

Aluminum takes the gold

Texas Auto Writers convey coveted crowns by Joe Sage

Vehicle comparison events vary in many ways—by scope, location, duration, participation and of course specific vehicle content.

Mudfest, in Washington state in spring-time, had 23 vehicles this year, in five categories, run one day off-road and one day on, with five category winners and one winner overall. Run to the Sun, in Oregon this fall, had 25 vehicles, driven over many highway miles in a consistent rotation, so each driver definitely drove each car. In that event, there are no awards, just impressions and a good time. The Active Lifestyle Vehicle Awards, in Arizona in late fall, have eight categories and eight trophies, with typically about 30 vehicles from a dozen brands (see next issue).

These comparative events all provide a good time for those behind the wheel, but they are also serious business. Events also vary in how far and wide their results resonate. The Texas Truck Rodeo—held each fall outside San Antonio, where trucks are king, and many are built and even more are tested—produces awards of huge significance and consequence. As Ford truck group marketing manager Doug Scott says, this is “one of the three big ones, along with the *Motor Trend* and North American Truck of the Year awards.”

Imagine what it takes at any of these events for manufacturers to go through their own decision processes about what to bring, in what trim, for what category or categories—multiplied by the logistics and costs involved in having them all in one often distant location by a specific time—multiplied by the key personnel who come along for presentations, demonstrations and general Q&A, as well as to anxiously await the outcome—multiplied again by the event personnel themselves, as well as the venues, the courses and trails that must be built and/or prepped—and everything else that goes with all of the above. Imagine all that, and then apply it to this granddaddy

of all truck events, the Texas Truck Rodeo.

This year set records even before the trophies were presented, including 168 registered attendees, a record; 60 journalists, a record; 75 vehicles entered, a record; with 18 brands represented and 17 award categories to be filled.

New this year was a Title Sponsor, the Steel Market Development Institute. This was a welcome development for the implementation of this huge event, but it raised a few eyebrows in bemused curiosity, as the 800-pound elephant in the lineup was Ford’s new aluminum alloy F-150 (which contains plenty of high-strength steel, too, of course). Ford was hoping to displace the Truck of Texas winner of the prior two years, the RAM 1500 pickup (EcoDiesel last year, Lone Star Edition the year before). This gave the Institute’s presence a bit of a “hey, don’t forget about your old buddy steel” feel, to some.

Also bound to make a splash were GM’s new midsize pickups, the Chevrolet Colorado and GMC Canyon.

Xpel protective coatings kicked in as the event’s Hospitality Sponsor.

The Texas Truck Rodeo presents three major awards: Texas Truck of the Year, Texas SUV of the Year and Texas CUV of the Year. A fourth major award is the overall Truck Line of Texas. There are also winners in each individual vehicle category and three specialty categories.

So off we all went to the competition fields. Parked in a huge green South Texas meadow at historic Knibbe Ranch were all 75 vehicles, grouped by the award categories. We would each grab them randomly and could choose to drive an off-road course (or rough road, really—very rough at times, with ultra-steep descents and ascents, water crossings, sudden drops, the works), or we could head onto a dandy stretch of Texas two-lane, full of tight hills and curves. The latter was most appropriate to vehicles in the crossover and some luxury categories.

Each judge’s first place vote receives three points, second receives two and third receives one, multiplying the value of the higher votes. This creates the possibility of some oddities in the outcome, whereby an uneven split among first, second and third could result in a second-place finisher receiving the most votes and the trophy—theoretically. As participating judges, we could study a complete breakdown of scoring results, which made for some fascinating parsing of details. Although there were some very tight races—very—there were no place-swapping anomalies. When all was said and done, the winners were:

TRUCK OF TEXAS:
2015 Ford F-150

SUV OF TEXAS:
2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee

CUV OF TEXAS:
2015 Lincoln MKC

TRUCK LINE OF TEXAS:
Ford

Mid-size Pickup:
2015 Chevrolet Colorado Crew Cab 4WD

Full-size Pickup:
2015 Ford F-150
King Ranch 4x4 SuperCrew

Luxury Pickup:
2015 Ford F-150 Platinum SuperCrew

Heavy Duty Pickup:
2015 Ram 2500 Longhorn

Off-road Pickup:
2015 Ram Power Wagon

Compact SUV:
2015 Jeep Cherokee

Mid-size SUV:
2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee Overland 4x4

Full-size SUV:
2015 Chevrolet Tahoe

Compact Luxury SUV:
2015 Land Rover
Range Rover Evoque 5-door

Mid-size Luxury SUV:
2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee
Summit EcoDiesel 4x4

Full-size Luxury SUV:
2015 GMC Yukon Denali



Compact CUV:

2015 Honda CR-V Touring

Mid-size CUV:

2015 Subaru Outback 2.5i Premium

Full-Size CUV:

2015 Kia Sedona SX

Luxury CUV:

2015 Lincoln MKC

Off-road Utility Vehicle:

2015 Jeep Wrangler

Commercial Vehicle:

2015 Ford Transit 250 MR

Best Technology:

Ford F-150 Aluminum Alloy Body

Best Connectivity:

Chrysler Group's Uconnect® Access

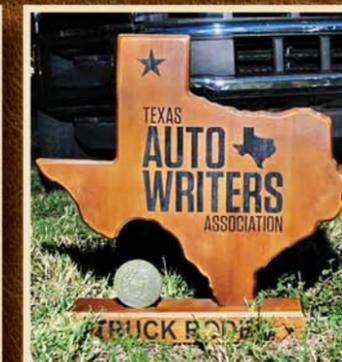
Best Powertrain:

Chrysler 3.0-liter V6 EcoDiesel

So RAM pickups passed the Truck of Texas trophy to a new champ in an aluminum suit this year, the F-150, which was reinforced with a Best Tech award for its aluminum body, but Chrysler Group’s EcoDiesel V6 still went home with Best Powertrain; RAM won two out of five pickup classes and Ford two; Jeep won half the SUV categories plus Off-Road Utility; and Ford took the commercial prize with its new Transit van. These two companies clearly dominated.

There was some talk about whether the SUV and CUV awards should be split off into another event. But see above—the costs and logistics of getting not only all the vehicles here, but all the people all at the same time—then factoring in the number of other events (not just comparos, but major auto shows and new product launches) that appear on everyone’s annual calendars—manufacturers and journalists alike—and it does seem to make the most sense to keep this whole Texas range together as one event. (There is also a Texas Auto Roundup.)

This event is everything its buzz sets it out to be, and we are already looking forward to next year’s Texas Truck Rodeo. ■



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