

Mudfest!

WHEN THE GOING GET'S TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET MUDDY

By Joe Sage / Photos: NWAPA / Vinnie Nguyen and Joe Sage

To assess vehicles for our own wettest and muddiest conditions, whether in the high country or during a Sonoran Desert monsoon storm, we headed to the Pacific Northwest—where there is always a better than average chance of rain, with almost perfect odds of mud—for our fourth participation in the annual NWAPA (Northwest Automotive Press Association) Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year competition, known best as Mudfest.

After a few years at Dirtfish Rally School in the Cascade Mountains, Mudfest last year moved to

a new location near Shelton, Washington, northwest of Olympia in the southern reaches of the Olympic Peninsula. This year, it moved to another location nearby—The Ridge Motorsports Park, a 170-acre facility with a 2.47-mile 16-turn track with 300-foot elevation change. A kart track added last year is a one-sixth-scale replica of the big track. We had off-road courses built specifically for our event, with additional extreme climb, obstacle and water hazards for qualifying vehicles.

Each vehicle has been carefully chosen by its manufacturer as having the right stuff to conquer

one of six categories—four for utilities, one for pickups (added last year) and an extreme class open to either. There is also an overall winner.

Sixteen manufacturers entered 28 vehicles—five from Detroit, nine from Europe and fourteen from Asia (eleven from eight Japanese brands and three from the two Korean brands).

Twenty-eight media members drove and voted, with 22 brand specialists on hand to point out features or answer any questions, plus ten hard-working press fleet representatives to run the event.

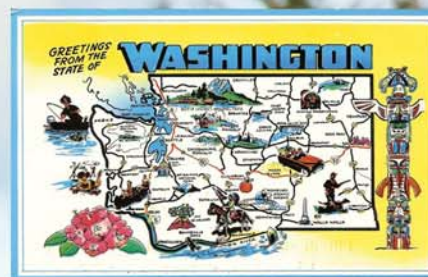
No matter how well each vehicle will do in the mud and ruts, most ownership miles center on the rubber hitting the road. The first day's sealed-surface events started in the paved paddock area, with a coned grid to test the vehicles' backup and proximity systems. Next was a straightaway for acceleration and braking, which led to the kart track, where tight turns and 50-foot elevation changes tested steering and handling.

Day two was what makes Mudfest Mudfest—the off-road portion. We were in luck with weather—it had rained quite a bit, yet had let up for most of our time on the course—mud below and occasional sunshine above, a winning combination. Since the course was new and built just for us, the crews made a few adjustments during the course of things. All in all, everyone was pleased with the new digs at The Ridge Motorsports Park.

You just about can't buy a bad vehicle these days. But this competitive event in various extreme conditions is a great way for differences large and small to make themselves clear.

Scoring considers a number of things: vehicle specifics (powertrain, braking, exterior styling, in-

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OUTDOOR ACTIVITY VEHICLE OF THE YEAR
2016 Jeep Grand Cherokee 75th Anniversary Edition

Photo (1): NWAPA / Vinnie Nguyen

BEST COMPACT: 2016 Mazda CX-3 Grand Touring



BEST PREMIUM COMPACT: 2016 Volvo V60 Cross Country T5 AWD



Photos (2): NWAPA / Vinnie Nguyen

BEST FAMILY: 2016 Jeep Grand Cherokee 75th Anniversary Edition



Photo (1): Joe Sage



Photos (7): Joe Sage

terior comfort, function and technology), ride and handling on-pavement, and handling and capability off-pavement. Factors are added for fuel economy and relative value. Despite this event being rooted in the dirt, paved and off-road attributes carry equal weight, reflecting real world use.

Each vehicle's numbers are added up to determine first, second and third place finishes in each category, sometimes confirming a gut favorite and sometimes delivering a surprise.

Results are often very tight. Anecdotal favorites discussed over lunch may not score a number one spot, but each category does produce a statistical winner.

