

Within thousandths of a point

Texas Auto Writers' influential annual comparo produces some very tight results *by Joe Sage*

The annual TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo is a regional event with global significance. One out of every five pickups bought in the US is bought in Texas. Arizona is a similarly strong truck market, though we have about 25 percent the population of Texas (in 42 percent the area).

At this year's Texas Truck Rodeo, more than 70 TAWA media members evaluated more than 70 pickups, SUVs and crossover utility vehicles, with combined sticker prices totaling over \$4 million, in 17 categories over a two-day period.

Engineers from the competing manufacturers were on hand to answer questions about the vehicles and to aid in the evaluation process. Journalists were also able to evaluate vehicles side by side.

They say you can't buy a bad car these days—which may not be a thousand per-

cent accurate, but certainly makes a point—and it's equally hard to buy a bad truck. A comparo event such as the Texas Truck Rodeo might thus be seen as a chance to see just how good "good" can be. And the answer is, very good indeed. So good, in fact, that scoring in many categories had winners and runners-up separated by just tenths, hundredths or even as little as thousandths of a percent. In other cases, there may be a statistical home run. But there is just one trophy per category.

Most covered are the title awards: Truck of Texas, Truck Line of Texas, SUV of Texas and CUV of Texas. Though they bear one (big) state's name, these accolades are widely used in marketing and advertising.

Statistics reveal other insights, however, in addition to the title awards.

There is always a fair amount of debate and speculation about whether each award goes to the objective best vehicle in its class, or whether a truck that is every bit as "best" as it was in a prior year might not win, maybe because it won before, or often because some other entry is shiny and new, or represents a particular point of interest or development—what is instead called "most significant" in many an auto show concept and reveal writeup.

Several brands made a splash with multiple wins, others with standout individual wins, and some indeed with repeat wins after prior triumphs. The whole thing is a fascinating statistical drill—all the moreso for those who have access to the fully cross-tabulated numbers.

This year, Ford won both Truck of Texas and Truck Line of Texas (their Super Duty pickups are entirely new for 2017, though their use of aluminum was already new in the F-150, which won two years ago). Overall, Ford won four categories.

FCA, on the other hand, won seven cat-

egories outright (four for Jeep, two for Ram and one for Uconnect), plus three top scores for various attributes (all for Ram), plus had the most-driven vehicle in the event (Ram Rebel), for eleven wins total. Four were for the Ram 2500 Power Wagon, yet it did not win the title trophy.

Nissan, who won Truck of Texas last year with the all-new Titan XD, their new full-size pickup, passed that crown along this year, but won the SUV of Texas title for their new Armada, two for Titan variants (a vehicle that surely increased their profile at the event overall), plus SUV and CUV categories for Armada and Murano. Add top score for Best Interior, and Nissan was the top-scoring badge, with six total.

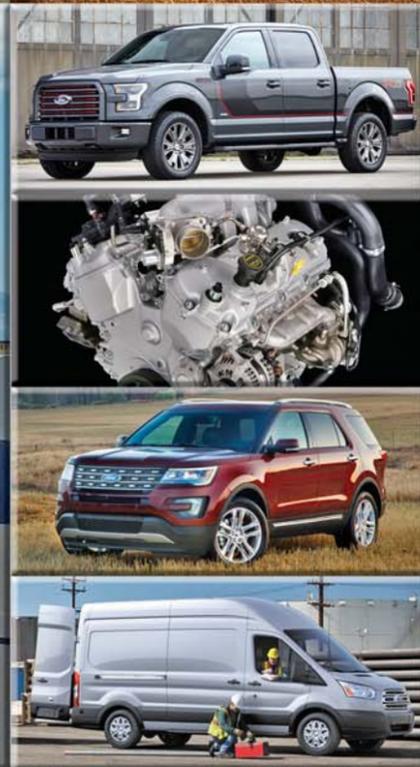
Volvo had a triple win with their XC90 crossover—the only other multiple-vehicle winner in the event—as title winner for CUV of Texas, plus winning the Luxury CUV category and Best Interior. We've referred to this all-new-a-year-and-a-half-ago vehicle before as "the endlessly award-winning XC90" and learned in welcome speeches that the number stood at 130 awards. So that's 133 (and counting).

