

# A new kid rides into town

Texas Auto Writers' influential annual comparo produces a few surprises by Joe Sage - photos © Raven Studios

The TAWA (Texas Auto Writers Association) Texas Truck Rodeo is one of the most prominent, respected and influential competitive vehicle events among those presented by national and regional automotive media associations. Though the awards carry "Texas" in their name, they are much broader in scope. In fact, trucks being trucks and Texas being Texas, having the Lone Star State in their names inherently reinforces the fact that these are the truck awards of all truck awards—of huge significance and consequence.

Arizona being Arizona, trucks are also very big here. Participating in the Texas Truck Rodeo is fun, but also a very useful tool for us, to make sure we're up to date on every development in this field. And it's a focused opportunity to interface with the top engineers and executives behind the machines—all part of a great couple of days on a beautiful Texas ranch, with top-notch Texas barbecue at the dinner bell.

Such events provide a good time behind the wheel but are also serious business. The Texas Truck Rodeo is held in the Hill Country outside San Antonio, where many trucks are built and even more are tested, as are the tires they bear. As Ford truck group marketing manager Doug Scott told us, this is "one of the three big ones, along with the *Motor Trend* and North American Truck of the Year awards."

Texas set records again this year, with 72 different vehicles from 21 brands entered in 17 award categories—primarily breaking down by pickup truck, SUV and crossover, with subsets for luxury, off-road or heavy duty use, plus a commercial vehicle category. Add in several display vehicles and a few duplicates to increase driving opportunities, and 88 trucks had been shipped in, at tremendous effort and expense, to await judgment.

The Steel Market Development Institute returned as title sponsor, as the use of high-strength steel grows (along with that of aluminum) for reduced weight and increased safety. Michelin, BF Goodrich and XPEL protective coatings also sponsored.

Entrants at Texas do reflect many of the same as the North American Truck of the Year Awards, the finalists for which are announced about the same time. And although all the judges at both events are free thinkers, America does love a winner, so it's hard to imagine a trophy in Texas might not provide a little more traction and gain more respect (after all, presidential primary thinking is upon us) as that event approaches its final decisions, to be announced in Detroit in January.

The Texas Truck Rodeo presents four major category awards, choosing one standout vehicle each as Truck of Texas,



SUV of Texas and CUV of Texas, plus a broader winner as Truck Line of Texas.

There are also winners in 17 individual vehicle categories and three special feature categories.

As the sun rose above Knibbe Ranch on the first drive day, some 69 journalist drivers grabbed a quick but hearty breakfast—and their tally sheets—then headed out to the competition courses.

Automotive media members would attempt to drive every vehicle, then judge them within a range of parameters. Selections and sequence are grab-as-you-can. Each vehicle and driver's departure and return times are recorded by barcode.

The toughest vehicles tackle a long and thorough off-pavement course, with rough surfaces, ultra-steep descents and ascents, deep natural water crossings, extreme rock climbs, sudden drops, the works. Others would hit the hills and curves of neighboring Texas Hill Country two-lanes. A special area provided heavy-duty towing comparisons, also often run on the road.

Judging is complex and can end up tight, so scoring has algorithms whereby a first place vote receives three points, second receives two and third receives one, multiplying the value of the higher votes.

In principle, this could create the occasional oddity in the outcome, whereby a

(Top to bottom) Truck of Texas the new 2016 Nissan Titan XD (which also missed the Full-Size Pickup crown by just one-tenth of a point). • SUV of Texas Ford Explorer. • Crossover of Texas Volvo XC90. • Ford won the full Truck Line of Texas award including pickups (F-150 shown), commercial and utilities.

The Truck of Texas trophy, for the new Nissan Titan XD with Cummins Diesel, is received by regional communications manager Steve Parrett, senior VP of US sales, marketing and operations Fred Diaz, and senior manager US regional communications Wendy Orthman. • Utility marketing manager Eric Peterson accepts the SUV of Texas trophy for Ford Explorer; Ford also won the full range Truck Line of Texas award. • National media relations manager Russell Datz accepts the Crossover of Texas trophy for the Volvo XC90—a triple champion, also winning the Luxury Crossover crown and the features award for connectivity for its Sensus Connect system.

second- or third-place finisher could theoretically receive the most pro-rata votes and the trophy. As participating judges, we could review detailed results, though, and didn't see any instances of this. What it does provide is a way to break a tie, which does happen from time to time.

