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## Nissan makes Juke, avoids tackle by dullness

Bursting through the 1965 Green Bay Packers' defensive line, Chicago Bears rookie phenom Gale Sayers finds himself facing fearsome linebacker Ray Nitschke. Nitschke, instinctively calculating Sayers' speed and trajectory, coils his 235 pounds of muscle and sights in on his target.



Heads or tails? The front end of Nissan's 2011 Juke is either hideous or just plain weird, depending on whom you ask. But nearly all observers agreed that the tail is sporty and distinctive.

Photos courtesy Nissan



The Juke's cabin is well designed and full of high-technology equipment.

### NUTS AND BOLTS

**WHAT IS IT?** 2011 Nissan Juke SV AWD, a distinctive and very compact crossover.

**WHAT DOES IT COST?** Available in three trim levels with front- or all-wheel drive, Juke starting prices range from \$19,570 for a front-drive S with automatic transmission to \$25,200 for an AWD SL. MSRP for the mid-line SV AWD was \$22,880 plus \$760 delivery fee.

**WHAT I LIKE BEST:** Surprisingly good in every way ...

**WHAT I LIKE LEAST:** ... except for its front-end styling.

**KEY SPECS:** 1.6-liter, 16-valve, in-line four-cylinder with direct injection produces 188 horsepower, 177 pounds-feet of torque. Continuously variable automatic. 99.6-inch wheelbase. 3,183-pound curb weight. 25 city/30 highway mpg (EPA). 10.5/35.9 cubic feet cargo space with rear seat up/folded. Zero to 60 in 7.4 seconds (stopwatch).

But Sayers anticipates the attack. He takes one more step to his left, then plants his left foot as Nitschke launches himself. The linebacker lunges at air as the elusive tailback slips to the right and into open space.

Sayers has avoided a tackle. Nitschke has been "juke."

The folks at Nissan who named their new-for-2011 "sport cross" Juke may not be old enough to remember NFL Hall-of-Famers Nitschke or Sayers. There's no indication that the name comes from the popular term for a football fake or that the folks who named it have even seen an NFL game.

But just like Sayers' jukes, this one helps Nissan avoid being tackled by sameness dullness banality.

At some point, some bigwig at Nissan decided it's OK to be different. The company has some sharp, mainstream-styled vehicles (the Maxima and Altima come immediately to mind), but this is also the company that gave us the unsightly Cube.

But to my eyes from some perspectives, the Juke makes the Cube seem as sexy as Angelina Jolie. I'm not alone. The first time I tried to drive it out of a parking lot, the attendant wouldn't open the gate until he weighed in on it.

"I hope you don't mind my saying so, sir, but that's a very strange looking vehicle," he said.

I replied, "I don't think it's strange as much as plain ugly. At least from the front."

He smiled and said, "I agree. Totally. But I didn't want to insult you."

The 2011 Juke SV AWD was a test vehicle, so I wasn't insulted. But I am amazed that Nissan had the guts to deliver such a polarizing design.

No, that's being kind. The Juke's styling isn't merely polarizing, it's bipolar. The rear is sleek, swoopy, sporty and intriguing. The front is simply hideous, a combination of contrasting and contradictory bubbles and bulges that more closely resemble a mutant Mr. Potato Head than any other vehicle.

About the only thing nice I can say about the front end is that it's more appealing -- slightly -- than Subaru's original B9 Tribeca and just about any Pontiac Aztec.

I apologize to owners of those vehicles for my disdain, and concede that beauty can indeed be in the eye of the beholder. But when I first saw the Juke in my driveway it was as if someone poked me in the eye.

Sometimes faces as homely as the Juke's grow on you. A former girlfriend once said that about me, and I've had a couple of dogs like that. But I never warmed to the Juke's front-end styling.

It was so distasteful I wanted to hate the vehicle. Seriously. But I couldn't. That's because other than being pug-ugly, the Juke is the best small vehicle I've tested in years.

It exceeded my expectations in every meaningful way. It was quicker, quieter, roomier, more refined and more comfortable than I thought such a small, economical vehicle could be. It handled more like a compact sport coupe than a small crossover.

Keep in mind that assessment is coming from someone who wanted to dislike the Juke.

Nissan made that impossible.

For one thing, there's the Juke's terrific drivetrain. Propulsion is provided by a diminutive, 1.6-liter in-line four-cylinder engine. I've ridden motorcycles with engines that size, but turbocharging and direct fuel injection help the Juke's engine deliver 188 horsepower and 177 pounds-feet of torque.

As a result, my test car felt peppy. It accelerated from a standstill to 60 mph in just over seven seconds and had plenty of punch for pulling onto the highway or trying to pass. And although the turbocharged engine calls for premium fuel, EPA ratings up to 27 city and 32 highway mpg make the Juke pretty thrifty.

Some of the credit goes to a continuously variable transmission (CVT), which helps maximize engine performance while eliminating the lurching sometimes evident when conventional automatics shift gears.

Nissan has been a pioneer and champion of CVTs, and in the Juke seems to have eliminated a lot of that technology's characteristic droning.

A lack of rain or snow made it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the Juke's available all-wheel drive. But it engaged and disengaged smoothly and was admirably unobtrusive on dry, paved roads.

I was impressed with the Juke's comfort and handling on various roads in various conditions. With its short wheelbase, the Juke understandably jounces a bit on the choppiest surfaces, but its ride was generally cushier than I expected. And its independent strut front/multi-link rear suspension (front-wheel drive models get a torsion-bar rear) did a nice job of keeping the small car's rubber on the road.

And its nimbleness, agility, responsive steering and tight turning (36.4-foot diameter) make it fun to drive. A surprisingly roomy interior -- two adults fit comfortably in the rear seat -- also makes the Juke a practical people transporter.

Don't expect to carry much of a payload, however, when all of its seats are occupied. There's only 10.5 cubic feet of space behind the rear seatback. But cargo space more than triples when the rear seats are folded, and a standard-equipment 60/40 split seatback enhances cargo-carrying versatility.

The Juke SV AWD includes plenty of other standard features for its very reasonable \$22,880 list price.

We're not just talking basics such as power windows, door locks and mirrors, but also goodies such as iPod and Bluetooth connectivity, satellite radio, auto climate control and a power moonroof.

Its standard equipment list, comfort, performance and price add up to a terrific little vehicle that's also a terrific value. That's assuming, of course, that it has a face you can at least learn to love.

*Scott Wasser is executive editor of MaineToday Media. He writes a weekly auto column for the Sunday Telegram and other newspapers. He can be reached at:*

*swasser@pressherald.com.*