

IT'S A DIRTY JOB, BUT SOMEBODY'S GOTTA DO IT.



By Joe Sage

Vehicle and people photos:
Kevin McCauley of Capturing the Machine

Lead trail photo: Joe Sage

The Texas Auto Writers' Association (TAWA) Texas Truck Rodeo has long been one of our don't-miss-it comparo events. After all, "Texas means trucks." As does Arizona. We have much commonality in terms of market and popular hardware.

The event has evolved over the years, much of it in line with how the vehicle market itself has developed new patterns.

Held in the fall, most vehicles used to be brand new next-year samples. But model year releases have become more scattered, for a variety of reasons—the past few years' lockdowns and supply chain disruptions among them. This may also be at least one reason some familiar brands have not shown up for a few years, while others have expanded or moved in anew.

Categories have also evolved, as at similar events, now broadly divided into SUVs (including crossovers) and pickups. These two sets are then divided up by sizes, or by luxury, off-road and EV categories. In many cases, but not all, vehicles appear in more than one category (e.g. full-size and off-road), which could seem equal parts opportunity or conflict, but helpful with a bit of cross-referencing. Categories and entries appear on the following pages.

The venues have changed, too. Originally held on big Texas Hill Country ranches full of natural features (rocks, rivers, steep off-road trails), the event moved to a small engineered course on a small property for a few years, which used to be the site of a second-evening awards dinner. Now, it is held at a site that combines elements of the two—a big North Texas acreage, home to Eagles

Canyon Raceway outside Decatur, with open dirt roads and trails, as well as specially prepared vehicle-challenging features (steep climbs, rock fields for articulation, water hazards and such).

We had a total of 29 vehicles and 41 drivers. With the event now compressed into one day, that's about seven hours for everyone to try them all—roughly four vehicles per hour, each. With time to check your charts against what's in the lot at any moment, often get a bit of a presentation and/or see if someone is riding along, drive out to the course from the staging area (and back) and repark, along with the time spent on the route and obstacles themselves, is this mathematically possible? A handful of vehicles are for pavement-only driving, which may or may not be a little quicker. Category overlap can help in some cases.

As you parse the (11) categories on the following pages, you'll find it all distills down to (14) SUVs and (8) pickups by brand and model (there are multiple variants of several). We work with more detailed information while driving and judging, but to get a reasonably healthy feel for things, here we are including the vehicle models and trims, horsepower, fuel mileage (or equivalent) and the price of our particular sample as optioned and driven.

There will be winners in each category, and the event culminates in two grand trophies via a separate, completely subjective vote—the SUV of Texas and the Truck of Texas.

But you will notice that information is not included here.

Voting used to be done, results tabulated and awards presented during dinner at the close of driving. Being crowned Truck of Texas used to keep automakers' ad agencies on the edge of their seats, ready to brag on billboards coast-to-coast to push year-end shopping, and in pricey Super Bowl ads for January—all proud of the power of the prestigious top trophies. In an atypical move, this information is now not revealed (even to ourselves) until later than the event and thus later than those traditional promotional cycles.

The reasoning seems to favor a more local or regional reach—saving the buzz for presentation during another Texas event. This year, even that will come in two waves. Category winners will be revealed at the San Antonio Auto Show in November, and the ultimate Truck of Texas and SUV of Texas trophies will not be known until the Houston Auto Show in January. (Such public presentations were often done in prior years, too, but did not preclude winners having already been announced promptly and widely, prior.)

We suspect this affects manufacturer participation.

Between our weekly vehicles, new model launches and other comparo events, we drive hundreds of vehicles each year. From now until these awards are announced will be the big LA and Detroit auto shows, as well as a new calendar year, all likely to bring new model year replacements for many. And next year's comparo drives will already be underway. You may likely develop your own new needs and new vehicles of interest along the way.

We tell you all this not to criticize the event, a complex and well-run affair. But we know you're wondering who the winners are—and otherwise may be thinking we forgot to tell you.

