

Just how much fun can you handle?

WE COVER OVER 500 MOUNTAIN, HIGH PLAINS AND COLUMBIA RIVERSIDE MILES OVER THREE DAYS IN 18 PERFORMANCE VEHICLES WORTH OVER \$1 MILLION AND BEARING OVER 7000 HP

By Joe Sage - Photos: cars by Doug Berger and Bailey O'Bar for NWAPA / scenics by Joe Sage

Although each vehicle at a comparative drive event is chosen by its manufacturer to show off something special, there is room for both objectivity and subjectivity—as they choose and as we analyze. Some cost considerably more than others, have more horsepower than others or have specific features lacking in others, while others may just have more personality or novelty.

When you have your hands on the wheels of a potent lineup like this, on great open roads—but not your hand on your wallet, a ballpoint pen in one hand and a sales contract on the table—it can be easy to momentarily forget about cost, specific power or other details. This is not all bad. Though all that is considered, the Northwest Automotive Press Association's annual Run to the Sun event also surely goes right to the heart and soul.

This year's event covered 527 miles in north-central Oregon, through Cascade Mountains, canyons, grasslands and lava outcrops on two-lane roads, as well as along the mighty Columbia River (driving on the Washington side for a stretch).

Run to the Sun is distinguished from other comparos by having a predetermined driver and vehicle sequence, vital to keeping things moving on a long road route, efficient while also ensuring every

driver drives each and every car.

Vehicles were categorized in five groups: Convertibles, Performance Coupes, Performance Sedans and Performance SUVs. We would vote for a favorite in each category, as well as one overall.

Vehicle photos are alphabetical by category, while our narrative is by our drive sequence. MPG is highway; prices are the particular model's base and as driven. Models are 2018 or 2019 as noted.

Day 1.

A one-vehicle day, this covers the longest drive segment of the event, from the Portland airport to our overnight spot outside Welches, Oregon (elevation 1320 feet), near the base of Mt Hood.

Each driver's first car is a matter of where the scissors snip the list. Our particular rotation had us start out in the middle of the largest category, Performance Sedans.

PERFORMANCE SEDANS

Kia Stinger GT2 RWD V6 (2018)
365 hp / 25 mpg.....\$49,200 / \$50,100
There's considerable variety in the Kia Stinger lineup—most notably four-cylinder and V6 models with rear- or all-wheel drive—and we've driven all before, all lively performers, four-door pony cars of a sort, presented as grand tourers. Here we had the top rear-driver (for \$2100 more, you can have AWD), which as a GT2 includes a limited-slip rear differential and shift-by-wire instead of

cable. It was a great vehicle for leg one, escaping from the Portland area to wooded mountain two-lanes.

Day 2.

For our longest drive day, with eleven vehicle-route segments, we resumed with two Performance Sedans, then moved on to other categories. (In our rotation, we would not visit the top of the sedan list till the end of Day Three.)

PERFORMANCE SEDANS (cont'd)

Subaru WRX STI Type RA (2018)
310 hp / 22 mpg.....\$48,995 / \$49,855
This potent AWD daily driver off-road rally champion has a higher base price than anything in the Subaru lineup except the top trim of the new three-row Ascent SUV (see elsewhere in this issue). Already top performance-specified from A to Z, our sample was a 2018 special edition—featuring weight reduction, revised gearing and five bonus horses—the Type RA as in "record attempt," in honor of their 2017 fastest-ever sedan lap at the Nürburgring. We loved its very cool contextually personalized digital instrumentation set with analog style cues.

Genesis G70 RWD 3.3T Dynamic Edition (2019)
365 hp / 26 mpg.....\$50,250 / \$51,245
Hyundai and Kia generally make a point of neither comparing nor discussing commonalities in their US lineups. However, Genesis, now split off as a third (and more up-market) brand, freely described the differences between their new G70 grand tourer and its first-to-market cousin the Kia Stinger. Genesis G70 engine and drivetrain fundamentals are essentially the same as Stinger. But the

G70 is a few inches shorter, thus also a bit lighter, and has a sportier suspension setup, duly noted as we had this for a cliffhanging open road stretch around Mt Hood.

PERFORMANCE SUVs

Acura RDX SH-AWD A-Spec (2019)
272 hp / 26 mpg.....\$45,500 / \$46,495
In a performance-built category, this Acura features an A-Spec package that adds sportiness—wheels, spoilers, fog lights, aluminum pedals and such—geared toward style but not adding horses. It also doesn't add too many dollars—this is the most affordable in the group, though with the other three averaging 508 hp and two getting fuel mileage in the 20s, competition is stiff.

Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio AWD (2018)
505 hp / 23 mpg.....\$79,795 / \$85,890
Power and price climbed quickly in this group, with the Alfa Romeo priced 75 to 85 percent higher (base and as tested) than the Acura, but also with horsepower 86 percent higher. With all that power, the Alfa's fuel mileage is only 11.5 percent lower than the Acura. The Stelvio, particularly in top performance Quadrifoglio AWD trim, had bagged a lot of comparo trophies already—a promising start, but let's see who else showed up here....

