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By MALCOLM GUNN
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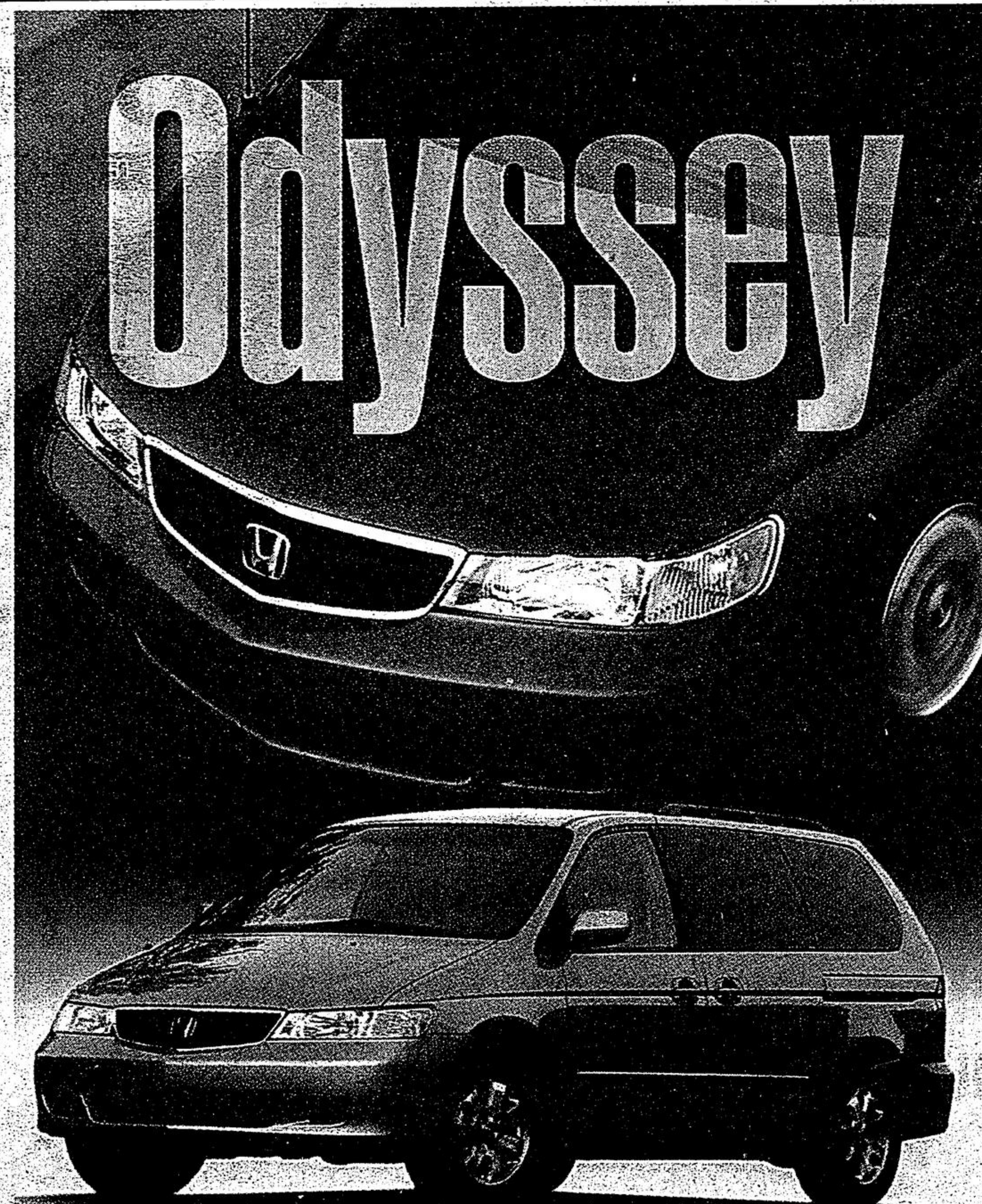
When Honda introduced its new-and-improved Odyssey for 1999, minivan shoppers were more than pleasantly surprised. Now, the '02 version is ready to knock their collective socks off.

The key to Honda's success in any segment of the vehicle marketplace has been its precise understanding of customer needs. Then, it dials in a league-leading degree of refinement. Also, the company has demonstrated that it is not averse to taking risks. Nowhere has this been more apparent than its full-scale assault on the still-important minivan category.

The original Odyssey (1995-'98) kept Honda in the game, although ultimately proved a bit too compact for North American tastes. It also lacked some mandatory features offered by its competitors, such as available V6 power, plus the ease and convenience of sliding rear doors. In other words, the initial Odyssey was a nice effort, but not quite an out-of-the-park homer.

After that four-year run, Honda emerged from the bigger-is-better school of minivan design in 1999 with an Odyssey that seemed to address most of the first generation's shortcomings. Two sliding rear doors became standard, as well as a 210-horsepower 3.5-litre SOHC V6 engine. All of this goodness came on a platform that competed head-on for size with the Dodge Grand Caravan, Ford Windstar, plus GM's assortment of extended-length haulers.

For 2002, the Odyssey lays claim to the title of Undisputed Horsepower Champion. Although last year's 3.5-litre powerplant has been retained, Honda engineers revamped a number of its key components, including intake, exhaust, fuel injection and variable valve timing (VTEC) systems.



They also increased the compression ratio to 10:1 from last year's 9.4:1 while at the same time weaning the engine off premium fuel (it now consumes regular).

The result of these collective improvements is that the Odyssey's powerplant produces 240 horsepower and 242 lb.-ft. of torque, a gain of 30 and 13, respectively, compared to the 2001 model.

However, Honda didn't stop there with its Odyssey drivetrain improvements. The upgraded V6 is now mated to a five-speed automatic transmission instead of the previous four-speed unit. Currently, only Kia's new Sedona minivan matches the Odyssey in this area, but you can bet that the rest of the pack won't be far behind.

Other changes to the Odyssey include a retuned suspension to allow a better ride on rough surfaces, more supportive front seats (with optional lumbar support) and a thicker steering wheel. A total of eight bag hooks have been thoughtfully installed along the back of the rear-seat cushion to keep your groceries from turning into a smashed, gooey mess.

Finally, the Odyssey receives a more distinctive grille and rear tail-lamps, as well as newly-designed wheels.

In the options department, rear-seat passengers can now be entertained with a factory-installed DVD entertainment system that employs a flip-down seven-inch LCD screen. There also a number of jacks included with this handy accessory, allowing camcorders and game consoles to be played through the unit. The DVD system does require the leather seat option, but it's a small price to pay for keeping the small fry amused, as well as your nerves intact, during those marathon 'Are-we-there-yet?' excursions.

Otherwise, Honda continues to provide an exemplary level of standard equipment in each and every Odyssey. Base LX minivans arrive with more than a modicum of items, such as front and rear air conditioning, power windows, tilt steering, cruise control, power mirrors and door locks, side airbags for front passengers and AM/FM/cassette stereo. Spring for the premium EX version and your Odyssey comes with climate control, keyless remote entry, eight-way power driver's seat, power sliding side doors, alloy wheels and a six-speaker audio system with CD player.

Whichever model you choose, the Odyssey's improved muscle, sophisticated design and impressive degree of content makes it a must to consider when contemplating a minivan purchase.

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