

Competitive strategies

By Joe Sage • Photos: Kevin McCauley / capturingthemachine

We drive in the Texas Autowriters' Association (TAWA) Texas Truck Rodeo every year. The pickup and SUV/crossover markets there are very similar to ours in Arizona, which makes it useful exposure, and the people involved make it a great time. Though a few such events, especially open road drives, are unjudged, most vote awards, as this one does.

The venue has evolved over the past few years, from sprawling Texas ranch roads spanning hundreds of acres, to a small purpose-engineered closed course.

The announcement of winners has also evolved, from an immediate tally and trophies at the conclusion of driving, to being revealed later, in this case in early November in conjunction with the upcoming Houston Auto Show. (We delayed this issue until

after normal deadline, to keep this fresh.)

There is much to be gleaned about the manufacturers' thinking on their own vehicles and the marketplace, from what they choose to enter. It's also all based on who participates. And whether for protracted pandemic factors or other reasons, some key manufacturers did not (as at any such event, even in normal times).

The event is broadly divided into SUVs and pickups. Though pavement driving is available for any (a few will often be pavement-only), this is, at its core, an off-road event. Evolution had seen a growing number of crossovers in this event, first on the heels of traditional SUVs. But as more car-like models entered, a decision was made to urge less dirtworthy ones to enter the track-based TAWA Texas Auto Roundup in spring, starting in 2020. Pandemic disruptions both helped and stalled this shift, but it has made great progress in general.

SUVs are divided into three classes by size, supplemented by luxury classes, here separately chosen by the manufacturers.

Pickups are divided by midsize, full-size and full-size heavy duty—with additional categories for luxury and off-road, though in this case the latter two are drawn from among the other existing categories (again the manufacturers' call).

In other words, SUVs are entered once, either by size *or*, if desired, by luxury. Pickups may be entered twice, first by size and duty and then *also*, if desired, by luxury and by off-road. As a wild card of sorts, one SUV *not* entered in any other category was also entered in the off-road category.

There is also a "green" category, pretty much a freestanding affair at this point.

Some manufacturers will enter multiple examples of the same vehicle—different trims, different powertrains, e.g. three Nissan Frontiers, two Jeep Gladiators and so on—within the same category. They have latitude in deciding whether to tally those vehicles' votes separately (which can draw important distinctions but can also have them competing against themselves) or gather them together in a collective vote

(the more common approach here).

It boils down to having a structure that works for the hosting organization and an awards allocation, while allowing the manufacturers the latitude they need, to best present their products in the competitive light as they see it.

All this background may be equal parts complex and enlightening, but in practice it's what makes it all fall together logically.

Because of derivatives and multiples, you can add up the entries more than one way, but a fundamental tally of (45) total vehicles entered in (50) slots—counting each individual machine present—gives us (15) 2021 models and (30) 2022s. Even that is open to some interpretation, as 2021s included the late-in-the-year all-new Jeep Grand Cherokee L (while its sibling two-row model, on display here but not driven, will be a 2022), while any number of 2022 models were fundamentally little changed for the new year. Model years have also been impacted by the pandemic, as well as the computer chip and supply line crises, but with the event late in the year, next year's models were still represented at an above average rate.

Of the (45), (13) were US brands, (21) were Japanese, (7) Korean and (4) European. (Despite their Stellantis global um-

brella, we're counting Jeep, Ram and Wagoneer models as US, and Alfa Romeo and Maserati as European.)

Stellantis, Toyota and Nissan had the heaviest representation at the event. Of (45) total vehicles entered in (50) slots including any repeats for off-road and luxury pickups, all but one of the US entries—a GM utility—were from Stellantis. Ford did not participate (despite Bronco, Maverick, Tremor, Mustang Mach-E and other strong contenders new in this cycle).

Volume representation (many entries) from any one given manufacturer seems bound to skew award results. Or perhaps not. Just one Acura, one Mazda, one Mitsubishi and one Subaru were entered by those brands, and each of the ones in competition has had a significant share of acclaim and success in other comparos and awards events.

There is considerable expense for the manufacturers to get all this tonnage on site. The more vehicles, the more personnel are likely to be sent, too. The decisions are surely always difficult. But the final list is always interesting. And revealing.

(cont'd)





SUVs

There were three categories of “SUVs” (which here includes crossovers). Luxury entries were as determined by manufacturers, separate from size category entries.

Seven were from the US, (13) Japanese, (7) Korean and (3) European. Underscoring a lack of breadth among domestics, six were from Stellantis (Jeep or Wagoneer), one from GM. Japan, on the other hand, was represented by seven badges (or five, depending how you count Nissan/Infiniti and Toyota/Lexus). Korean models were all Hyundai in the size classes, shifting to all Genesis among luxury entries. (Kia did not participate.) VW, Alfa Romeo and Maserati are the only Europeans, though the latter two are also both part of the significantly represented Stellantis family.