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Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) won seven trophy categories: Luxury Pickup Truck (2017 Ram 1500), Off-Road Pickup (2017 Ram 2500 Power Wagon), Compact CUV (2016 Jeep Renegade), Compact SUV (2017 Jeep Cherokee), Midsize SUV (2017 Jeep Grand Cherokee), Off-Road Utility Vehicle (2017 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon) and Best Connectivity (Uconnect Access). The Ram 2500 Power Wagon also scored tops in Appeal, Exterior and Performance, and the Ram Rebel was Most Driven.

Ford (both Ford Motor Company and Ford the brand) took home four trophies, including the two traditional top dawgs: Truck of Texas (Ford Super Duty pickup) and Truck Line of Texas (F-150, Super Duty, commercial vans, SUVs and CUVs), as well as Heavy Duty Pickup (Super Duty again) and Best Powertrain (EcoBoost V6).



There was a time when “The Big Three” meant one thing: Chrysler, Ford and GM. With everyone from Toyota to Volkswagen to Kia increasingly significant both globally and domestically, we often hear those called “The Detroit Three” now. (Of course, Fiat now owns FCA, and Ford and GM have always had broad global presence, but all three headquarters remain firmly planted in metro Detroit.)

The key thing is that the American pickup market has long been nearly impossible to significantly crack with a product beyond The Detroit/Big Three.

The results of this year’s Truck Rodeo could suggest another Big Three emerging in the all-American truck market: FCA, Ford and Nissan (alphabetically).

GM’s presence was slim at this year’s event (GMC brought four vehicles, and Chevrolet did not enter at all), though whether this is a horse or a cart scenario—no wins through slim participation? or slim participation because they anticipated no wins?—has been debated.

It remains to be seen how Nissan Titan (built in the US) does with market share (they are realistic but optimistic), but it has done well in trophy competition.

For perspective, we have presented the winners two ways here. Photo spreads highlight the biggest winners (in corporate alphabetical order). And listed next are all contenders and winners by category, winners first, then alphabetically by badge:

Compact CUV

- ★ 2016 Jeep Renegade Trailhawk 4x4
- 2016 Fiat 500X Lounge AWD
- 2017 Kia Sportage SX AWD
- 2017 Volkswagen Golf Alltrack SEL

Midsize CUV

- ★ 2016 Nissan Murano Platinum AWD
- 2017 Hyundai Santa Fe Sport 2.0-T Ultimate FWD

Full-Size CUV

- ★ 2016 Mazda CX-9 Grand Touring FWD
- ★ 2016 Mazda CX-9 Signature AWD
- 2017 Hyundai Santa Fe Ultimate FWD
- 2017 Toyota Highlander SE AWD

Luxury CUV

- ★ 2017 Volvo XC90 Excellence
- 2017 Acura MDX SH-AWD Advance & Entertainment
- 2017 GMC Acadia Denali AWD
- 2017 Infiniti QX60 AWD

Compact SUV

- ★ 2017 Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk Active Drive Lock
- ★ 2017 Jeep Cherokee Overland 4x4 Active Drive II
- 2017 Ford Escape SE FWD
- 2017 Ford Escape Titanium FWD
- 2017 Nissan Rogue SL Platinum AWD
- 2017 Toyota RAV4 Platinum AWD

Midsize SUV

- ★ 2017 Jeep Grand Cherokee Trailhawk
- 2017 Nissan Pathfinder Platinum 4x4

Full-Size SUV

- ★ 2017 Nissan Armada Platinum 4x4
- 2017 Dodge Durango Citadel Anodized Platinum AWD
- 2017 Toyota Land Cruiser

Mid-Size Luxury SUV

- ★ 2017 Jaguar F-PACE 35t R-Sport
- ★ 2017 Jaguar F-PACE S
- 2017 Jeep Grand Cherokee Summit
- 2016 Lexus RX 350 F Sport

