

Verification

BY JOE SAGE PHOTOS: JOE SAGE AND KEVIN MCCAULEY / TAWA

TAWA, the Texas Auto Writers Association, hosts two high-profile comparo events each year. We drive and judge in both. In the fall is the Texas Truck Rodeo, with heavy off-pavement emphasis; each spring is the Texas Auto Roundup, where pavement emphasis is an understatement.

As Texas means trucks (home to several manufacturers' assembly plants, test facilities and regional or national offices), the Texas Truck Rodeo's awards have national and even global significance (almost sure to generate Super Bowl ads). The Texas Auto Roundup basks in the same halo.

This year's was our fourth Texas Auto Roundup. In prior years, it was held at Texas Motor Speedway near Fort Worth, a NASCAR and IndyCar facility

with a road course in the infield, then Circuit of the Americas (COTA) southeast of Austin, home to FIA Formula One, American Le Mans Series, IMSA and other events. This year, the event moved to Eagles Canyon Raceway, outside Decatur, Texas, an hour north-northwest of DFW Airport—a 2.55-mile club track with eleven turns and six straightaways up to 2000 feet in length. Set in the Texas countryside, Eagles Canyon follows natural terrain.

Almost 50 members of the media drove almost 50 vehicles at this year's event. We use the track much as we might use Texas two-lane farm and ranch roads (if only we could, this aggressively). "We're not racing," TAWA president Michael Marrs reminded the eager group before we

started, encouraging us to think of the track as "a public road simulator facility." Those were words to temper the savage beast, but each vehicle was given a strong launch—one car at a time, at intervals—full acceleration, a succession of tight turns and grade changes, various cones and chicanes, and a spot for braking from speed. In most cases, manufacturer representatives are also on hand to ride along, answer questions and point out special features, capabilities and changes in new models.

Just a few years ago, traditionally domestic brands had a reputation for dominating the wins in Texas, but now it's anybody's game. (This is without even getting into the complexities of "foreign" brands based and/or built in America.) Out of 11 category trophies, a grand total of one first place win went to the domestics; add in runners-up, and you add three more. The lion's share went to the Germans, Italians, Japanese and Koreans. The overall Car of Texas and Family Car of Texas title trophies went to one domestic and one import.

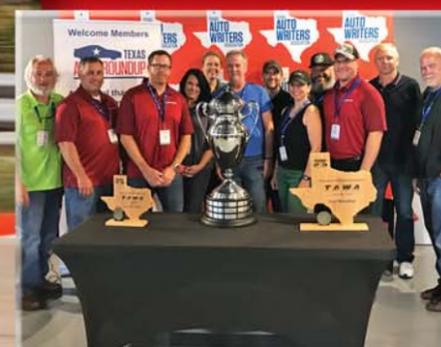
There is no predetermined vehicle driving sequence, so each driver grabs whatever he or she can, in whatever order (subject to ongoing availability of some of the hottest rides). Scoring is entered online during midday break and at the end of the day, with efficient and accurate electronic tabulation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

There's a certain amount of glory in running at the big tracks—Texas Motor Speedway and COTA—but Eagles Canyon Raceway was perfect for the event, with handy staging adjacent to the course and just the right length to get everything done.

Categories are determined by the event group, and entries are chosen and placed in categories by the manufacturers, with a certain amount of flex by both parties at times. Among eleven vehicle categories, six had just two vehicles each. The most crowded segment was Activity Vehicle, with eight contenders. Any number of vehicles could have been in different classes, and some were in more than one. Ultimately, each manufacturer wants us to experience and evaluate each vehicle in its own best and most appropriate light.

KEEP RIGHT >>

Eagles Canyon Raceway instructors offered right-seat orientation runs in the club's midengine Porsche Cayman coupes (left). Sponsors included the Steel Market Development Institute (SMDI), Polaris Slingshot (who despite not competing gave us each all the track time we wanted, center right), and Dallas communication firm Wieck. For dinner, we headed to restaurants, coffee and ice cream surrounding the downtown Denton County Courthouse-on-the-Square (at right)—the original hometown center of this rapidly growing college town (home to University of North Texas, Texas Woman's University and others).