Categories and results are as follows. All were 2016 models except for one 2017 Kia as noted.

Compact Utility Vehicle

- Fiat 500X Easy AWD
- Kia Sportage SX AWD (2017)
- Mazda CX-3 Grand Touring AWD ★
- Mitsubishi Outlander Sport GT S-AWC
- Subaru XV Crosstrek 2.0i Premium
- Toyota RAV4 Hybrid Limited AWD

PRICE RANGE\$26,240 Subaru > \$36,231 Toyota
 HP RANGE148 HP Mazda > 237 HP Kia
 HWY MPG RANGE...23 MPG Kia > 34 MPG Subaru/Toyota*
 *Toyota's best MPG is city, with hybrid powertrain

▼ As segments start to blend, merge and overlap, this group contained compacts and subcompacts. With a spread of 60 percent in horsepower, 48 percent in fuel mileage but only 38 in price, it might seem that a more expensive vehicle would win. Four out of six were priced in the \$20s, though, keeping that factor balanced.

WINNER: Mazda CX-3 Grand Touring AWD
 ▼ 148 HP, 32 MPG hwy, \$27,640 as tested

Premium Compact Utility

- Acura RDX AWD Advance
- BMW X1 xDrive28i
- Volkswagen Tiguan SE 4Motion
- Volvo V60 Cross Country T5 AWD ★

PRICE RANGE\$35,050 VW > \$49,775 Volvo
 HP RANGE200 HP VW > 279 HP Acura
 HWY MPG RANGE...26 MPG VW > 32 MPG BMW

▼ Three of these are new or updated within the past few years. The veteran VW bore a price thirty percent lower than the top in the group, but ditto its power, though it scored well in our own tally. The Volvo Cross Country is a raised version of the V60 wagon, and whereas it didn't score the highest in the dirt (though most were close), it hits in most other categories, an efficient highway car you can take almost anywhere.

WINNER: Volvo V60 Cross Country T5 AWD
 ▼ 250 HP, 28 MPG hwy, \$49,775 as tested

Family Utility Vehicle

- Ford Explorer Platinum 4WD 3.5L EcoBoost
- Honda Pilot AWD Elite
- Hyundai Santa Fe Sport 2.0T Ultimate AWD
- Jeep Grand Cherokee Ltd 4x4 75th Anniv ★
- Kia Sorento SXL AWD
- Mitsubishi Outlander 2.4 SEL S-AWC

PRICE RANGE\$33,095 Mitsubishi > \$54,760 Ford
 HP RANGE166 HP Mitsubishi > 365 HP Ford
 HWY MPG RANGE...22 MPG Ford > 29 MPG Mitsubishi

▼ This group of larger SUVs feels like the meat of things overall, though compacts are leading sales currently. These entries cover an impressive range of value, even when outfitted toward premium levels. All have fuel mileage in the 20s, respectable for their strength and capability. All are exemplary, but a familiar face took the crown.

WINNER: Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited 4x4 75th Anniversary Edition V6 EcoDiesel
 ▼ 240 HP, 28 MPG hwy, \$51,315 as tested

Premium Utility Vehicle

- BMW X5 xDrive40e
- Lexus LX570
- Mercedes-Benz GLE450 AMG Coupe
- Volvo XC60 T6 AWD Drive-E ★
- Volkswagen Touareg VR6 Sport w/Techn

PRICE RANGE\$47,655 VW > \$97,405 Lexus
 HP RANGE280 HP VW > 383 HP Lexus
 HWY MPG RANGE...18 MPG Lexus > 27 MPG Volvo*
 *BMW plug-in hybrid hits 56 MPGe in electric cycle

▼ The premium group's prices overlap the family group in two out of five cases (VW and Volvo). The top-dollar Lexus swaps top and bottom spots with Volvo for horsepower and fuel mileage (not counting BMW when used as a plug-in electric). The combination of midrange power and low end price in the group added up to another Volvo win.