With all that in mind, hang on to the following vehicle and category information, which includes some brief insights for now. And we'll let you know, at those later points in time, which vehicles had prevailed in group voting, back before this point in time. Final results are always full of both affirmations and new insights. We generally never reveal our own votes, but do keep track, so we'll look forward to comparing them with groupthink.





At left (top to bottom): INEOS Grenadier, Kia Sorento, Nissan Kicks, Lexus GX, Toyota Crown Signia, Honda Prologue, Jeep Wrangler Rubicon 392.



SUVS

Subcompact SUV

2025 Nissan Kicks SR141/14028/35/31\$30,705

• **NOTES:** This hot-selling category had only one entry—so they will win it.

Midsize SUV

2025 Genesis GV80 Coupe 3.5T e-SC409/40518/22/20\$87,780
 2025 Honda Pilot TrailSport285/26218/23/2051,250
 2024 Honda Prologue Elite288/333MPGe 9259,295
 2024 Hyundai Santa Fe XRT 2.5T277/31119/26/2242,675
 2024 INEOS Grenadier Trialmaster282/33214/14/1483,855
 2024 Kia EV9 GT-Line379/516MPGe 8078,430
 2024 Kia Sorento X-PRO SXP 2.5T281/31120/27/2349,400
 2024 Lexus GX 550 Overtrail349/47915/21/17est 71,620
 Lexus GX 550 Luxury+349/47915/21/1784,665
 2024 Lexus TX 550h F SPORT366/31727/28/2778,660
 2025 Toyota Crown Signia Limited Hybrid240/46639/37/3851,730
 2024 Toyota Land Cruiser i-FORCE MAX326/46522/25/2371,809
 Toyota Land Cruiser First Ed i-F MAX326/46522/25/2376,825

• **NOTES:** Several brands appear to be competing against themselves here—two Hondas, multiple Toyotas and Lexuses, multiple Kias as well as cousins Hyundai and Genesis. But one Honda and one Kia are EVs and also entered in the separate Electric SUV category. Toyota-Lexus, having almost half the vehicles in this category, may appear to dominate it, but actually are splitting their votes—Land Cruiser goes against close cousin Lexus GX, while two GX trims are voted as one model, but go up against their TX.

Luxury SUV

2025 Genesis GV80 3.5T Prestige SUV375/39116/22/19\$82,150
 2024 INEOS Grenadier Trialmaster282/33214/14/1483,855
 2024 Lexus GX 500 GX 550 Luxury+349/47915/21/1784,665
 2024 Lexus TX 550h F SPORT366/31727/28/2778,660

• **NOTES:** Three out of four in this category are also entered in the Midsize SUV category, and the fourth (Genesis) has its Coupe sibling in that group, making this whole category basically a subset, but its winner will still be meaningful.

Off-Road SUV

2025 Honda Pilot TrailSport285/26218/23/20\$51,250
 2024 Hyundai Santa Fe XRT 2.5T277/31119/26/2242,675
 2024 INEOS Grenadier Trialmaster282/33214/14/1483,855
 2024 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon 392 Final Ed470/47013/16/14108,475
 2024 Kia Sorento X-PRO SXP 2.5T281/31120/27/2349,400
 2024 Lexus GX 550 Overtrail349/47915/21/17est 71,620
 2024 Toyota Land Cruiser i-FORCE MAX326/46522/25/2371,809
 Toyota Land Cruiser First Ed i-F MAX326/46522/25/2376,825

• **NOTES:** Jeep is the only one in this category that is not also in one of the size-based categories. Raw capability gets attention on the course, in this group, although cross-referencing prices may or may not also influence votes. As in the Midsize SUV category, Toyota and Lexus are likely to be splitting their votes here between close cousins Land Cruiser and GX.

