

BORN IN A CROSSFIRE HURRICANE

BONE-CHILLING TRUCK RODEO MIXES IT UP WITH THE WEATHERMAN

by Joe Sage / Photos: Kevin McCauley @capturingthemachine / and Joe Sage

Mudfest is the longstanding nickname of one of the largely off-road vehicle comparos we drive and judge in every year, the Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards in the Pacific Northwest. However, it was hard for us not to think of that term during this year's Texas Truck Rodeo in the Hill Country outside Austin.

(Mudfest is an event of NWAPA, the Northwest Automotive Press Association; Texas Truck Rodeo is an event of TAWA, the Texas Auto Writers Association; we are members of both groups.)

There's quite a bit of travel in our line of work, and we readily admit to looking ahead at the weather map, knowing we hope to see some rain or blizzards or something else exciting. Living in the Valley of the Sun can do that to you. Not that we mind our relentlessly perfect weather—it's a fundamental reason to live here. Sure, we have some extremely wild monsoon storms and the occasional snowy surprise for an hour or so midwinter. But if we can hit a wild storm elsewhere in our travels,

that'd be something. At least in theory.

Temperatures in the Sonoran Desert had only just within the prior week or so dropped from about 110 to more like 80 degrees, as the fringes of Hurricane Sergio barely brushed us. When we arrived in Austin on a Sunday afternoon, the temp was about the same. But Sergio's huge ball of remnant storm weather had also headed for Texas, and by morning, it had dropped another 40 degrees—and the rains had begun.

The drive from our hotel to the Longhorn River Ranch, site of the Texas Truck Rodeo, takes about 45 minutes. By the time we stepped out of the car out there, wind-whipped rain cut right to the bone, and all including a few with knee-high rubber boots were slogging through deep mud—grassy fields an hour earlier—in a scene reminiscent of something between Woodstock and basic training.

They call this "driving rain," but not for the reason we would hope for, on our first driving day.

The 1632-acre ranch has open meadows, tree-



lined lakes and streams and significant elevation changes. Four courses comprise a Level One route for the heartiest and hardest off-roaders, with steep grades, deep ruts, rolling rockslides and a number of normal water crossings; a slightly less extreme Level Two course for solid weekend adventure off-roaders; a Level Three course of dirt and gravel roads suited to all-wheel-drivers good for weekend fishing and picnic trips; and a Level Four course on two-lane paved country roads in the immediate region for crossovers without any serious off-road intentions. Many vehicles can run on more than one of these routes.

Before a fresh, warm Mexican breakfast could even be served—in a tent that was as cold as the outdoors and threatening to become just as wet, flapping in the wind as the mud followed us in—the course crews had taken a new test run on the Level One course, and the decision had already been made to close that. When rocky hillclimbs become water courses, too, there was just too much risk to life, limb, pricey machinery and even the ongoing pace of the event to take a chance on likely predictable mishaps.

With almost 50 vehicles to drive, in 18 categories, we proceeded to grab some of the toughest, to tackle the Level Two course, which proved to be as nasty as Level One would usually be, probably moreso. This was not, as they say, our first rodeo, and tough conditions are not only to be expected but to be embraced—to a degree. A succession of modern cabins with premium creature comforts made the drives themselves fine from the inside, though visibility was slipping outside, in sheets of rain that at times approached a whiteout snowstorm, while notably deep water in the route's otherwise desirable rocks and ruts were creating fountains of mud that reduced visibility further, both on our glass and in the view ahead. Most of all, though, a few factors were continuing to build against the event. Whereas other off-road events have happened to have a paved lot or a large barn as staging areas, this locale is one hundred percent grass and dirt. No matter how comfortable anyone could delude themselves into thinking they were while driving, there was no way to get out of one vehicle and choose another without getting soaked even moreso—socks and boots, especially. As for the ranch, after any such event every effort is made to return things to their normal state, but we were destroying the place rapidly. And on top of all that, anyone could tell, after the first couple of hours, that we would never get anywhere near the needed number of vehicles driven by the needed number of drivers.