The winners of the overall top dog awards—Truck, SUV, Crossover and Truck Line of Texas—are as follows:

## Title Awards

- TRUCK OF TEXAS**
- Nissan Titan XD (Cummins Diesel)
- SUV OF TEXAS**
- 2016 Ford Explorer
- CUV OF TEXAS**
- 2016 Volvo XC90
- TRUCK LINE OF TEXAS**
- Ford F-Series

Those are always the first to grab headlines, the longstanding Truck of Texas award most of all. But there are twenty

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additional trophies presented, as follows:

**Category Awards**

**PICKUP TRUCKS**

- Midsize pickup: 2016 Toyota Tacoma TRD Off-Road and TRD Sport and Limited
- Full-size pickup: 2016 Ram 1500 Rebel
- Luxury pickup truck: 2016 Nissan Titan XD Platinum Reserve
- Heavy duty pickup truck: 2016 Ram 2500
- Off-road pickup: 2016 Nissan Titan XD Pro-4X

**CROSSOVER UTILITY VEHICLES**

- Compact CUV: 2015 Jeep Renegade Trailhawk
- Mid-size CUV: 2015 Nissan Murano Platinum
- Full-size CUV: 2016 Hyundai Santa Fe Limited AWD
- Luxury CUV: 2016 Volvo XC90 T6

**SPORT UTILITY VEHICLES**

- Compact SUV: 2016 Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk and Limited
- Mid-size SUV: 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited Diesel
- Full-size SUV: 2015 Dodge Durango RT AWD and Citadel AWD
- Compact luxury SUV: 2016 Land Rover Discovery Sport HSE LUX
- Mid-size luxury SUV: 2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee Summit 4x4
- Full-size luxury SUV: 2016 Lexus LX 570
- Off-road utility vehicle: 2016 Jeep Wrangler

**COMMERCIAL VEHICLES**

- Best commercial vehicle: 2016 Mercedes-Benz Metris cargo and passenger van

**FEATURE AWARDS**

- Best technology: Ford Pro Trailer Backup Assist
- Best connectivity: Volvo Sensus
- Best powertrain: Nissan 5.0L V8 Cummins Diesel and Aisin transmission

We had good exposure to quite a few of these already. We had recently visited the Nissan Titan XD's Cummins Diesel engine plant in Indiana. We had driven the new Ford Explorer a few hundred miles in western Colorado, the Mercedes-Benz Metris at its Southern California launch and the Volvo XC90 at its Northern California launch. We drove a number of similar vehicles during Mudfest, the NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year Awards, a few months earlier. We had tried Ford's Pro Trailer Backup Assist during their Silicon Valley megatrends event and Volvo's new Sensus user interface at the launch of their new S60 and V60 models. There is a lot to cover in Texas, and all of that helps.

The manufacturers choose very carefully, and they put massive effort into having all this equipment and personnel in one place at one time for us. Every vehicle is prequalified as worthy of a win. We had many favorites and many we'd happily take home—who knew an 18-and-a-half-foot \$70,000-plus Lincoln Navigator L Reserve was so nimble and quick? And how could you not want a Ram 1500 Rebel, after pounding it through the toughest circuit with a play-by-play on its features (with all its extra capabilities, it trades off not one drop of fuel economy or roadworthiness) from Chief Engineer Elizabeth Krear?

As with *Time* magazine's Man of the Year award, the deciding factor is not (necessarily) what is "best," but what is most significant. The new 2016 Titan XD moves Nissan into the truly full-size pickup realm for the first time, noteworthy indeed, though it was also very well received on its own merits. Nissan had pulled out all the stops to build us a few pre-production trucks, and drive impressions are under embargo until mid-November, but the trucks will start arriving at dealerships en masse in December. (Nissan Titan

A feast of pickups, Jeeps, SUVs, crossovers and commercial vans included the 2016 Toyota Tacoma TRD (Midsize Pickup winner); Ram 1500 Rebel (Full-Size Pickup winner); Jeep Renegade Trailhawk (winner of Compact CUV, while the Cherokee Trailhawk won Compact SUV); new 2016 Hyundai Tucson (a close second to the Renegade, and smaller sibling to Full-Size CUV winner Hyundai Santa Fe); 2016 Land Rover Discovery Sport HSE LUX (Compact Luxury SUV winner and a standout at Mudfest in the Pacific Northwest last spring); and Mercedes-Benz Metris (winner of the Commercial Vehicle category in both cargo and passenger form, with passenger shown here).

and RAM Power Wagon were in fact tied for the separate Off-Road Pickup award, but in a category of five entrants, Titan received more second-place votes, a tie-breaker that earned them that trophy.)

Fred Diaz, senior vice president of sales, marketing and operations USA for Nissan North America, said, "Of the hundreds of thousands of miles driven during the development of the all-new 2016 Titan XD, the miles driven by the truck experts of the Texas Auto Writers Association were the most critical miles driven to date as we prepare to launch our new truck. This prestigious Truck of Texas award gives us tremendous validation heading into the Titan XD launch in December. We are humbly honored to accept this award."

It was unusual to not have Ram among the title awards. Last year, Ford F-150's newsmaking new aluminum construction was enough to wrest the Truck of Texas trophy away from the Ram 1500 EcoDiesel after prior consecutive wins in the Texas Truck Rodeo and many other wins in other events. Ram did well throughout the category awards, however, with win, place or show positions in six categories, including two wins and a tie for a third win.

GM was another surprise. Chevrolet pickups garnered second in one category and third in another, while GMC had none—this despite a notably enthusiastic media response to their new Chevrolet Colorado and GMC Canyon midsize pickup introductions earlier this year.

It all comes down to the ballot box and math. We sometimes find surprises as the trophies are presented, but when the results are fully scrutinized, their combination of objective and subjective considerations seems reassuringly consistent.

This event itself is certainly a winner, and we are already looking forward to next year's TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo. ■