Alfa/Maserati, Hyundai/Genesis, Nissan/Infiniti and Toyota/Lexus entered their mainstream brand by size, premium brand as luxury, with one or two exceptions.

COMPACT SUV

2022 Hyundai Kona Limited AWD
2022 Hyundai Santa Cruz AWD Limited
2022 Hyundai Tucson Limited AWD
2022 Jeep Compass Limited
2022 Jeep Compass Trailhawk
2021 Mazda CX-30 AWD Premium
2022 Mitsubishi Outlander SEL
2021 Toyota RAV4 TRD Off-Road
2022 Volkswagen Tiguan 2.0T SE 4MOTION
WINNER: 2022 Hyundai Santa Cruz

MIDSIZE SUV

2021 Alfa Romeo Stelvio Quadrifoglio
2022 Hyundai Santa Fe XRT 2.5 L AWD
2021 Jeep Grand Cherokee L Overland
2021 Jeep Grand Cherokee L Summit Reserve
2022 Nissan Pathfinder Platinum 4WD
2022 Subaru Outback Wilderness
2022 Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro
WINNER: 2021 Jeep Grand Cherokee L

FULL-SIZE SUV

2021 GMC Yukon XL 4WD
2022 Hyundai Palisade Calligraphy AWD
2022 Infiniti QX80 Sensory
2021 Nissan Armada Platinum 4WD
2022 Wagoneer Series II
WINNER 2022 Wagoneer

MIDSIZE LUXURY SUV

2022 Genesis GV70 3.5T AWD Sport Prestige
2022 Lexus NX 350 2.4L Turbo Luxury
2022 Lexus NX 450h+ Plug-In Hybrid F Sport
2021 Maserati Levante Trofeo
WINNER: 2022 Genesis GV70 3.5T AWD

FULL-SIZE LUXURY SUV

2022 Acura MDX SH-AWD Advance
2021 Genesis GV80 3.5T AWD Advanced+ (3-row opt)
2022 Grand Wagoneer Series III
2022 Infiniti QX60 Autograph AWD
2022 Lexus GX 460 Blackline Special Edition
WINNER: 2022 Grand Wagoneer Series III

GREEN VEHICLE

2021 Jeep Wrangler 4xe
2021 Volkswagen ID.4
WINNER: 2021 Jeep Wrangler 4xe

DISPLAY VEHICLE

2022 Jeep Grand Cherokee (two-row)

OF NOTE: In the compact category, with many new models and refreshes—including Jeep Compass, which has such a nice new interior, with McIntosh audio, nobody wanted to get out—Hyundai Santa Cruz follows a familiar path as the newest news (the “new and shiny” fac-

tor). As many debate what the Santa Cruz is (Hyundai calls it a Sport Adventure Vehicle), Hyundai chose to enter it among SUVs here, while at NWAPA Mudfest in the Northwest (also in this issue), they not only entered it as a pickup, but it won the “Best Pickup Truck” prize.

Midsize entries followed suit. Although Subaru’s Outback Wilderness is a significant new build (now also available on Forester), an all-new gen-five Grand Cherokee L (a new three-row long version was released first; see elsewhere in this issue) offered ample drive time, with two samples entered, and took top honors.

The full-size trophy also went to the only totally new vehicle (and badge) in the group, Wagoneer—yes, entirely new vehicles often seem to do well at comparos.

Luxury SUVs were originally entered and voted on as one category, but a later decision split them into two awards, by midsize (two rows) or full-size (three rows). Both winners are completely new models, so we can only wonder which might have won without the split.

The new green category (not limited to SUVs, but that’s how it worked out) could be seen as a coin toss, with just two entries, both of which have had notable acclaim to date. They say this vote was close.

You can see how category awards are skewed by participation, but also by the many decisions entrants made by size (increasingly overlapping in many cases), and by the decision of whether to enter as luxury.

TITLE AWARD: 2022 SUV OF TEXAS ★

The TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo’s two top awards are not an aggregate of category votes by a matrix of attributes. Rather, driver-judges choose a first, second and third, subjectively. It may seem natural this prize went to the same winner of the biggest and priciest category—but, as you will see with pickups, this is not always the case.

WINNER: 2022 Grand Wagoneer

Pickups

There were four categories for pickups—midsize, full-size and full-size heavy duty, then also a luxury class. Unlike the SUVs, luxury participants were not separate entries, but were derived from among other classes.

Thirteen total pickups broke out as (5) from the US and (8) from Japan. (Hyundai’s entry of the Santa Cruz as an SUV here, though as a pickup in the Northwest, may have been partly due to size; perhaps next year, other brands will return and there will be a compact class.)

