

TEXAS TRACK TIME

Story and venue photos: Joe Sage
Winner photos: Major League Photography

Every fall, the Texas Auto Writers Association (TAWA) hosts the Texas Truck Rodeo, where the toughest pickups and utilities vie for prestigious awards on challenging specialty courses in the hill country near San Antonio and Austin. In spring, we trade rivers and rocks for the track—Texas Motor Speedway near Forth Worth—for the Texas Auto Roundup. Raptors and Ram Rebels give way to Mustangs and MX-5 Miatas, as well as crossovers and minivans.

A record number of media participants, 58, came from eleven states and from as far away as The Netherlands this year.

Manufacturers ship in the best of their best, vehicles appropriate for the top Car of Texas and Family Car of Texas titles, but knowing full well there is the potential of track time. We have three options at our disposal: a route out onto public roads that includes a chance to merge and purge on the Interstate; a set of ring

roads on the track property, with various curves, dips and straightaways (but sharing rules of the road with the occasional working civilian); and the infield road course at the track. The larger track, a full-blown speedway with 24-degree banked turns, was in use by IndyCar teams training for Memorial Day Weekend and the 100th running of the Indy 500—giving us great background sound effects and a general air of excitement.

Any of our vehicles can be driven on the public roads or ring roads, while some of the more obvious ones are also specifically allowed on the infield track—Viper, SRT Hellcat, Volkswagen Golf R, Fiat 500 Abarth, Lexus GS-F and many others (including some you might not expect to see on the track). In some cases, the manufacturers provided absolute top-tier right-seaters, such as John Rutherford (Johnny's son) for SRT, or Scott Speed for VW.

The only thing better than having a premier driver in your right seat is having them in the driver's seat and yourself in the right seat. We took a number of highly memorable laps in the VW Golf R with Scott Speed at the wheel, demonstrating once again that no matter whether any of us think we are pushing a car's limits, we generally are not. We thought we'd raise our smartphone for a track sequence during Speed's speed laps, but we may as well have been attempting a windshield



selfie during a space shuttle launch, such were the g-forces. This is also when we first learned that Speed would be in Phoenix in a couple of weeks for Red Bull Global Rallycross at Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park, also featured in this issue.

Last year was our first time attending Texas Auto Roundup. It was held in March, and it poured almost the whole time, precluding track time. (A couple of vehicles braved right-seat-only laps with champions driving toward the very end.) This year, the event was moved to May, and the weatherman was on our side. Lucky timing, actually, as parts of Texas experienced record newsmaking flooding within a couple of weeks of this. This year, we had a little bit of rain, but not for long and not enough to change our plans.

Manufacturers make their own entry decisions. We had 50 vehicles to try, from 21 brands. Five brands entered the most,