Maserati Levante GTS (2019)
550 hp / 18 mpg.....\$119,980 / \$131,800
Horsepower continued to climb within this group, as did price. If we thought the Alfa had a significant cost bump above the Acura, we just jumped up another 50 percent with the Maserati Levante GTS. Fuel mileage moves down, comparatively, but none of that matters when you drive it, and it likely won't much matter for those who buy it and feed it, either. The Levante GTS (which we had met in Michigan this summer) is a new entry, at notably lower price than the Levante Trofeo, while trading off just 40 horses, from 590 down to 550—a more than fair trade against their top dog. And the cabin is a knockout.

Mercedes-AMG GLC63 4MATIC SUV (2018)
469 hp / 22 mpg.....\$69,900 / \$87,440
Among these four entries, the AMG hits a Goldilocks spot in power, fuel mileage and base price, although as outfitted here costs about like the Alfa. The GLC lineup offers many choices, as noted in our last issue's writeup on the GLC43 Coupe—box or coupe body styles, regular

KEEP RIGHT >>

PERFORMANCE SUVs (alphabetical)



Acura RDX A-Spec



Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio



Maserati Levante GTS



Mercedes-AMG GLC63 SUV

PERFORMANCE COUPES (alphabetical)



Chevrolet Camaro ZL1



Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Redeye WB



Ford Mustang Bullitt



Ford Mustang GT



Toyota 86 TRD Special Edition



or AMG flavors, with multiple powertrains in any. As noted then, all this can actually lead to a simple decision among them. The Run to the Sun model gave us a chance to compare its 469-hp V8 GLC63 with that prior 362-hp biturbo V6 GLC43. The only German in this group, potent and solidly featured, it gave us a 42 percent drop in price but just a 15 percent drop in power from the Maserati.

PERFORMANCE COUPES

Toyota 86 TRD Special Edition (2019)

205 hp / 28 mpg.....\$32,420 / \$35,008

The Toyota 86 coupe—also covered in our last issue, the former Scion FR-S, though always a Toyota 86 in much of the world, also a twin to the Subaru BRZ—has the best fuel mileage in this group, though all are close enough to not likely be a deciding factor. It also has the lowest price by quite a bit, which very likely could be a deciding factor for many buyers, though the tradeoff in horsepower is far more than pro rata to price in our set. The core draw with the 86 is its traditional sports car fun formula.

Ford Mustang GT Coupe Premium (2018)

460 hp / 25 mpg.....\$39,095 / \$51,185

Mustang comes as a 310-hp four-cylinder EcoBoost or a 460-hp V8 GT. This GT adds \$2200 in Premium touches (ambient lighting, voice-activated touchscreen and such), as well as a Level 2 Performance Package with 19-inch wheels, Magne-Ride damping, Torsen rear axle and rear spoiler (\$6600), plus performance exhaust and Recaro seats (\$895, \$1595), bringing it above \$50 grand. Ford entered this Mustang GT along with a Mustang Bullitt. We've seen comparo events where two similar vehicles are entered as one for voting, but here they would be separate. Might this split the vote so neither could win?

Chevrolet Camaro ZL1 Coupe (2018)

650 hp / 21 mpg.....\$61,500 / \$68,585

Sound expensive for a Camaro? Instead of comparing it with their base model, look at Corvette ZR1. Both have 6.2L supercharged V8s, though Corvette's is built to 755 hp. The Camaro is just 125 pounds heavier than the Corvette. And price? Corvette ZR1 starts at \$121,000 (almost exactly double the Camaro ZL1) and runs up above \$130 grand. The Camaro ZL1 is a great performer, just the right bit showy but not too much so, and comes with those sure-to-be-mentioned Corvette ZR1 bragging rights.

Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Redeye (2019)

797 hp / 22 mp.....\$58,650 / \$90,590

Dodge Challenger always broadcasts a strong persona

when it shows up next to the other ponies. Push it to SRT Hellcat levels, and its horsepower eclipses all (yet with launch control and cylinder deactivation keeping it useful on weekends or on a daily basis). And this year? Meet the Challenger SRT Hellcat Redeye Widebody (featured in our last issue), at 797 hp far exceeding the basic Hellcat (just pushed from 707 to 717 hp) and basically filling the needs of former dragstrip-ready SRT Demon buyers (that was 840 hp) in a more, well, arguably mainstream setup.

Ford Mustang Bullitt (2019)

480 hp / [tbd] mpg.....\$46,595 / \$52,885

Mustang Bullitt carries a lot of character with it wherever it goes, starting with the name's 50-year heritage. (Also see our prior issue for a full feature.) A limited edition built on the Mustang GT, Bullitt has 20 more horses and a bit higher starting price, but even this max-level Recaro version is just \$1700 higher than the GT Premium also running in this group. (The Bullitt is a 2019 model, to the GT's 2018.) Though available also in black, ours came—as almost all surely should—in Steve McQueen *Bullitt* movie-evoking Highland Green. Probably more people came up to our group at various stops asking whether they could steal this or the Redeye than any others.