Stellantis had the most entries, five (four full-size and full-size heavy duty Rams, one midsize Jeep), followed by four from Nissan (three midsize, one full-size) and three from Toyota (the inverse: one midsize, two full-size).

Nissan went heavier on their midsize Frontier, as it is brand new for 2022, while Toyota went heavier on their full-size Tundra, for the same reason. Both paid off.

MIDSIZE PICKUP

2022 Honda Ridgeline AWD Sport
2021 Jeep Gladiator Texas Trail
2022 Nissan Frontier PRO-4X Crew Cab
2022 Nissan Frontier Pro-X Crew Cab
2022 Nissan Frontier SV Crew Cab LWB 4x4
2022 Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro
WINNER: 2022 Nissan Frontier

FULL-SIZE PICKUP

2021 Nissan Titan Pro-4X Crew Cab
2022 Ram 1500 Laramie G/T
2021 Ram 1500 TRX
2022 Toyota Tundra Hybrid 1794
2022 Toyota Tundra Limited TRD Off-Road
WINNER: 2022 Ram 1500

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Compact SUV: Hyundai Santa Cruz



Green Vehicle: Jeep Wrangler 4xe



Midsize SUV: Jeep Grand Cherokee L



Full-size SUV: Wagoneer



Midsize Luxury SUV: Genesis GV70



Full-size Luxury SUV: Grand Wagoneer



TITLE AWARD: 2022 SUV OF TEXAS: Grand Wagoneer



HEAVY DUTY PICKUP

2022 Ram 2500 Limited
2021 Ram 2500 Power Wagon
WINNER: 2022 Ram 2500

LUXURY TRUCK

2022 Ram 1500 Laramie G/T
2021 Ram 1500 TRX
WINNER: 2021 Ram 1500 TRX

OFF-ROAD VEHICLE

2021 Jeep Gladiator Texas Trail
2021 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon 392
2021 Ram 1500 TRX
WINNER: 2021 Ram 1500 TRX

OF NOTE: Though hard to miss the glaring absence of Ford or GM, this was a solid mix of everything else. Folks have waited for a new midsize Nissan Frontier for a long time, and it was welcomed with open arms.

The full-size category is interesting, as it breaks the pattern seen among SUVs (and so often at any comparo in any class)—although the Toyota Tundra was the all-new entry, once the votes were tallied (a complex aggregate of numerical ratings for a wide variety of attributes), Ram prevailed. (And yet ... see below.)

The next three categories were 100 percent populated by Stellantis. The heavy duty award was considered an aggregate (Ram 2500 overall, not model-specific), while luxury did highlight the TRX, a nod to the fact that this performance off-roader came in at \$88k as outfitted, versus \$61k for the Laramie G/T. Had Ram decided to enter the \$81k 2500 Limited in luxury, who knows?

Off-road is not a pickup truck category, as you can see by the Wrangler entry, but we've included it here because a pickup won. It also generally seems that the more off-road-worthy an SUV is, the more trucklike it is.

TITLE AWARD: 2022 TRUCK OF TEXAS ★

Remember how your high school yearbook had picks for best looking, best personality, smartest, best dancer and so on? Yet when the homecoming king and queen were chosen, they might be different people altogether? That can happen here, too. Sometimes the Title Awards may seem to be the sum of the parts of all the others; other times, they may seem to be about pure glory. With Toyota USA now headquartered in Texas and Tundra all new after a long stretch (though still not offering a heavy duty), it took home the biggest crown in this event, which—since “Texas means trucks”—is also one of the most prominent wins among all such events anywhere.

WINNER: 2022 Toyota Tundra

Other awards

Manufacturers choose whether to showcase individual technologies and features for additional awards.

Best Safety Feature or Driver Assist

Lexus Safety System+ 3.0
Toyota Safety Sense 2.5
Infiniti ProPilot Assist

WINNER: Lexus Safety System+ 3.0

Best Infotainment System

Lexus Interface Multimedia System
Stellantis Uconnect 5
Toyota Audio Multimedia System

WINNER: Stellantis Uconnect 5

Best Powertrain

Ram 6.2L Supercharged HEMI® V8
Toyota i-FORCE MAX

WINNER: Ram 6.2L Supercharged HEMI V8

It remains clear that showing up is the best winning strategy. And that's a wrap! ■

Midsize Pickup: Nissan Frontier



Full-Size Pickup: Ram 1500



Heavy Duty Pickup: Ram 2500



Luxury Truck: Ram 1500



Off-Road Vehicle: Ram 1500 TRX



Best Powertrain: Ram 6.2L Supercharged HEMI V8



TITLE AWARD: 2022 TRUCK OF TEXAS: Toyota Tundra

