

MUDFEST!

Off-roaders compared on pavement and in the extreme



by Joe Sage

Photo: NWAPA / Josh Mackey

The competitive vehicle event popularly known as Mudfest—officially the Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year awards—is presented by the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA), a consortium of media predominantly from Oregon and Washington State, with a few outliers from such places as British Columbia and, in our case, Arizona. The Pacific Northwest means outdoor activity, so the awards, now in their 23rd year, are of broad interest everywhere. This was our fifth year.

There is always a better than average chance of rain in the Pacific Northwest, with almost perfect odds of mud. The event was held for the second time at The Ridge Motorsports Park, a 170-acre facility with a 2.47-mile 16-turn track with 300-foot elevation change (which we don't use) and a kart track that's a one-sixth-scale replica of the big track (which we do use). Off-road courses are specifically built for our event overlaying motocross courses and other acreage at the facility.

Voting was reengineered this year to place more value on day one, the pavement day, than in the past, generating a bit of debate. On one side are those who say this is how most people use these vehicles most of the time. On the other side are those who say day two, the off-road part, is the distinguishing characteristic of Mudfest. Whatever your take on this, you may want to bear it in mind while absorbing the results.

No matter how well each vehicle can do in the mud, rocks and ruts, and no matter how owners push each one to its intended limits on weekends or in rallies, most ownership miles center on the rubber hitting the road (though even this will often include more rain and snow than we get in Arizona). The first day's sealed-surface events started in the paved paddock area, with a coned handling course and a grid to test the vehicles' backup and proximity systems. Next, we enter the kart track, starting with a straightaway for acceleration and hard braking, followed by the track's succession of tight turns to challenge steering and handling, all with 50-foot elevation changes. Every vehicle entered in the event is run through this course. Lower, sleeker models may seem they will have an advantage here, and some do, but the bigger and burlier pickups and utilities are often surprisingly as nimble here as sporty crossovers.

Day two is what makes Mudfest Mudfest—the off-road portion, with climb, descent, rough surface, side slope, obstacle and mud elements. One course is used by all vehicles, while a second

course with more extreme hazards is used for certain qualifying vehicles specifically entered in an extreme capability class, plus generally a few others whose engineers have more to show off.

This year, there was considerable rain leading up to the event, some drizzle and fog for the on-pavement day, then clear skies for the off-road day, with biblical thunder and lightning and an absolute torrent opening up just as we finished driving and started tallying the winners.

Each vehicle is carefully chosen by its manufacturer to compete in one of six categories—four for utilities, one for pickups and a class open to the most extreme of either. The classes remain the same for the on-road and off-road days. An overall winner is also chosen independently of the individual category results.

The goal of judging media is to learn all they can about each vehicle's features, capabilities and performance, especially within parameters pertinent to the theme. The goal of the buying public is to learn what they should buy, but you will really benefit from taking in the relativities of it all, as well as the final votes. The manufacturers' goal is to put their best foot forward in each category, bringing the vehicles that best fit event parameters and meet the goals of the buyer.

Eighteen manufacturers entered 27 vehicles—five from Detroit, six from Europe, eight from Japan and one from Korea. All were 2017 models.

Twenty-eight media members drove and voted. Brand specialists were on hand to point out features and answer questions, and a team of hard-working press fleet representatives ran the event.

Although it's hard to buy a bad vehicle these days, this competitive event in challenging conditions is a great way for differences large and small to make themselves clear.

Scoring considers a number of things: vehicle specifics (powertrain, braking, exterior styling, interior comfort, function and technology), ride and handling on-pavement, and handling and capability off-pavement. Factors are added for fuel economy and relative value. Despite this event being rooted in the dirt, on-road and off-road attributes carry equal weight, reflecting real world use.

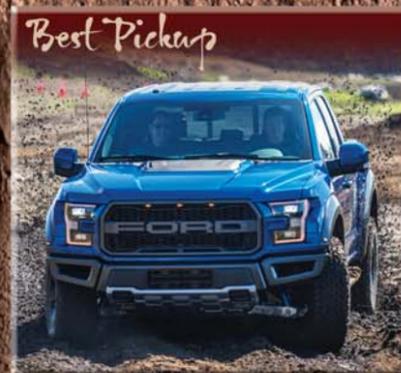
Each vehicle's numbers are added up to determine first, second and third place finishes in each category, sometimes confirming a gut favorite and other times delivering a surprise.