WINNER: Volvo XC60 T6 Drive-E
 ▼ 302 HP, 27 MPG hwy, \$52,505 as tested

Extreme Capability

- Jeep Wrangler Unlimited 4x4 75th Anniv ★
- Nissan Titan XD Pro4X
- Range Rover Sport HSE Td6

PRICE RANGE\$48,035 Jeep > \$84,260 Range Rover
 HP RANGE254 HP Range Rover > 310 HP Nissan*
 HWY MPG RANGE...20 MPG Jeep > 29 MPG Range Rover*
 *RR and Nissan are diesels w/ torque 443 and 555 lb-ft
 *As heavier-than-1/2-ton, Titan is not MPG rated

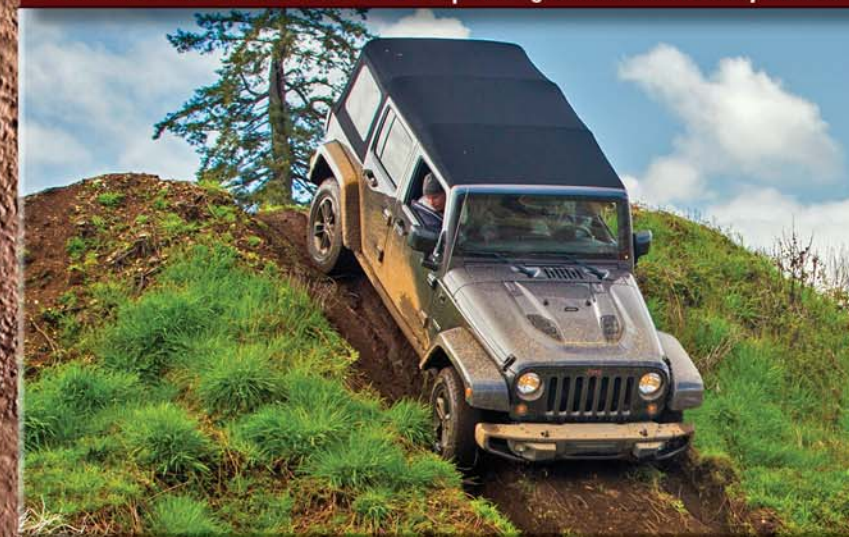
▼ Two years ago, this category pitted an affordable Jeep Wrangler and Toyota 4Runner against a Range Rover well over \$100k, a big disadvantage for the Range Rover. This year Jeep moved upscale, Range Rover moved down, and Nissan Titan at \$58,165 filled the middle, leveling the

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BEST PREMIUM: 2016 Volvo XC60 T6 AWD Drive-E



BEST EXTREME CAPABILITY: 2016 Jeep Wrangler 75th Anniversary Edition



BEST PICKUP: 2016 Ram Rebel



Photos (3): NWAPA / Vinnie Nguyen

playing field considerably. And the Jeep still won.

WINNER: Jeep Wrangler Unlim 75th Anniv

▼ 285 HP, 20 MPG hwy, \$48,035 as tested

Pickup Trucks

Chevrolet Colorado 4WD Z71 Crew DuraMax

Nissan Titan XD Platinum Reserve

Ram 1500 Rebel Crew Cab 4x4 5.7 HEMI ★

Toyota Tacoma TRD Off-Road 4x4 Dbl Cab

PRICE RANGE\$37,610 Toyota > \$63,270 Nissan

HP RANGE181 HP Chevrolet > 395 HP Ram*

HWY MPG RANGE...21 MPG Ram > 29 MPG Chevrolet*

*Chevy and Nissan are diesels w/ torque 369 and 555, though gasoline Ram has torque of 410 lb-ft

*As heavier-than-1/2-ton, Titan is not MPG rated

▼ Pickups entered their second year of competition at Mudfest. We had considerable variety from four entries—two high-torque diesels, two full-size and two midsize trucks, variously tricked out for differing degrees of off-road, on-road or premium fitment advantage. An almost 70 percent price range and more than 2-to-1 power range, yet with all delivering 20-something MPG, makes for a truck-shopper's paradise. When the tallies came in, FCA had its third category win.

