

Big numbers on the open road

WE COVER OVER 500 INLAND NORTHWEST TWO-LANE HIGHWAY MILES IN ABOUT TWO DAYS IN 24 PERFORMANCE VEHICLES WORTH ABOUT \$2 MILLION AND BEARING ABOUT 10,000 HP

By Joe Sage - Photos by Joe Sage and Doug Berger / NWAPA

Try this mental drill on the freeway sometime: add up the cars in your immediate vicinity and see how many millions of dollars' worth it is. It's enlightening, but only moreso at Run to the Sun—where we have our own specially selected fleet including supercars running into six figures each.

Hosted by the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA), Run to the Sun brings this scenario to life each fall in the Pacific Northwest, most often in north-central Oregon, where terrain, grasslands, lava outcrops and roads themselves are very similar to parts of Arizona's high country.

Run to the Sun has long been distinguished from other multi-vehicle comparo drives by two factors:

First, it's the only multi-vehicle event we attend—and possibly the only one in the industry—that predetermines not only the route but vehicle and

driver sequence, essential to making sure each person drives each car, all within the allotted time. Other events—road, track or off-road—have fixed staging areas and a fixed course or courses, losing time as everyone returns to the pool and decides what to drive next, often with bottlenecks around a couple of superstar models. Run to the Sun covers a lot of ground, each swap is in a different spot, and it's important to keep things moving.

Second, Run to the Sun has pretty much stood alone by never having its vehicles categorized and not generating awards. Each manufacturer simply brings something very special from their lineup. The event was originally an all-convertible affair, but began evolving when convertibles were few, adding muscle, supercar and luxury vehicles. The common threads are sport and performance.

Nothing is as reliably constant as change, however, and for this year's event the cars were categorized and judged, and awards were given in four groups: Convertibles, Performance Coupes, Performance Sedans and Performance SUVs. Participating media would for the first time vote for a favorite in each category, as well as one overall.

Variety has always been the name of the game

here. Now with judging categories overlaid, variety becomes all the more apparent. The performance sedan group ran from under \$20k to almost \$80k base, convertibles from the \$30s to over \$200k, performance coupes from about \$60k to the upper \$100s, and so on—each diverse group vying for the same single trophy in that class. Vehicles were a mix of 2018 and 2017 models (and one 2016).

Categorization was partly motivated by the addition of SUVs to the event this year, with new premium performance utilities from several makers.

Following is our drive sequence. (Sidebar photos are alphabetical by group.) Fuel mileage stated is highway; two prices stated are base and ours as outfitted. The Corvette Grand Sport changed categories (but not its drive sequence) as its removable hard top suggested the convertibles group, and one vehicle went out of service, all noted below.

Day One. Each driver grabs their first vehicle at Portland International Airport and drives about an hour to our base camp near Welches, Oregon (elevation 1320 feet) at the base of Mt Hood. It's a one-vehicle Day One with an extra long drive, which gives the event a head start and eases the load a little for the next two busy days. We started things off with a bang, with our longest drive of the entire event in the McLaren 570S Spider, our first in the convertibles class.

CONVERTIBLES

McLaren 570S Spider

• 562 hp • 23 mpg est • \$208,000 est base
McLaren is not the only highly sculptured high-horsepower midengine supercar, but it's the only one from a small (and rapidly growing) UK builder. Their latest entry, the 570S—

here in power retractable spider form—is the most affordable, dramatically so by McLaren standards. In an era of cookie-cutter prestige, a McLaren—certainly this one in Curacao Blue—still turns heads. With great handling, ample power and an inviting balanced-tech cockpit, this car stakes out distinctive turf.

Day Two. For the longest drive day, with 15 segments, we first resumed with convertibles.

Mercedes-AMG GT C Roadster

• 550 hp • tbd mpg • \$157,000 / \$179,065
We had driven the Mercedes-AMG GT and GT C Roadsters—AMG's second-ever in-house build—at their launch in Arizona last spring, and they went straight to our cover (May/June 2017). A full family of coupes and convertibles in two powertrains each, these are poised to potentially displace a good proportion of 911 sales.

