

ROUNDUP!

By Joe Sage / Photos: Joe Sage and Marshall Tidrick Photo / TAWA

TAWA—the Texas Auto Writers Association—hosts two high-profile vehicle comparison events each year. We drive and judge in both. In the fall is the Texas Truck Rodeo. Texas means trucks, so this event and its winners have national and even global significance. In the spring is the Texas Auto Roundup, with ten vehicle award categories—of which five are performance-oriented—plus categories for new features and interior, and three overall car of the year awards.

Roads, driving styles and demographics in the Lone Star State are similar in many ways to Arizona's, so both events' results are useful here.

Truck Rodeo is held on a huge Texas ranch, a great way to put things to the test on rough roads, in the mud, through water fordings, over rocks and logs, and up and down the steepest and toughest

terrain. Auto Roundup is held at the track. All categories benefit from this, as here we can really put acceleration, handling and braking to the test.

This year's was our third Texas Auto Roundup. In prior years, it was held at Texas Motor Speedway near Fort Worth, with a 1.44-mile banked track for NASCAR and IndyCar, as well as an inner road course, a couple of service ring roads and easy access to a stretch of Interstate. Our event ran on all but the big oval. This year, the event moved to Circuit of the Americas (COTA) southeast of Austin, new in 2012 and home to FIA Formula One, American Le Mans Series, IMSA and other events.

The Euro-inspired track at COTA is 3.427 miles long, with 20 turns, a 133-foot elevation change and an 0.62-mile straightaway. The starting line leads straight to the track's highest point, at Turn One. Each vehicle would have a longer run than at Fort Worth, although former drive time between

garage and road course was eliminated. (There is also a service road in the mix at COTA, although only one vehicle chose to use it and it only; given the option on all the other vehicles, most drivers chose the track most often.) We had 42 vehicles in the stable and most of two days to drive them all.

Our runs were not a matter of going all out for three and a half miles. Rather, the course was broken up into eight stages, with a full stop between each, including slalom, moose test, acceleration and braking, and well-allocated use of challenging turns. A speed cap of 60 mph was stated, which sounded impossible at this venue, but turned out to be appropriate and most of the time easy enough to stay within. The succession of stops between stages kept this manageable, also equalizing the pace from driver to driver and vehicle to vehicle.

There is no predetermined sequence, so each driver grabs whatever he or she can, in whatever order (subject to ongoing availability of some of the hottest rides). Our scores are entered online during midday break and at the end of the day, with electronic tabulation—an efficient and accurate process. (Many other events are still done by hand.)

Among ten vehicle categories, three had just two vehicles each (Minivan, Full-Size Luxury Car and Supercar). The most crowded segments were

Performance Compact, with six, and Activity Vehicle, which actually had seven, though they were counted as six, since Jeep brought two trims of the Compass to be voted on as one. On the other hand, two Dodge Chargers in the Performance Sedan category competed against each other. Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid was entered in both Minivans and Green Vehicles, both rightly so; this was the only two-drive-category vehicle. Not all hybrids were in the green category, however: Toyota entered the RAV4 Hybrid in a performance group. Any number of vehicles could have been in different classes—for example, the new 2018 Lexus LC 500h was entered among Performance Coupes, but arguably could have been in the small Supercar class with Mercedes-AMG GT S and Nissan GT-R. The decision by a manufacturer to enter, say, the Performance Utility class or the Activity Vehicle class was subjective, as long as each was appropriate. Each manufacturer wants us to experience each vehicle in its own best and most appropriate light, and they also surely make decisions based on the anticipated competitiveness of each vehicle within its chosen category.

Category winners and runners-up are highlighted below, followed by other entrants in alphabetical order. Most vehicles entered were 2017 models, except for three 2018s and one 2016 as noted.

KEEP RIGHT >>

CIRCUIT OF THE AMERICAS™



Best Compact Car



COMPACT CAR

WINNER.....**Mazda3**
RUNNERUP...**Honda Civic Hatchback**
ALSOKia Soul
.....Toyota Corolla XSE
.....Toyota Corolla iM

NOTES: Civic and Corolla sell over 350,000 a year; Corolla iM, a rebadged Scion, fewer than 18,000. Soul sells almost 150,000, but is due for an update, as is Corolla; Civic was new last year. Mazda3 is a few years old, but smaller numbers (95,000±) may keep it fresh; it took this win.

MINIVAN

WINNER.....**Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid**
RUNNERUP...**Toyota Sienna Limited AWD**

NOTES: Minivans may not seem the hottest category in a track event, but the winner here, Pacifica, went on to also win Green Vehicle, Best Feature and Family Car of Texas.

ACTIVITY VEHICLE

WINNER.....**Jeep Compass Trailhawk/Latitude**
RUNNERUP...**Mazda CX-5**

ALSOHyundai Tucson AWD
.....Nissan Rogue Sport AWD
.....Toyota C-HR (2018)
.....Volkswagen Atlas (2018)

NOTES: Five out of six here are new for 2017—Jeep, Toyota and VW totally new, Rogue Sport new to the US, and CX-5 a new version. VW was the only entry in the whole event that specified road course evaluation only, no track. Jeep Compass, in two trim flavors, took first place.