WINNER: Ram 1500 Rebel Crew 4x4 5.7 HEMI

▼ 395 HP, 21 MPG hwy, \$53,150 as tested

Vehicle of the Year

Beyond the point-by-point scoring in six categories above, an overall best is voted subjectively, as the statistical tallies can't compare meaningfully from group to group. We each simply pick a first, second and third choice, then those are tallied to determine the year's king daddy.

The "best overall" winner—the NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year—does not need to have won a category, but that's pretty likely. This year's champion was also the Family Utility Vehicle winner, suggesting that this category may indeed be the spiritual core overall.

WINNER: Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited

4x4 75th Anniversary Edition V6 EcoDiesel

▼ 240 HP, 28 MPG hwy, \$51,315 as tested

Relativity

Our own tallies and votes compared with the collective wins much as in the past. We had voted the same first place choice in four out of seven cases. Our second choice won first in another, and in two we had a clean miss. (This suits us. If we had a one hundred percent match, we couldn't tell you any of this, or you'd know how we voted.)

Though it includes a healthy dose of subjectivity, the process ultimately reflects the complexity of your own purchase decision. Quite a few of the vehicles entered in this event have notably won other recent events with other criteria. ■

VEHICLE IMPRESSION : 2016 DODGE DART RALLYE

RALLYE TO THE RALLY

Dodge has made its mark, loud and clear, with the muscle of Challenger, Charger and Viper. But for under \$20,000, we have the compact Dodge Dart Rallye that transported us between the Seattle airport and the Olympic Peninsula for Mudfest. In fact, this is an upscale trim—Dart starts at just \$16,495. With 184 horses pulling its 3200 pounds, this is a lively ride that still hits 35

MPG—and well outfitted here with style and performance upgrades, well-executed 8.4-inch Uconnect and Laser Blue Pearl Coat paint that brightens up even a rainy day. Options are very reasonably priced (see below), and you can shave another \$1250 with a 6-speed manual transmission—a win-win in our book. We maneuvered tight city blocks around the airport, long stretches of I-5 and best of all, scenic two-lanes through aggressive hills, curves and waterfront to our event. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE2.4L PZEV M-Air 4-cyl
DRIVETRAINFWD
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE184 hp / 174 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION6-spd man / opt auto
BRAKES...F: 305mm, R: 264mm single-piston
SUSPENSION: F: MacPherson strut, coil over gas shocks, stabilizer bar; R: multi-link independent, coil, gas shocks, link-type stabilizer bar on Rallye
SEATING5
CARGO VOLUME13.1 cu ft
TURNING CIRCLE36.5 ft
WEIGHT3215 lb
FUEL/CAPACITY8.7 regular / 14.2 gal
MPG23/35/27 city/hwy/comb

BASE PRICE\$19,395

6-SPD POWERTECH AUTO / AUTOSTICK1250
RALLYE APPEARANCE PACKAGE: 17x7.5 granite crystal aluminum wheels, touring suspension, rear stabilizer bar, leather shift knob and wheel, black grille crosshair and surround, fog lamps, dual rear exhaust w bright tips, floor mats595
CUSTOMER PREFERRED PACKAGE: 8.4-inch Uconnect touchscreen (no CD), backup cam, remote USB, iPod control, illuminated panel surround595
SIRIUS SATELLITE RADIO (1 YR)195
RADIO 8.4 NAV: GPS nav, SiriusXM Traffic/Travel...595
SPORT APPEARANCE HOOD495
COMPACT SPARE395
DESTINATION CHARGE995

TOTAL\$24,510



Photo: Joe Sage