Mazda MX-5 Miata Grand Touring RF

• 155 hp • 33 mpg • \$32,620 / \$33,885
We had also recently driven the Mazda MX-5 RF, which also scored a cover (Sept/Oct). Replacing the old ragtop Miata, this retractable hardtop, the most affordable and fuel economical in this group, has perfect 50/50 weight distribution among its many appealing traits.

Chevrolet Corvette Grand Sport Coupe

• 460 hp • 25 mpg • \$65,495 / \$99,230
(Note: this removable-top car was driven in sequence with Performance Coupes, below, but moved to Convertibles for voting.)
Grand Sport has always occupied a great balance point in the Corvette lineup—a high-horsepower model closer in price to the base Stingray than to the Z06. Ours had options bumping its price 50 percent—the \$15,000 Carbon 65 Edition package atop a \$9745 3LT package, limited to just 650 copies. There is an actual GS convertible available (\$4000 more), but the coupe's removable hardtop prompted organizers to move it in with convertibles.

KEEP RIGHT >>

CONVERTIBLES (alphabetical)



Chevrolet Corvette Grand Sport Coupe



Mazda MX-5 Miata Grand Touring RF



McLaren 570S Spider



Mercedes-AMG GT C Roadster

PERFORMANCE COUPES (alphabetical)



Acura NSX



Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Widebody



Infiniti Q60 Red Sport 400



Lexus LC 500 Coupe



Nissan GT-R NISMO



PERFORMANCE SUVs

MINI Cooper S E Countryman ALL4

• 221 hp • 27 mpg, 65 MPGe • \$36,800 / \$39,700
A first from the brand, this rugged off-road-capable MINI is electrified, powered by a three-cylinder turbo gasoline engine and electric hybrid synchronous motor, all applied with a version of MINI's ALL4 all-wheel-drive system. It has the lowest horsepower in the group, but among the highest fuel economy and the lowest purchase price.

BMW X4 M40i

• 355 hp • 26 mpg • \$58,100 / \$67,495

Reviewed elsewhere in this issue from a weeklong drive back home in Arizona, this Sport Activity Coupe achieves the elusive synthesis of a utility basis, coupe styling and M-adapted power and trim, combined in the even-numbered X Series in a moderately pricey, powerful package.

Volvo XC60 T8 E-AWD Inscription

• 400 hp • tbd mpg • \$52,900 / \$71,590

Volvo has won awards in the hundreds for its larger XC90 utility and recently introduced a new XC60, driven here in top Inscription trim with T8 electrified powertrain—400 hp and 472 lb-ft of torque from a combination of a 313-hp 2.0L turbocharged-plus-supercharged gasoline four-cylinder and an 87-hp electric motor. (Also in this issue, the XC60 did well at the Texas Truck Rodeo.)

Audi SQ5 3.0T quattro tiptronic

• 354 hp • 24 mpg • \$54,300 / \$61,375

This Audi utility is a bit of a Goldilocks in this class and in the Audi lineup. It's in the middle of their utility size and price range, an S model sitting between base and RS, and has average fuel mileage and pricing among the event group. Its style, fit and finish are classic Audi.

Alfa Romeo Stelvio Ti Sport AWD

• 280 hp • 28 mpg • \$43,995 / \$53,640

The Alfa Romeo Stelvio was one of the most anticipated vehicles at the event. It was new, of course, but it takes more than that. The jaded press corps just especially wanted to get its hands on this sexy, sporty Italian utilitarian (as we called it in our September/October review).

Jeep Grand Cherokee Trackhawk

• 707 hp • 17 mpg • \$85,900 / \$100,960

This is Jeep's answer to the Charger and Challenger SRT Hellcat models, achieving their same 707 hp in a highly technical and lightweight road-going utility vehicle. To

help differentiate it in the Jeep lineup and align it in the competitive market, it has a high level of luxury fitment.

Dodge Durango SRT 392

• 475 hp • tbd mpg • \$62,995 / \$73,360

The hot-selling 7-passenger Durango had topped its lineup to date with a luxury model and a performance-oriented R/T. Powerful Charger and Challenger siblings have now influenced Durango even more, with a new top-performing SRT 392 model—power and glory taking kids to soccer practice or hitting the nightclubs. (The obvious question: will there be a 707-hp model down the line?)