But what could you do? Such an event takes as much preparation and logistical work—and personnel—as the invasion of a small country. And there is not a person there or a company involved that doesn't have a schedule that's booked to the gills well into the future. Rescheduling would be beyond impractical and effectively impossible. And other than the generally decreasing feasibility of it all, we were all ready to rock.

A power core of participants, crew and manufacturers' representatives powwowed in one of the ranch's stone houses, as others variously drove, huddled in the tent, wrung out their socks a few more times, or in at least one case just sat in the



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muddy meadow in a front-drive crossover with wheels hopelessly spinning in place.

A decision was made. We would move the event, lock stock and burritos, back to the hotel, in itself no easy task. Trucks and utilities were quickly allocated among us all, and we drove back to the hotel. Meanwhile, staff and management at our base, the Sonesta Bee Cave Austin Hotel, pulled unimaginable strings to accommodate an event they'd never even experienced, other than lodging and feeding us. By the time we arrived back at the hotel, they had cleared out virtually all of their underground garage just for our purposes.

We are probably all a bit jaded at these events, even the toughest ones, in that most people expect to just show up and start driving, with all the details taken care of by the invisible hands of their hardest-working colleagues. As such, drivers quickly adapted to working through their same vehicle lists from the depths of the large garage.

But the hotel deserves huge praise for their efforts, as do the manufacturers, who told us they completely trusted the organization to come up with as workable an alternate solution as possible in these conditions. And the show goes on.

Our new course was on pavement, with a short and a long route quickly established and mapped. Being in the Hill Country—though a rapidly developing portion of the Hill Country—roads were a mix of lightly traveled hilly and curvy four-lane boulevards and stretches of busier suburban business. Most drivers quickly adapted, mixing in various improvised routes in the same region. Someone even came up with an off-road feature in an undeveloped area not far from our hotel—with its own heavy rain, mud and sudden lakes, a great detour and photo op for a few of the tougher units.

The pace picked back up, and since all the drivers and manufacturers are very accustomed to doing this the usual way, with dirt and rocks, we were able to translate our experiences and evaluations into that mindset. It's certainly not as powerful as the real thing, but it was surprisingly effective—and suitable enough to gauge features and performance enough to vote.

Our dinner that night was held at another ranch almost as far out as Lomhorn River Ranch, though we moved the whole thing indoors there, too, with zero discussion needed. As the rains continued, we found ourselves stuck on a small country road, in the dark, in flash flood waters quickly rising from 18 inches to two feet and still rising. Backing up a couple of full-size buses in these conditions was its own subadventure. We later learned that some had hit similar flooding while driving out to dinner and had had to just give up.

There was still another drive day ahead, and Murphy's Law would of course have us awake to

blue skies and sunshine. Not this time around. That was a good thing, really, as a modified event on a beautiful day would have been kind of frustrating, though there is no way the staging meadows and original courses at the ranch could have been re-prepped overnight, anyway.

By early afternoon, the driving was complete, and it was time to vote. Just as we had been able to combine prior experience with new drives to evaluate the vehicles, we were able to rate their attributes effectively on our ballots.

Our awards dinner was held at Star Hill Ranch, one of our favorites, a venue that has created a frontier Texas town from a variety of actual historic buildings brought in from around the state. Usually, dinner is held on the dirt main street, with a band playing on the general store's steps and the top winning vehicles driven out of the shadows and into the lights to receive their trophies.

As Star Hill Ranch is a popular wedding location, there is a chapel and also a big dance hall. And as you might suspect, this rainy year the dinner and presentations were moved indoors.

CATEGORY AWARDS

Following are winners and runners-up in various individual vehicle categories (as well as others from those categories, alphabetically). All were 2019 models, unless noted otherwise.

