boosts fuel economy one mile per gallon in town, three on the highway vs. the same engine without VCM.

- ▶ The optional 190-horsepower four-cylinder gets the same fuel economy as the 177-hp base engine in the low-end LX version of the Accord.

Why, then, would Honda bother with the base engine? Cheaper. It doesn't have all the variable-valve timing hardware, which helps lower the cost and price of the LX Accord.

Most important, though, is that Honda did a sweet job on the overhaul. The combination of pleasant driving, practicality and refinement probably is unmatched among mainstream sedans.

Seats in the preproduction test cars gave pause, though, generally too stiff. Honda says that's been changed and production models should feel better.

Unless you're a complete power junkie,

don't bother with the V-6. The 2.4-liter, 190-hp four is a sweetheart.

It is powerful enough to be fun and to avoid anxious moments pulling into fast-moving traffic or the passing lane. It has sufficient low-end power to burble around town without a hiccup. The automatic transmission shifts superbly under hard acceleration and almost as quickly and smoothly on hard-throttle downshifts, a uniformity of polished execution beyond the transmission-tuning skills of some automakers.

The 190-hp engine, standard in the EX model, comes with a stiffer suspension than the LX, which has the 177-hp version of the 2.4-liter engine. EX feels solid, not stiff, and it handles bumps and corners as if it were specifically tuned for each one, rather than having a general tuning engineers hope will cope.

If you step up to the V-6 model, you'll get blazing engine performance but rougher downshifting than in the four-cylinder cars. Also, a sensitive driver can feel the V-6 go through its multicylinder transitions.

A variety of preproduction test cars were driven on realistic routes around here that mixed traffic, low-speed burbs, higher-speed rural roads and a little freeway. Some observations:

► **Roomy.** The extra size isn't wasted. Back seat riders benefit most, getting, Honda says, an inch or more extra leg and knee room. There's enough back there to be comfortable, even when front seats are far back.

► **Refined.** The 177-hp base engine is a tad coarse when spurred, but mainly the drivetrains drive, rather than calling attention to themselves. Suspensions on all models were clunk- and thump-free. They simply dealt with road irregularities with casual competence, whether the challenge was a gravel shoulder, a hole in the asphalt, uneven paving or rough surfaces.

► **Smart.** Uncommon attention to details ensures Accord is not just a good family sedan. Examples:

Filters on the liquid-crystal display (LCD) readouts make them — finally — legible rather than invisible to people who wear polarized sunglasses. Cut glare, too.

Slender windshield pillars give the driver a better, safer vista, even as rivals seem to be making their pillars fatter and more visually intrusive. Honda says it's made the skinny pillars at least as strong as wider ones.

Two-tier cubby in the cabinet between the console and dashboard is well-designed

2008 Honda Accord

► **What is it?** Redesign of Honda's best-selling vehicle. Four-door, front-wheel-drive, five-passenger sedan. Longer, wider than the previous Accord, it now squeaks into the full-size category.

► **How soon?** Sedan goes on sale Sept. 12. A coupe model goes on sale Sept. 20.

► **How much?** \$20,000 to \$30,000; about the same as the previous model, though the new one has more room, more power, more features, Honda says. Exact prices to be announced closer to on-sale dates.

► **What's the drivetrain?** LX: 2.4-liter four-cylinder rated 177 horsepower at 6,500 rpm, 161 pounds-feet of torque at 4,300 rpm.

EX: 2.4-liter four-cylinder rated 190 hp at 7,000 rpm, 162 lbs.-ft. at 4,400.

EX V-6: 3.5-liter V-6 rated 268 hp at 6,000 rpm, 248 lbs.-ft. at 5,000.

Five-speed manual transmission standard with four-cylinder engines, not available with V-6. Five-speed automatic transmission

optional with four-cylinders, standard on V-6. Traction control is standard.

► **What's the safety gear?** Expected bags, belts, plus side-impact bags for front occupants, side-curtain bags for front and rear, anti-lock brakes, stability control.

► **What's the rest?** Standard features include climate control; power steering, brakes, windows, locks, mirrors; AM/FM/CD/MP3-compatible stereo with MP3 input jack; remote-control locks and windows; cruise control. Additional features and options: www.honda.com.

► **How thirsty?** Four-cylinder engines with manual transmission are rated 22 miles per gallon town, 31 on the highway, 25 in combined driving; with automatic transmission, 21/31/24. V-6 is rated 19/29/22 mpg.

► **Overall:** Extraordinarily pleasing practicality.

► **See Test Drive at cars.usatoday.com for additional specifications and details.**



Honda

to hold phones or other items that otherwise would occupy the cup holder. Many automakers waste that space or arrange it poorly. Seems trivial but makes quite a difference in how pleasant a car is to use in everyday life.

On the other hand, Honda is still kind of backward about certain features. No back-up camera at any price, nor automatic on-off headlights.

To get a simple trip computer to track your fuel economy or tell you how many miles you have to find a fuel station before you run dry, well, you have to get the

pricey navigation system in the pricey EX-L (the EX model with leather upholstery).

Want XM satellite radio? Likewise get the EX-L.

Sometimes car-company decisions make you want to scream.

But if you accept that the marketplace is the final judge of an automaker's wisdom, you have had to concede over the years that Honda is among the gifted-and-talented group.

The latest Accord feels so good to drive and generally is so nicely furnished that Honda's standing is in no jeopardy.