KEEP RIGHT >>



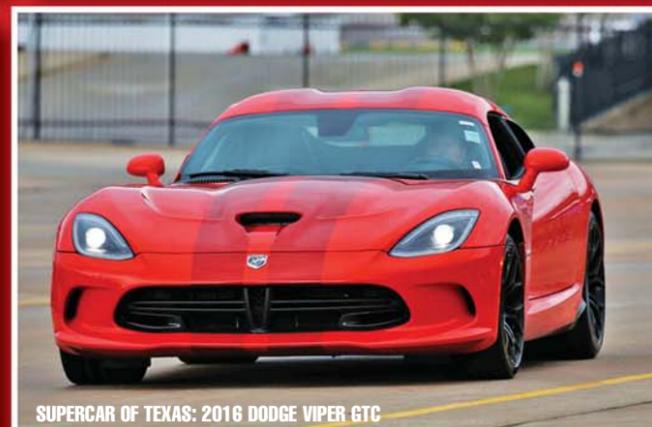
BEST MINIVAN, FEATURE, INTERIOR + FAMILY CAR OF TEXAS: CHRYSLER PACIFICA



BEST PERFORMANCE COUPE + CAR OF TEXAS: 2016 SHELBY GT350R



BEST PERFORMANCE SEDAN: 2016 DODGE CHARGER SRT HELLCAT



SUPERCAR OF TEXAS: 2016 DODGE VIPER GTC



BEST ACTIVITY VEHICLE: 2016 NISSAN MURANO PLATINUM



BEST FULL-SIZE LUXURY CAR: 2016 CADILLAC CT6



BEST PERFORMANCE UTILITY: 2016 VOLVO XC90 T6 AWD



BEST COMPACT CAR: 2016 HONDA CIVIC TOURING





four each: Chevrolet, Chrysler, Dodge, Nissan and Toyota. There were 20 from the US (22 if you count Fiat, part of Detroit's FCA), nine from Europe (including Fiat) and 20 from Asia (18 Japanese and two Korean, both from Kia). Corporate-wise, top representation was from FCA with eleven, GM eight, Toyota-Lexus seven and Nissan-Infiniti six.

Judging falls into 13 vehicle award categories by size, performance, luxury, utility, green credentials and combinations thereof. Subcompacts were folded in with compacts this year, as lines continue to blur in many segments. Even Tesla sent a vehicle, the first time we've seen them participate in such an event (their new Model X was entered not as a Green Vehicle but rather Performance Utility).

Two ultimate prizes are for the annual Car of Texas and Family Car of Texas.

Awards are also given for best new feature and best new interior.

There was one display-only vehicle: the upcoming 2017 Fiat 124 Spider (which we drove in California a few weeks later, as featured elsewhere in this issue).

It's a go-go-go day-and-a-half effort, each of us with checklist in hand, trying to drive all 50 (as we will be voting on all 50, efficiently via an online interface). It's mad dash after mad dash, car to car, with a chance to visit with manufacturers and colleagues in the gaps. Selections are discretionary, as available, and demand for some was, not surprisingly, red hot.

Each category receives votes for first, second and third place, and a weighted algorithm determines first place and runner-up in each category. A deeper dive into raw scoring generally shows just how tight the scoring gets—there is not a vehicle entered that's not worthy of a win.

Entrants and winners are as follows. All are 2016 models unless noted. The first grouping includes cars in five categories:

COMPACT CAR

1st: Honda Civic Touring

2nd: Mazda3 5-Door Grand Touring

OTHERS: Chevrolet Cruze Premier

Fiat 500X Trekking Plus AWD

Honda Civic Coupe LX-MT

Nissan Sentra SL

Volkswagen Beetle Dune Convertible

Volkswagen Jetta 1.4T S

MIDSIZE CAR

1st: Kia Optima SXL

2nd: Nissan Altima SL

OTHERS: Chevrolet Malibu Premier 2LZ

Chrysler 200 Limited Platinum

Toyota Camry XSE V6

MIDSIZE LUXURY CAR

1st: Infiniti Q50 Red Sport 400

2nd: Lexus ES 350

OTHERS: Buick Cascada Premium 1SP Convrt

Volvo S60 T5 Inscription FWD

FULL-SIZE CAR

1st: Dodge Charger R/T Scat Pack

2nd: Nissan Maxima Platinum

OTHERS: Chrysler 300S Alloy w/Mopar Stage1

FULL-SIZE LUXURY CAR

1st: Cadillac CT6

2nd: Chrysler 300 Platinum

Next, a small group of crossovers (this makes sense, as most will instead enter the Texas Truck Rodeo) and minivans:

ACTIVITY VEHICLE

1st: Nissan Murano Platinum

2nd: Volvo XC60 T6 AWD Drive-E

OTHERS: Ford Edge Sport

Infiniti QX60 AWD

Kia Sportage SX AWD (2017)

Toyota RAV4 Hybrid Limited

MINIVAN

1st: Chrysler Pacifica Limited (2017)

2nd: Toyota Sienna Limited

As this event is held at a major race-track, there are several performance categories, some echoing the categories above, plus a new Supercar category with just one entrant (wait'll next year?):