Full-Size Luxury SUV

- ★ 2017 Mercedes-Benz GLS 550 4MATIC
- 2017 Dodge Durango GT Brass Monkey AWD
- 2017 Land Rover Range Rover HSE Td6
- 2016 Lexus LX 570

Off-Road Utility Vehicle

- ★ 2017 Jeep Wrangler Unlim Rubicon Hard Rock
- ★ 2017 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sahara
- 2016 Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro

Midsize Pickup

- ★ 2017 Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro
- 2017 GMC Canyon 2.8L Diesel Denali 4WD
- 2017 Honda Ridgeline AWD RTL-E
- 2017 Honda Ridgeline RTL-E
- 2016 Nissan Frontier PRO-4X Crew Cab

Full-Size Pickup

- ★ 2017 Nissan Titan Texas Edition SL Crew Cab
- 2017 Ford F-150 4x4 Supercrew King Ranch
- 2017 Ford F-150 4x4 Supercrew Lariat
- 2017 Ram 1500 Lone Star Silver
- 2017 Ram 1500 Rebel
- 2017 Toyota Tundra TRD PRO

Heavy Duty Pickup

- ★ 2017 Ford Super Duty F-250 4x4 Crew Cab Lariat
- 2017 Ram 2500 Limited
- 2017 Ram 2500 Longhorn

Luxury Pickup

- ★ 2017 Ram 1500 Longhorn
- 2017 Ford Super Duty F-250 4x4 Crew Cab Platinum
- 2017 Ford Super Duty F-350 4x4 Crew Cab Platinum
- 2017 GMC Sierra 4WD Denali
- 2017 Nissan Titan Platinum Reserve

Off-Road Pickup

- ★ 2017 Ram 2500 Power Wagon
- 2017 Ford Super Duty F-250 4x4 Crew Cab King Ranch
- 2016 GMC Sierra 1500 4WD All Terrain X
- 2017 Nissan Titan PRO-4X CC

Commercial Vehicle

- ★ 2017 Nissan Titan XD Single Cab Diesel
- 2016 Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 2500 Passenger 170"
- 2016 Ram ProMaster Tradesman

Technologies and Features

- ★ **Connectivity:** FCA Uconnect Access
- ★ **Powertrain:** 2017 Ford F-150 w 3.5 EcoBoost V6
- ★ **Technology:** Honda In-bed audio system

- ★ **Truck of Texas: 2017 Ford Super Duty**
- ★ **Truck Line of Texas: Ford Motor Company**
- ★ **SUV of Texas: 2017 Nissan Armada**
- ★ **CUV of Texas: 2017 Volvo XC90**

Ford, GMC, Honda, Nissan and Toyota also displayed several specialty models or future products, not for driving:



Four category winners had two flavors of a model entered, maybe increasing the odds of each driver getting a full run, though done because of their predictable high demand. In other cases, having two did not add up to a win.

Philosophies and statistical methods are continually refined, and it’s always possible something may be tallied differently in the future.

The TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo was held at a highly praised new venue this year, Longhorn River Ranch, still in Texas Hill Country but now closer to Austin than San Antonio. Winners were announced on the final evening, with a formal awards presentation ceremony held in November (at the San Antonio Auto Show for the first time). And we of course are already looking forward to next year. ■

Nissan won the title trophy for SUV of Texas with its all-new 2017 Nissan Armada, based on the global Nissan Patrol, as well as four other category wins and top score for Best Value—for a total of six, the most for any one badge—including Full-Size Pickup (2017 Nissan Titan, which was Truck of Texas last year), Full-Size SUV (2017 Armada again), Midsize CUV (2016 Nissan Murano) and Best Commercial Vehicle (2017 Titan XD Single Cab with 8-foot bed, beating vans, which usually win).

Volvo XC90 won the CUV of Texas title, Luxury CUV and Best Interior. Other category wins went to Mercedes-Benz for Full-Size Luxury SUV (GLS), Jaguar for Midsize Luxury SUV (F-PACE), Mazda for Full-size CUV (CX-9), Toyota for Midsize Pickup (Tacoma TRD Pro), and Honda for Best Technology (Ridgeline in-bed audio system).