GETTING AROUND IN TEXAS

2018 TOYOTA AVALON TOURING

We got to Texas just as the future did, too. Our Denton-addressed hotel was so new (we were among the very first guests) that it was not in the nav system. In fact, the whole area is so new, we were not on any roads at all, on screen, for that flying car feeling. (Nobody else's nav showed it, either.)

The future also got ahead of itself with our wheels. We had a nice new 2018 Toyota Avalon to drive from DFW to our hotel and to the track outside Decatur. But within a week, Toyota introduced an all-new 2019 Avalon.

Longer, lower and wider, with shorter overhangs and its cabin extended by seven inches, the gen-five 2019 Avalon features more power and improved fuel economy from new V6 and hybrid powertrains, new multi-link rear and available adaptive variable suspensions, standard Entune 3.0 and connectivity via wifi, Toyota Remote, smartwatch, Amazon Alexa and Apple CarPlay.

While the 2018 Avalon—a near-Lexus experience at Toyota prices—suited our purposes very nicely, the main thing we got out of our drive time may have been perspective. The all-new 2019 Avalon (starting at \$35,500), noticeably restyled and updated in every way, would, in fact, turn out to be one of the vehicles we drove at the Texas Auto Roundup, where it won its category, Full-Size Car. Already a great car, the award for the 2019 is enough to tell you it is only getting better. ■



Best Compact Car



Best Midsize Car



Best Full-Size Car



Best Full-Size Luxury Car



Best Minivan



Best Green Vehicle



Following are category winners and runners-up, with other entrants in alphabetical order. Most were 2018 models, with five 2019s as noted.

COMPACT CAR

WINNER.....**Toyota Corolla Hatchback (2019)**
RUNNERUP..Volkswagen Golf R
ALSOMazda3
.....Volkswagen Golf GTI
.....Volkswagen Jetta

MIDSIZE CAR

WINNER.....**Toyota Camry**
RUNNERUP..Volkswagen Passat

FULL-SIZE CAR

WINNER.....**Toyota Avalon (2019)**
RUNNERUP..Honda Accord

FULL-SIZE LUXURY CAR

WINNER.....**Lexus LS 500**
RUNNERUP..Infiniti QX50 (2019)

ANALYSIS: In Compacts, Volkswagen showed up in force, which may have diluted their vote. Mazda3 is a perennial favorite, but the 2019 Corolla marks a big change to hatchback form and took home the trophy. Three out of four of the "Car" categories had just two entrants, which makes votes seem very clear, but who knows how more would have affected things. Infiniti's entry of a crossover (not their biggest) as a Full-Size Luxury Car is a bit different (it also entered as Performance Utility). Toyota and Lexus took all four Car titles—did their recent headquarters relocation from LA to Plano, Texas, give home field advantage? There is nothing like that in scoring, of course, but they did have the easiest job bringing their trophies home to the office display case.

MINIVAN

WINNER.....**Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid**
ANALYSIS: Pacifica Hybrid wins this category so often, it had it to itself this year—and won.

GREEN VEHICLE

WINNER.....**Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid**
RUNNERUP..Honda Clarity
ALSOKia Niro PHEV
.....Nissan Leaf
.....Toyota Camry Hybrid

ANALYSIS: Many could enter this is "self-defined" category, as once "alternative" powertrains become mainstream. Despite many all-new vehicles, the win went to one that has been bagging trophies since it was born, the Pacifica Hybrid.