PERFORMANCE COMPACT

1st: Mazda MX-5 Miata Club

2nd: Volkswagen Golf R

OTHERS: Fiat 500 Abarth

PERFORMANCE COUPE

1st: Shelby GT350R

2nd: Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat

OTHERS: Cadillac ATS-V Coupe

Chevrolet Camaro Coupe Convrt 2LT

PERFORMANCE SEDAN

1st: Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat

2nd: Cadillac CTS-V Sedan

OTHERS: Jaguar XF-S

Lexus GS-F

Subaru WRX Limited

Volkswagen Jetta GLI SEL

PERFORMANCE UTILITY

1st: Volvo XC90 T6 AWD R-Design

2nd: Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT

OTHERS: Range Rover Sport

Tesla Model X

SUPER CAR OF TEXAS

1st: Dodge Viper GTC

The Green category is perhaps less distinct all the time, as frugal efficiency gets mainstream. As noted above, Tesla opted to enter as Performance, not Green.

GREEN VEHICLE

1st: Lexus RX 450h

2nd: Chevrolet Volt Premier Hatchback (2017)

OTHERS: Toyota Prius Four Touring

New technologies and upgraded cabins are big news in every vehicle, but in these categories, manufacturers can highlight something particular. Minivans don't usually get the most attention at this track-based event, but this year the new Chrysler Pacifica won both of these, bringing their tally to three at this point:

BEST NEW FEATURE

1st: Uconnect Theater, Chrysler Pacifica

OTHERS: Driver Mode Selector, Chevrolet Camaro

Teen Driver, Chevrolet Malibu

Regen on Demand, Chevrolet Volt

Adaptive Steering, Ford Edge

Bird's Eye View, Toyota RAV4

1.4 Engine Offering, Volkswagen Jetta

BEST NEW INTERIOR

1st: Chrysler Pacifica Limited (2017)

OTHERS: Honda Civic Touring

The event's biggest trophies are determined by a separate vote from among all vehicles. And now Pacifica has four wins:

CAR OF TEXAS

Shelby GT350R

FAMILY CAR OF TEXAS

Chrysler Pacifica Limited (2017)

Some votes focus on specifics, some are subjective, and most are a bit of both. Some results are as expected, and there are always surprises.

Statisticians parse the results further. A few insights were that Viper scored highest among all vehicles across all categories for exterior, as well as for performance; Volvo XC90 scored highest among all for interior; and Mazda MX-5 Miata had the best overall score for value. ■

VEHICLE IMPRESSION : 2016 HONDA ACCORD TOURING V6

DFW TO THE TRACK AND BACK

We would have some 50 vehicles at our disposal during the Texas Motor Speedway event, but still needed to cover about 50 miles round trip between the airport and the track.

For this, we scored a new Honda Accord in top trim—Touring V6—which, in typical Honda fashion, required no options (to call it full-featured is an understatement, as generous as an Acura, yet at a Honda price).

There are 26 sedan and coupe models in the Accord lineup, from \$22,205 for an LX sedan with 6-speed manual (manuals are available in a number of Accords), up to a \$31,025 EX-L V6 coupe.

Two samples of its compact sibling Civic at our event spanned that lineup's range: a manual LX coupe and a line-topping Touring V6 sedan. All new for 2016, Civic was a strong performer on our private road

course. This bigger sibling Accord, in its fourth year, had incorporated some the new Civic's wonders earlier and will surely evolve some more.

Traditionally a midsize, Accord sedan is now EPA classified as full size, thanks to its spacious cabin (the coupe is still midsize). This suggests a sweet spot on the cusp of two segments, and the Accord has hit it.

The V6 has cylinder deactivation, seamless in our local street and freeway time. Its nav system required pulling over to input, but won our hearts in this particular concrete-spaghetti dash. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE3.5L SOHC 24v i-VTEC Earth Dreams V6

HORSEPOWER/TORQUE278 hp / 252 lb-ft

TRANSMISSION6-spd auto w/ sport mode

MPG21/34/26 city/hwy/comb

BASE PRICE\$34,580

DESTINATION CHARGE.....\$820

TOTAL.....\$35,400