Crossovers

COMPACT CROSSOVER

- 1st.....Nissan Kicks SR
- 2ndMazda CX-3 Grand Touring AWD
- others.....Jeep Compass Limited
-Mitsubishi Eclipse Cross SEL
-Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV GT

MIDSIZE CROSSOVER

- 1st.....Nissan Murano Midnight Ed AWD (2018)
- 2ndHonda Pilot Elite

FULL-SIZE CROSSOVER

- 1st.....Mazda CX-9 Signature AWD
- 2ndVolkswagen Tiguan SEL (2018)

LUXURY CROSSOVER

- 1st.....Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio (2018)
- 2ndLexus UX 250h F Sport
- others.....Infiniti QX50 Essential

SUVs

SUBCOMPACT SUV

- 1st.....Hyundai Kona Ultimate AWD (2018)
- 2ndFiat 500X Trekking AWD (2018)

COMPACT SUV

- 1st.....Toyota RAV4 Adventure
- 2ndJeep Cherokee Trailhawk
- others.....Hyundai Santa Fe Ultimate 2.0T
-Jeep Cherokee Limited
-Nissan Rogue SL AWD
-Toyota RAV4 XSE HV

MIDSIZE SUV

- 1st.....Jeep Wrangler Sahara (2018)
- 2ndToyota 4Runner Nightshade Limited
- others.....Kia Sorento SXL AWD
-Subaru Ascent Limited 8-Passenger
-Toyota Volkswagen Atlas SEL (2018)

FULL-SIZE SUV

- 1st.....Dodge Durango SRT
- 2ndNissan Armada Platinum 4x4

Luxury SUVs

COMPACT LUXURY SUV

- 1st.....Volvo XC40 R-Design
- 2ndAcura RDX Advance

MIDSIZE LUXURY SUV

- 1st.....Jeep Grand Cherokee Summit
- 2ndLexus RX 350L

FULL-SIZE LUXURY SUV

- 1st.....Maserati Levante GTS
- 2ndInfiniti QX80 Limited

Off-Road Utility Vehicles

OFF-ROAD UTILITY VEHICLE

- 1st.....Jeep Wrangler Rubicon (2018)
- 2ndToyota 4Runner TRD Pro

Trucks

MIDSIZE PICKUP

- 1st.....Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro

FULL-SIZE PICKUP

- 1st.....Ram 1500 Limited
- 2ndNissan Titan Crew Cab SL
- others.....Toyota Tundra TRD Pro

HEAVY DUTY PICKUP

- 1st.....Ram 2500 Power Wagon (2018)

LUXURY PICKUP

- 1st.....Ram 1500 Laramie Longhorn
- 2ndNissan Titan Platinum Reserve

OFF-ROAD PICKUP

- 1st.....Ram 1500 Rebel
- 2ndNissan Titan PRO-4X

COMMERCIAL VEHICLE

- 1st.....Nissan Titan XD Single Cab

FEATURE AWARDS

Manufacturers enter their proudest new features and technologies for these awards.

BEST TECHNOLOGY

- 1st.....FCA UConnect 4C With 12-inch Screen
- 2ndInfiniti Smart Rearview Mirror

BEST POWERTRAIN

- 1st.....Ram eTorque Mild Hybrid
- 2ndInfiniti VC-Turbo

BEST CONNECTIVITY

- 1st.....Volvo Sensus

OVERALL AWARDS

These are the big dog trophies, the ones likely to generate Super Bowl commercials.

Truck of Texas

- 1st.....Ram 1500
- 2ndRam 2500 Power Wagon (2018)

SUV of Texas

- 1st.....Maserati Levante GTS
- 2ndJeep Wrangler Rubicon (2018)

Crossover of Texas

- 1st.....Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio (2018)
- 2ndMazda CX-9

"Epic" is a highly overused word, but no-one disputed it was appropriate here. The storm met or surpassed records for rainfall, flash floods and rising lakes even while we were there, and it continued for days more. Odds are good that next year's Truck Rodeo will have beautiful weather. Meadows and trails will have been handsomely restored. And the event will proceed normally. But everyone will still be talking about this year. ■

Truck of the Year: Ram 1500



Hyundai Kona



Honda Pilot



SUV of the Year: Maserati Levante GTS



Lexus LX 570



Jeep Wrangler



CUV of the Year: Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio



Toyota Tacoma



Nissan Titan