FULL-SIZE LUXURY CAR

WINNER.....**Volvo S90 T6 AWD Inscription**
RUNNERUP...**Chrysler 300S**

NOTES: Chrysler 300 is a perennial favorite and a great buy at \$39,555, but may be due for an update. Volvo S90, new this year, came in supercharged/turbocharged AWD Inscription trim (\$66,365). Winning hundreds of awards for their XC90, Volvo is now headed there with the S90.

GREEN VEHICLE

WINNER.....**Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid**
RUNNERUP...**Hyundai Ioniq Hybrid**

ALSOKia Niro
.....Toyota Prius Prime Advanced

NOTES: Ioniq and Niro are totally new vehicles bringing hybrids mainstream (EVs and plug-in hybrids, too, in Hyundai's case). Prius is an update. Pacifica is so new, it took a new name when it replaced Town & Country. Each brings something significant, but Pacifica took the win.

PERFORMANCE COMPACT

WINNER.....**Mazda MX-5 Miata RF**
RUNNERUP...**Toyota 86 - 860 Special Edition**

ALSOFiat 124 Spider
.....Ford Focus RS (2016)
.....Subaru BRZ
.....Volkswagen Golf R

NOTES: The event could probably have run for a day with just these, and all as a group would be happy. It seems nobody doesn't like Miata, and the new retractable hard-top RF proved irresistible in the vote tally.

PERFORMANCE COUPE

WINNER.....**Lexus LC 500h (2018)**
RUNNERUP...**Infiniti Q60 Red Sport 400**

ALSOAlfa Romeo 4C
.....Dodge Challenger
.....Lexus RC F

NOTES: The event could also have run for a day with just this category combined with Supercars. Some entrants here could probably have entered as supercars—the new Lexus LC 500h, a stunning 295-hp, 348 lb-ft hybrid, looks and feels that way, and the Lexus RC F has aggressive style and 467-hp skills. Lexus LC is the newest in the group and took the prize.

PERFORMANCE SEDAN

WINNER.....**Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio**
RUNNERUP...**Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat**

ALSODodge Charger R/T Daytona
.....Lexus GS F
.....Volkswagen Jetta

NOTES: This makes three performance entries for luxury-rooted Lexus. Two Chargers were voted individually, pirating votes from each other. Jetta, a turbo, was bold for taking on this group. But the highly anticipated sexy new 505-hp Italian won this category easily.

PERFORMANCE UTILITY

WINNER.....**Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT**
RUNNERUP...**Infiniti QX30 Premium AWD**

ALSOToyota RAV4 Hybrid SE

NOTES: Three vehicles here represent disproportionately wide variety. The Infiniti is an impressive premium package, but it's a track event, and, well, SRT. (The only prior time we'd driven at COTA was in the Grand Cherokee SRT, at its launch four years ago. It was right at home.)

SUPERCAR

WINNER.....**Mercedes-AMG GT S Coupe**
RUNNERUP...**Nissan GT-R Premium**

NOTES: With a couple of other potential contenders entered in the Performance Coupe category, this came down to a venerable absolute favorite of everyone and a new absolute favorite of everyone. And new wins again.

While driving, we also paid attention to interiors and features, as would always be the case, but these impressions also determine our votes in a separate Best New Interior category (among those vehicles that chose to compete, which were only three). Static displays in the garage area are used for non-driving demonstrations in the Best Feature category, which this year included a variety of powertrain, safety and driver assist features.

BEST FEATURE

WINNER.....**Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid Powertrain**
RUNNERUP...**Toyota Safety Sense, Corolla 50th Anniv.**

ALSODriving Modes, Ford Focus RS (2016)
.....Volvo S90 IntelliSense

BEST NEW INTERIOR

WINNER.....**Volvo S90 Inscription**

ALSOAlfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio
.....Lexus LC 500h (2018)

When all else is said and done, the driving and judging media draw three more conclusions from among the entire set of entries. Category-by-category decisions can form a solid basis for this, and each winner did also win a category trophy or two.

TITLE AWARDS

PERFORMANCE CAR OF TEXAS:

.....**Mercedes-AMG GT S Coupe**

FAMILY CAR OF TEXAS:

.....**Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid**

CAR OF TEXAS:

.....**Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio**

Next up is the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo, in October, a similar event in concept, but for pickups and utilities, run almost entirely off-pavement. We're ready; we booked our flights months ahead. ■

Best Performance Compact



Best Performance Coupe



Best Performance Sedan



Best Performance Utility



Best Supercar



Performance Car of Texas



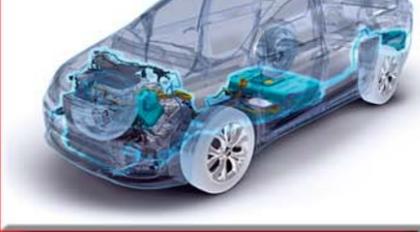
Best Activity Vehicle



Best Full-Size Luxury Car



Best Green Vehicle



Family Car of Texas



Car of Texas