Results can be tight, with casual favorites not always statistical winners. Two categories this year had ties for first, broken by adding second place votes. Entrants and results are as follows:

KEEP RIGHT >>



Photos: Joe Sage



Compact Utility Vehicle
 Honda CR-V Touring AWD
 Jeep Compass Trailhawk
 Kia Sportage SX AWD
 Mazda CX-5 Grand Touring AWD
 Mitsubishi Outlander Sport SEL AWC
 Nissan Rogue SL Hybrid AWD
 Toyota RAV4 Platinum AWD

PRICE RANGE\$26,590 Mitsubishi > \$38,778 Toyota
 HP RANGE166 HP Mitsubishi > 240 HP Kia
 HWY MPG RANGE23 MPG Kia > 34 MPG Nissan

NOTES: As segments start to overlap, this group included compacts and subcompacts. Similar spreads of power, fuel economy and price made comparisons easier. Against several upgraded models, Jeep Compass—midrange on vital specs, while as a Trailhawk having an edge off-road—was all new and took the vote.

WINNER: Jeep Compass Trailhawk
 180 HP, 30 MPG hwy, \$33,565 as tested

Premium Compact Utility
 BMW X4 M40i
 MINI Cooper S Countryman ALL4
 Volkswagen Golf Alltrack S 4Motion

PRICE RANGE\$28,615 VW > \$67,495 BMW
 HP RANGE170 HP VW > 355 HP BMW
 HWY MPG RANGE26 MPG BMW > 31 MPG MINI

NOTES: At more than double the VW's price and power, the BMW M dazzled both on- and off-road. The big new MINI Countryman showed an edge on the track. The VW, though more carlike, ran surprisingly well off-road. VW brought their Golf Alltrack only as a late substitute for the new Atlas 7-seater utility, which got pulled for corporate duties elsewhere—thus it was a bit of a surprise when their bring-something entry won the category.

WINNER: VW Golf Alltrack S 4Motion
 170 HP, 30 MPG hwy, \$28,615 as tested

Family Utility Vehicle
 Mitsubishi Outlander 2.4 SEL S-AWC
 Nissan Pathfinder Platinum AWD
 Subaru Forester 2.5i Touring
 Toyota Highlander SE AWD

PRICE RANGE\$30,770 Mitsubishi > \$44,685 Nissan
 HP RANGE168 HP Mitsubishi > 295 HP Toyota
 HWY MPG RANGE26 MPG Nissan/Toyota > 32 MPG Subaru

NOTES: This is a more subjective category, "family" being a characteristic that could be applied to any and all. Subaru Forester, a vehicle with some of the highest buyer loyalty rates in the business, had almost the lowest horsepower, but the highest fuel mileage and a price point toward the lower end—and was the winner.

WINNER: Subaru Forester 2.5i Touring
 170 HP, 32 MPG hwy, \$33,765 as tested

Premium Utility Vehicle
 Acura MDX AWD Advance
 Jeep Grand Cherokee Trailhawk
 Lexus GX460 Luxury
 Mercedes-Benz GLS 450 4MATIC
 Nissan Armada Platinum 4WD
 Volvo V90 Cross Country T6 AWD

PRICE RANGE\$50,125 Jeep > \$96,250 M-Benz
 HP RANGE290 HP Acura > 390 HP Nissan
 HWY MPG RANGE18 MPG Lexus/Nissan > 30 MPG Volvo

NOTES: Tough competition, this one, full of vehicles that generate lust among even those who would never need them. We could wax rhapsodic about each, on and off pavement. Brought to the event in its top off-road trim, Trailhawk, the Jeep Grand Cherokee—last year's overall winner—dominated this category once again.

WINNER: Jeep Grand Cherokee Trailhawk
 295 HP, 25 MPG hwy, \$50,125 as tested

Photos: NWAPA / Josh Mackey

Extreme Capability Vehicle
 Jeep Wrangler Trailstorm (Mopar accessorized)
 Land Rover Discovery HSE Luxury
 Toyota 4Runner TRD Off-Road

PRICE RANGE\$43,433 Toyota > \$82,100 Land Rover
 HP RANGE270 HP Toyota > 340 HP Land Rover
 HWY MPG RANGE20 MPG Jeep/Toyota > 21 MPG LR

NOTES: The category is called Extreme, and the winner was perhaps appropriately the most powerful and most expensive of the three, although Wrangler usually wins partly for the opposite reason. Jeep knew the Disco was all new, so they built a Wrangler tricked out by Mopar at double its base price. And the new Land Rover won.

WINNER: Land Rover Discovery HSE Luxury
 340 HP, 21 MPG hwy, \$82,100 as tested

Pickup Trucks
 Ford F-150 Raptor 4x4 Super Cab
 Honda Ridgeline AWD Black Edition
 Nissan Titan Pro-4X 4WD V8
 Ram 2500 Power Wagon Crew Cab 4x4

PRICE RANGE\$43,770 Honda > \$62,850 Ford
 HP RANGE280 HP Honda > 450 HP Ford
 HWY MPG RANGE18 MPG Ford > 25 MPG Honda*

*Ram Power Wagon, a heavy duty, is not MPG rated

NOTES: Raptor and Power Wagon are built as the most extreme off-roaders, the Ram burlier, but both quite nimble. Nissan has won many prizes with the powerful new Titan, as it pushes for its share of this extremely brand loyal market. Honda won a surprisingly big vote share, partly for Ridgeline's tech innovations, partly due to the emphasis of the pavement portion, although its unibody-on-frame build also did well off-road. The Raptor badge seems to carry a lot of buzz, though, and took this win.

