

ACTIVE DUTY

By Larry Edsall
Photos by Joe Sage



The Local Motors factory in Chandler (new cars in progress at upper right) was the site of the Carpendent.com 9th Annual Active Lifestyle Vehicle Awards for 2013, for the second year in a row.

The Ram 4x4 Laramie pickup, shown (left) traversing Local Motors' torture track, was winner of the broad \$35,000-and-up Luxury Off-Road category.

Vehicle finalists also included such gems as the Infiniti JX35 and Mazda CX-5 shown at right.

Actual active lifestylers were able to evaluate the full range of finalists fully informed by top-flight representatives on hand from each manufacturer.

A few years ago, a major automaker refused to call its sports utility vehicle by that name. Instead, it insisted its SUV was actually an SAV, a sports activity vehicle.

That its SAV was really no different from everyone else's SUV was beside the point. So was the fact that most SUVs had nothing to do with sports or activity. They simply were big, gas-guzzling trucks with back seats instead of pickup beds and were disguised to look like something ideal for pulling a popup trailer or for campground or for trekking to a hiking trailhead or for hauling a bunch of bicycles to some shady lane well away from the horrors of city traffic and air pollution.

Because of their truck-based architecture, SUVs also generated a lot of profits for their producers.

But shouldn't they also live up to the promise of their mission?

A trio of athletes who also worked for newspapers, magazines and websites thought they should, and nine years ago they launched the Active Lifestyle Vehicle of the Year awards. Their idea was to encourage automakers to produce vehicles which befit the truly active lifestyles of people who regularly ran, biked, paddled and pursued other such active hobbies.

Sure, there were various car-of-the-year awards programs, but theirs would be different because they would involve bonafide athletes in the selection process.

One of those three founders is Arizona resident Nina Russin, who not only runs marathons but was a licensed auto mechanic and is a leading automotive journalist formerly for the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper and now for the carspondent.com website.

Influenced by her involvement, for the last two years the finals of the ALV awards have been staged in Phoenix, at the Local Motors assembly center—and the parking lot next to the building—just across I-10 from Firebird International Raceway.

Early each year, automakers are invited to enter their newest vehicles for ALV consideration, in one of seven categories. A panel of automotive journalists evaluate those vehicles, and their votes determine the vehicles eligible for the ALV finals.

At the finals, held in October, active Phoenix area athletes are invited to spend a Saturday learning about the cars, driving the cars, and voting to determine which cars best meet their lifestyles.



KEEP RIGHT >>



Kia Soul was top pick in the Urban category.

Winner of the Best Value On-Road category was the all-new Hyundai Santa Fe Sport (which does well off-pavement, too—see our launch report in the November/December 2012 issue).

Jeep® maintains its impeccable creds, with its Wrangler taking top honors in the Best Value Off-Road category (see our March/April 2012 issue).

Since no one vehicle can fit everyone's specific needs, awards are given in seven categories, and a team of athletes were assigned to each category. Manufacturers' representatives or product specialists—not sales personnel—are invited to share details on their vehicles. Then the cars, trucks, SUVs and crossovers are available for the athletes to drive on paved roads and, for those in the off-road categories, on the Local Motors off-road course.

For the auto manufacturers, they are exposed to what amounts to a focus group of athletes, who provide feedback not only on an automaker's product but on those of its top competitors in each category.

At the end of the day, votes are tabulated and trophies awarded.

"This is different from running," said Susan Lichtsinn, who said that what she and others on the Native Beast Running Club would have been doing this Saturday morning would be running. Instead, they were driving and riding and evaluating.

"We get to drive a lot of different cars that we wouldn't drive otherwise," she added as she rode in the back seat of a Chevrolet Sonic, one of the vehicles being considered in the Urban category.

"And," she continued, "there's no one trying to make you buy the car."

By the way, Susan owns a Toyota Prius. As she rode, another Native Beast runner, Wenjing He, drove the Sonic, and their club's coach, Dave Allison, sat in the front passenger's seat.

Their conversation was focused on the various features of the Sonic, its dynamic capabilities, and how it compared to the other vehicles in the category.

Over the course of the day, a dozen or more athletes would evaluate each vehicle. Each person could award a vehicle as many as four points in a variety of categories. The athletes' points were totaled, averaged and compared to the points from the journalist jury, to determine the overall winners—the vehicles that best fit with an active lifestyle.

After several years' absence, while the company concentrated on SUVs, the Audi allroad (see our November/December 2012 issue) returns and wins the crown in the Luxury On-Road category.

"Green" means different things to different people, and in this case Volkswagen's extremely popular TDI diesel walks away with the Green trophy.

The new-for-2013 Mercedes-Benz GL (see our September/October 2012 issue), has been winning one accolade after another. In this case, its GL 350 BlueTEC diesel grabbed the ALV Family award.

The 2013 Active Lifestyle Vehicles of the Year categories and winners are:

- URBAN:** small vehicles at \$20,000 or less:
Winner.....Kia Soul
 Other finalists: Chevrolet Sonic Hatchback, Mitsubishi Outlander Sport, Toyota Prius c
- BEST VALUE ON-ROAD:** vehicles at \$34,999 or less, designed primarily for driving on pavement:
Winner.....Hyundai Santa Fe Sport
 Other finalists: Toyota Prius v, Kia Sportage, Scion FR-S, Subaru XV Crosstrek
- BEST VALUE OFF-ROAD:** vehicles at \$34,999 or less, designed for use on or off pavement:
Winner.....Jeep Wrangler
 Other finalists: Honda CR-V, Nissan Xterra, Nissan Pathfinder
- LUXURY ON-ROAD:** vehicles at \$35,000 or more, designed primarily for driving on pavement:
Winner.....Audi allroad
 Other finalists: Dodge Durango, Infiniti JX, Volvo XC60, Volkswagen Touareg, Mercedes-Benz GLK
- LUXURY OFF-ROAD:** vehicles at \$35,000 or more, designed for use on or off pavement:
Winner.....Ram 4x4 Laramie
 Other finalist: Jeep Grand Cherokee
- GREEN:** vehicles with electric, hybrid, clean diesel or other alternative powertrains:
Winner.....Volkswagen Jetta SportWagen TDI
 Other finalists: Mazda CX-5, Toyota Prius Plug-In, Toyota Camry Hybrid
- FAMILY:** vehicles that offer three rows of seating:
Winner.....Mercedes-Benz GL 350 BlueTEC
 Other finalists: Chrysler Town & Country, Mazda5, Kia Sorento, GMC Acadia