GENERIC LEG: One high-dollar, low-volume car had a service glitch and was removed from competition, not a big thing but with a part not readily available. For this leg, we drove a support vehicle that was not in competition.

PERFORMANCE SEDANS

Genesis G80 AWD 3.3T Sport

• 365 hp • 24 mpg • \$57,750 / \$58,725

Also reviewed in this issue from a weeklong drive in Arizona, this full-size all-wheel-drive turbocharged sport sedan delivers sure-footed power and autobahn leanings that can be compared to considerably pricier Europeans.

Mercedes-AMG E43 Sedan

• 396 hp • 25 mpg • \$72,400 / \$91,175

Nine vehicles now comprise a unified Mercedes-AMG 43 family: AMG C43 Coupe, Sedan and Cabriolet; this AMG E43 Sedan; AMG SLC43 Roadster; and four different AMG 43 SUVs and wagons. With AMG 63 and 65 models farther up the lineup, the AMG 43 models provide a compelling starting point in the stratosphere.

BMW M550i xDrive Sedan

• 456 hp • 25 mpg • \$72,100 / \$88,985

This BMW 5 Series with M modifications followed new value-point contender Genesis G80S and close competitor Mercedes-AMG in the run sequence—all three with AWD and performance upgrades. Between the two Germans, the most significant preferences are likely to be based on brand loyalties, though the BMW, while not a pure M car, bears 15 percent more horses (but Mercedes-AMG also offers an AMG E63 if budget allows).

Subaru WRX Limited

• 268 hp • 27 mpg • \$31,595 / \$34,555

Of the two most affordable entries in this group, WRX has a 13 percent higher price and 18 percent lower fuel

mileage (or with Sport Lineartronic CVT, 24 mpg), but 28 percent more horsepower, a fair tradeoff. Subaru's customer loyalty rate is among the highest in any business, and any WRX model has instant brand recognition.

Volkswagen Jetta 2.0T GLI

• 210 hp • 33 mpg • \$27,895 / \$28,715

VW's popular Jetta comes in three turbo drivetrains: 1.4T (150hp), 1.8T (170hp) and GLI with a 2.0T (210 hp). All are front-drivers. Top-trim GLI costs almost 60 percent more than the 1.4T for 40 percent more horsepower, but also has features and finishes that may have you comparing with Audi. Entry and mid trims offer manual transmission and up to 38 mpg. GLI's price goes up \$1650 for 2018.

Day Three. After dinner and a good night's sleep at base camp, Day Three had eight vehicles, which sounds easy after a 15-vehicle day, but includes some of the longest legs and ends earlier, with voting and departures by midafternoon.

Ford Focus RS 5-Door Hatchback

• 350 hp • 25 mpg • \$35,900 / \$39,560

Ford has gone full Euro with this model, delivering a high-horsepower all-wheel-drive performance hatch while keeping the price in the \$30s and fuel mileage in the mid-20s, feeding a 2.3L EcoBoost four through a 6-speed manual. It's a great head-turner, conversation starter and performer. (This was a 2016 model.)

Honda Civic Type R Touring

• 306 hp • 28 mpg • \$33,900 / \$34,775

From showy sheet metal and red trim highlights to its prominent rear wing, the new Civic Type R demands to be seen, heard and driven. Civic Type R compares with Civic Si (also in this issue) at about 50 percent more power, 40 percent higher price and 26 lower fuel mileage. Drive-by-wire is one of many technologies that keep weight just a hair over 3000 lb and provide precision power and handling while still a front-driver.

PERFORMANCE COUPES

Infiniti Q60 Red Sport 400

• 400 hp • 27 mpg • \$51,300 / \$56,705

We drove this refined beast at Circuit of the Americas last spring among a group not running quite as high in power and price as the group here. Among performance coupes at Run to the Sun, the Infiniti has the lowest

horsepower and also the lowest price, but the comparisons are a mix—it costs barely more than half the next-lowest vehicle by horses, while it has just 57 percent the power of the next-lowest vehicle by price. This is what makes a horse race. Or a price race.

Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Widebody

• 707 hp • tbd mpg • \$63,795 / \$76,180

After seeing this as a static display in Michigan three months earlier, this was our chance to drive. Dodge has done two things with this model—it gives customers a new way to buy a Hellcat, a model on which nobody would otherwise want to change a thing; and it delivers the raw widebody stance of the dragstrip-ready SRT Demon, a vehicle people love to look at but fewer buy.

Nissan GT-R NISMO

• 565 hp • 22 mpg • \$174,990 / \$177,980

Nissan's rock solid supercar has by far the longest heritage among the group, and with good reason. This is another car on which most people would beg not to change a thing. Its cockpit and tech are a great mix of classic style and function with top technology, and its powertrain and handling are far more accessible than its numbers or reputation might suggest.

Chevrolet Corvette Grand Sport Coupe

(Note: driven here, Corvette GS moved to convertibles for voting)

Lexus LC 500 Coupe

• 471 hp • 26 mpg • \$92,000 / \$103,500

A buyer's toughest choice is between this 5.0L powertrain and the LC 500h hybrid (which we also drove at Circuit of the Americas last spring). The hybrid costs \$4000 more and has lower horsepower (354) but higher fuel economy (35 mpg). At COTA, it was in a performance coupe group, which generated discussion about whether it could have run with that event's supercars—33 percent more horses in this gasoline model clarifies that.

Acura NSX

• 573 hp • 22 mpg • \$156,000 / \$200,700

We finished the 24-car series as powerfully as we had started out, in Acura's return of their halo supercar, a technical wonder with a sport hybrid AWD drivetrain comprising two mechanically independent front-wheel electric motors and a midengine twin-turbo V6 powering a direct-drive motor for the rear wheels, running through a 9-speed dual clutch trans. The setup keeps city and combined fuel mileage at 21 and delivers sure-footed exhilaration throughout your drive experience.

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PERFORMANCE SEDANS (alphabetical)



BMW M550i xDrive Sedan



Ford Focus RS 5-Door Hatchback



Genesis G80 AWD 3.3T Sport



Honda Civic Type R Touring



Mercedes-AMG E43 Sedan



Subaru WRX Limited



Volkswagen Jetta 2.0T GLI



Awards. That's a wrap on driving. Now the results of first-ever Run to the Sun voting. Would vehicles in each diverse category win by performance? Price? Intangibles? All of the above?

BEST CONVERTIBLE: Mercedes-AMG GT C Roadster
Corvette might have won based on power/price balance. Miata might have won based on lowest price. McLaren might have won with top dog power and price status. But the Mercedes-AMG GT C Roadster, part of a whole new performance two-seater lineup, edged them all out.

BEST PERFORMANCE COUPE: Acura NSX
In a group with three six-figure supercars and the highest-horsepower vehicle of the day, the combination of second-highest horsepower, highest price and racecar-worthy technologies in the Acura NSX took the crown.

BEST PERFORMANCE SEDAN: Honda Civic Type R
There was a lot of style and power in this group, but the Honda Civic Type R took this category, with a strong power-to-price ratio, plus the glow that inevitably comes along for the ride with a brand new model.

BEST PERFORMANCE SUV: Audi SQ5 3.0T quattro
The Audi had three competitors with more horsepower, two with less and one within a point of identical. Its price falls about mid-pack (with greater variance once options were added to all). Goldilocks prevailed here.

MOST FUN OVERALL: Mercedes-AMG GT C Roadster
Participants were also asked to name one "most fun to buy vehicle" they would buy themselves.

Arizona tends toward more rarified sport and performance vehicles—go top dog or go home—and most of our roads are this clear and dry most of the time. We suspect a couple of wins would be different here, but as always with Run to the Sun, there was not a loser in the entire group.

We'll be interested to see how entries line up next year, now that the event will be known well in advance to have been redefined with categories and awards. ■

PERFORMANCE SUVS (alphabetical)



Alfa Romeo Stelvio Ti Sport AWD



Audi SQ5 3.0T quattro tiptronic



BMW X4 M40i



Dodge Durango SRT 392



Jeep Grand Cherokee Trackhawk



MINI Cooper S E Countryman ALL4



Volvo XC60 T8 E-AWD Inscription