ACTIVITY VEHICLE

WINNER.....**Infiniti QX80**
RUNNERUP..Jeep Wrangler
ALSOFord EcoSport
.....Hyundai Kona
.....Kia Sorento (2019)
.....Mazda CX-5
.....Nissan Rogue Sport
.....Toyota C-HR

ANALYSIS: This may be the most self-defined of all, broader and even subjective. Buzz in the marketplace right now is on the smallest crossovers, here from Ford, Hyundai and Toyota, and Nissan (though their smaller Kicks would be launched just weeks later). There's little debate about Jeep Wrangler being a highly active vehicle, and it's all new this year, yet the trophy went to a big luxury family hauler that has been around for years, the Infiniti QX80 (formerly QX56).

PERFORMANCE COMPACT

WINNER.....**Honda Civic Type R**
RUNNERUP..Mazda MX-5 Miata

ANALYSIS: Newest and shiniest often takes the trophy in any category at such events, but that was a mixed bag among the Performance categories. In the two-car Compact class, Mazda MX-5 Miata has been a crowd- and judge-pleasing perennial for literally decades, but the Civic Type R—which has been pretty universally acclaimed and coveted since its launch over the prior year or so—won the gold.

PERFORMANCE COUPE

WINNER.....**Lexus LC 500**
RUNNERUP..Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Widebody
ALSOFord Mustang GT 5.0L
.....Lexus RC F

ANALYSIS: Performance Coupes were an interesting mix, two lightweighted Detroit irons and two luxury Japanese. Despite Lexus competing with themselves, they took another top prize here, perhaps surprisingly, as the most expensive of the foursome. (The LC 500h hybrid won this slot last year.)

PERFORMANCE SEDAN

WINNER.....**Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio**
RUNNERUP..Kia Stinger

ANALYSIS: Whereas the Kia Stinger is all new, has created quite a stir and has won many other accolades, the new-last-year 505-hp Alfa Giulia was a repeat win from last year, despite its having at least three times the price tag.

PERFORMANCE UTILITY

WINNER.....**Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio**
RUNNERUP..Dodge Durango SRT
ALSOInfiniti QX50 (2019)
.....Toyota Sequoia

ANALYSIS: Italian and American cousins, two from Japan, one luxury, one not, with a more-than-twofold price range, plenty of power in at least three, though applied very differently—and just about anything could happen. In the final analysis, it's another Performance win for Alfa.

SUPERCAR

WINNER.....**Mercedes-AMG GT R Coupe**
RUNNERUP..Jeep Grand Cherokee Trackhawk

ANALYSIS: With 707 hp (same as a Hellcat), this very special Grand Cherokee is pricey, but still about half the price of the AMG, and it carries exponentially more goods and people. The AMG's Green Hell Magno may have tipped the scales, as well as its more traditional supercar form and presence.

Value is part of the vote, but there are several instances where the most expensive vehicle won, which seems to perhaps underscore the fact that the judges do not have to actually write a check.

Manufacturers could also enter their vehicles in the following two categories—the first with considerable variety, and the second of which could be a very tough call in an era of highly advanced interiors, though only a handful entered.

BEST TECHNOLOGY FEATURE

WINNER.....**Infiniti QX50 (2019): world's first production-ready variable compression ratio engine**
ALSOFord Mustang: 12" digital instrument cluster
.....Infiniti QX80: smart rear view mirror
.....Toyota Avalon: Amazon Alexa

BEST NEW INTERIOR

WINNER.....**Toyota Avalon Touring (2019)**
ALSOInfiniti QX50 (2019)
.....Volkswagen Jetta

Finally, a clean-slate vote determines two big winners from among the entire set of entries, the big dawg trophies of the entire event. Category votes are not part of this separate tally, though each winner had indeed also won its category.

TITLE AWARDS

CAR OF TEXAS: Lexus LC 500
FAMILY CAR OF TEXAS: Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid

Next up is the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo, in October. We've already booked our flights. ■

Best Activity Vehicle



Best Performance Coupe



Best Performance Utility



Car of Texas ★



Best Performance Compact



Best Performance Sedan



Best Supercar



Family Car of Texas ★