Electric SUV

2024 Honda Prologue Elite288/333MPGe 92\$59,295
 2024 Kia EV9 GT-Line379/516MPGe 8078,430

• **NOTES:** Both of these are also entered in the Midsize SUV category, but as EVs, this is their more focused presence (other than for any shoppers who may be freely comparing EV and gasoline alternatives). These two have notably different sizes, personalities and prices. The Kia EV9 has been around for a couple of years now and is an established multiple trophy winner, but the new Honda Prologue (which we also drove at NWAPA Drive Revolution, along with its Acura cousin) brings an appealing and economical new formula to the table.

At right (top to bottom): Toyota Tacoma, Honda Ridgeline, Hyundai Santa Cruz, Ram 1500 Rebel, INEOS Grenadier Quartermaster, Toyota Tundra, Nissan Frontier.

PICKUPS

Compact Pickup

2025 Hyundai Santa Cruz XRT 2.5T281/31118/26/21\$41,605

• **NOTES:** Santa Cruz has some commonality with the midsize Honda Ridgeline, in that they are both unibody pickups. But by size, this is a category of one.

Midsize Pickup

2024 Honda Ridgeline TrailSport280/26218/23/20\$46,830
 2024 INEOS Grenadier Quartermaster Fieldmaster282/33215/15/1572,409
 2025 Nissan Frontier PRO-4X Crew Cab310/28116/20/1850,245
 2024 Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro326/46522/24/2367,974
 Tacoma Limited iForce MAX326/46523/24/2456,225

• **NOTES:** The midsize pickup category, long a second fiddle to full-size, has expanded mightily in recent years. Though not all possible pickups participated, there is considerable variety here—one completely new truck, one unibody, two conventional veterans. We'll be watching this one with great interest.

Full-Size Pickup

2025 Ram 1500 Limited540/521tba\$86,290
 Ram 1500 Rebel420/469tba82,130
 Ram 1500 Tungsten540/521tba91,085
 2024 Toyota Tundra TRD Pro437/58318/20/1974,270

• **NOTES:** As with the midsize pickup category, there are notable brands that did not participate. The three Rams are entered as one contender against Toyota.

Heavy Duty Pickup

2024 Ram 2500 Rebel (6.7L Cummins TD) ...370/850na (HD)\$92,900

• **NOTES:** Another category of one, its winner a foregone conclusion—but a worthy contender it is, especially with how well the 1500 Rebel has always done.

Luxury Pickup

2024 INEOS Grenadier Quartermaster Fieldmaster282/33215/15/15\$72,409
 2025 Ram 1500 Tungsten540/521tba91,085
 2024 Toyota Tacoma Limited i-Force MAX326/46523/24/2456,225

• **NOTES:** As in SUVs, these three are also entries in other categories. They vary considerably in style, personality, power and price—a wild card trophy group.

Off-Road Pickup

2024 Honda Ridgeline TrailSport280/26218/23/20\$46,830
 2024 INEOS Grenadier Quartermaster Fieldmaster282/33215/15/1572,409
 2025 Nissan Frontier PRO-4X Crew Cab310/28116/20/1850,245
 2025 Ram 1500 Rebel420/469tba82,130
 2024 Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro326/46522/24/2367,974
 2024 Toyota Tundra TRD Pro437/58318/20/1974,270

• **NOTES:** If any one category represents the traditional heart of the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo, it is this one. All of these also appear in their size categories, but this feels less like a subset—we are talking prime purpose here. And there is not a bad one in the bunch. Some represent different points in the evolution of the category itself. We'll be curious to learn the group's consensus.

SELF-NOMINATED FEATURE AWARDS

Best Towing Technology: Toyota showcased their Wireless Trailer Camera System, available on Sequoia, Tundra and Tacoma.

Best Powertrain: The only one with competition: Ram's 3.0L Hurricane High Output Straight-Six Turbo versus Toyota's i-FORCE MAX Hybrid.

Best Driver Assist or Safety Feature: Toyota Safety Sense 3.0 (TSS 3.0) suite of features from pre-collision and lane departure to dynamic cruise. ■