WINNER: Ford F-150 Raptor 4x4 Super Cab
 450 HP, 18 MPG hwy, \$62,850 as tested

Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year

NOTES: The six categories are judged point by point, but just averaging that math would likely skew more and mean less than the subjective method used for the overall winner—judging media each simply pick a first, second and third choice and tally from there. Thus, the Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year does not need to have won a category, but it's always likely—this year's overall champion was also the Extreme Capability winner.

WINNER: Land Rover Discovery HSE Luxury
 340 HP, 21 MPG hwy, \$82,100 as tested

Interestingly, last year's overall champion—the Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited 4x4 75th Anniversary Edition V6 EcoDiesel—was also the Family Utility winner, which had led us to suggest that category might be the event's spiritual core. Not only is there some subjectivity as to which categories a manufacturer enters, but there is much variety in trims within vehicles—after all, this year's Grand Cherokee, an off-road-oriented Trailhawk, was entered in the Premium Utility class.

With this year's new scoring emphasis on the pavement portion—and as healthy votes came rolling in for Volkswagen Golf Alltrack and Honda Ridgeline—we perceived some shift toward the urban/suburban end of the scale. All the more noteworthy, then, that the Land Rover Discovery won. As also the Extreme Capability Vehicle winner, it suggests that off-road may indeed still be the spiritual core of Mudfest after all. ■

VEHICLE IMPRESSION : 2017 TOYOTA AVALON TOURING

Our Mudfest event cruiser

Avalon is Toyota's flagship sedan, basically their full-size model, although EPA-classed as midsize, in an era of ever increasing overlap. Camry is Toyota's midsize, the best seller in that top-volume category; Avalon offers its appeal in a larger size and upfeatured.

Toyota Avalon is the corporate sibling to Lexus ES, though Lexus adds the rear-drive GS and big LS above that. Avalon starts at \$33,300—their biggest sedan at \$4525 less than the compact Lexus IS and \$5600 less than the near-twin ES. Our Avalon, in second-to-top Touring trim (Limited is the line-topper), is highly featured and premium-outfitted at \$1250 less than a base ES.

We drove ours from Seattle-Tacoma airport to our Olympic Peninsula hotel, to the Mudfest event site and back, then back to Sea-Tac. Powerful and smooth, our leather-trimmed Avalon cocoon had a user-friendly split-screen touch interface and nine-speaker premium audio—nice in a wild Pacific Northwest rainstorm, as was knowing the entire Toyota Safety Sense P (TSS-P) system is now standard in the entire Avalon lineup.

Toyota understands badge envy, as they bring us both brands. For a near-Lexus experience with a dose of Toyota frugality, Avalon delivers. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	3.5L DOHC 24v dual VVT-i V6
DRIVETRAIN	transaxle FWD
HP/TORQUE	268 hp / 248 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	6-spd ECT-i automatic
SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut w torsion bar; R: dual link indep MacPherson strut w stblzr bar
STEERING	electrically assisted rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 11.7 vented / R: 11.1 solid disc Parking brake: foot-applied pedal
WHEELS/TIRES	18x7.5 / P225/45 R18
LENGTH/WB/GRND CLEAR	195.3" / 110.0" / 5.5"
TURNING CIRCLE	40.0 ft
SEATING CAPACITY	five
LUGGAGE CAPACITY	16.0 / 61.3 cu.ft.
WEIGHT	3505 lb
FUEL / CAPAC	87 octane reg / 17.2 gal
MPG	21/30/24 (city/hwy/comb)

INCLUDES: Toyota Safety Sense P included (pre-collision system w/pedestrian detection, lane departure alert w/steering assist, auto high beams, dynamic radar cruise control); Star Safety System (VSC, TRAC, ABS, EBD, BA & Smart-Stop); Latch child seat system; rear outboard seats; alarm w/engine immobilizer; blind spot monitor w/cross traffic alert; auto on/off LED headlights; heated mirrors w/signals; dual chrome-tip exhausts; power tilt/slide moonroof; dual zone climate w/filter and rear vents; Entune 9-sprk premium audio w/nav & app suite, AM-FM-CD-HD-SiriusXM, 7" touchscreen, leather trimmed seats/wheel, paddle shift, Bluetooth, voice command, 8-way power driver's seat & 4-way passenger; keyless entry/start, HomeLink.

BASE PRICE	\$37,650
BLIZZARD PEARL PAINT	395
CARPET/TRUNK MAT SET	224
DESTINATION CHARGE	865
TOTAL	\$39,134



Photo: Joe Sage