Day 3.

Six vehicles sounds easy after an eleven-vehicle day, but Day Three has some of the longest legs and ends earlier, with lunchtime voting and early afternoon departures. With a morning temperature of 34 degrees (at an elevation about the same as Scottsdale), we started out with the convertibles—and nonetheless yes, of course, top down!

CONVERTIBLES

Fiat 500c POP Cabrio (2018)

135 hp / 33 mpg.....\$17,740 / \$21,170

Price seems to be everything with certain models at this event—and it's certainly a major bragging point for the Fiat 500 Cabrio. At \$17,740 base, it's the least expensive open-top new car in America. The savings continue with its high fuel mileage. Dragstrip power is not its game, but fun certainly is, in spades. Power-to-pounds, its 135 hp proves to be a lot more than it sounds like on paper.

Mazda MX-5 Miata RF (2019)

181 hp / 34 mpg.....\$33,335 / \$35,905

Miata has its roots in affordable classic sports car per-

formance, so comparing its power and fuel mileage with the Fiat (35 percent more horsepower and about the same fuel mileage), things may be looking quite good here for the Miata, but its price has been climbing, in this case hitting around double the Fiat's price. Replacing the old soft top Miata last year, this retractable hardtop boasts perfect 50/50 weight distribution.

PERFORMANCE SEDANS (resume)

Lexus ES 350 F Sport (2019)

302 hp / 31 mpg.....\$44,035 / \$52,414

This is the first of three in a row that are amped-up models of mild-mannered sedans, aiming to take on better known performance-first brands. Lexus ES, a mainstay of conservative sedan shopping for years, receives its first F Sport treatment for 2019. We used to think of F Sport models as not-really-full-on F cars, but have come to appreciate them considerably as less expensive, more fuel-efficient yet potent turbos as an alternative to V8s. Add F Sport bits to an unassuming ES, buckle up and punch it.

Buick Regal GS AWD (2018)

310 hp / 27 mpg.....\$39,070 / \$44,115

Buick has already been polishing their brand, upping their image as premium performers, rather than the staid sedan lineup of days now long gone. Take the extremely useful Regal Sportback sedan, GS-engineer it with a 310-hp V6, standard all-wheel drive, Brembo dual-piston front brakes and more, and this has a fair shot at being the "BMW killer" so many have aspired to.

Buick Regal TourX: There are several support vehicles at the event, as well as a "spare" in case of mechanical failure or a mishap with one of the entries. For this, Buick also provided a Regal TourX, a shooting brake or wagon format we would have loved to also try (but did not need to).

Volkswagen Passat GT V6 (2018)

280 hp / 28 mpg.....\$29,145 / \$29,995

The VW Passat GT seems to be another sleeper version of a generally innocuous sedan, though they come at it from different ends of the equation. It can be seen as upping the four-cylinder models with a 280-hp V6, but perhaps more notably, it takes the V6 from the pricier SEL top-premium Passat and puts it in a simpler sport trim that gives you the fancier car's horsepower while saving over five grand. Subtle red trim identifies the GT.

BMW M5 Sedan (2018)

600 hp / 21 mpg.....\$102,600 / \$129,795

BMW's M vehicles are well established as über-perform-

ance alternatives to their mainstream equivalents, performance oriented in every way (this M5 pumps out 600 hp, far and away the highest output in this group) and priced accordingly (also far and away the highest in this group). For us, it was the last drive of the event and thus a great way to wish Run to the Sun could continue for days more—which we always wish, anyway.

Note: Below are the first three in our particular rotation again, for reference; see first page for more info.

Kia Stinger GT2 RWD V6 (2018)

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Subaru WRX STI Type RA (2018)

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Awards.

That's a wrap on driving—now the results of voting (for only the second year). Would vehicles win by performance? price? intangibles? all of the above? We don't get to see the tallies, but with just 18 votes per category, one or two tight votes could make all the difference. We also don't reveal our own votes, but our top votes matched some, others not. The subjective nature of the awards is reflected in each being called "Most Fun," rather than "Best."

MOST FUN IN THE SUN (CONVERTIBLE)

2019 Mazda MX-5 Miata RF

MOST FUN PERFORMANCE COUPE

2019 Ford Mustang Bullitt

MOST FUN PERFORMANCE SEDAN

2018 BMW M5

MOST FUN PERFORMANCE SUV

2018 Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio

MOST FUN TO DRIVE VEHICLE

2018 Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio

Arizona tends toward top dog sport and performance vehicles, and most of our roads are this clear and dry almost all of the time. A couple of wins are likely to be different here, but as always with Run to the Sun, there was not a loser in the entire group. And, as always, we're already looking forward to next year. ■

CONVERTIBLES (alphabetical)



Fiat 500 Cabrio



Mazda MX-5 Miata Grand Touring RF

PERFORMANCE SEDANS (alphabetical)



BMW M5



Buick Regal GS



Genesis G70



Kia Stinger GT



Lexus ES 350 F Sport



Subaru WRX STI Type RA



Volkswagen Passat GT

