

PROOF OF PRODUCT

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) chose a beautiful Michigan summer day almost exactly in the middle of 2017 to reveal to us their secrets for 2018. Following suit to prior summers, they held a comprehensive "What's New 2018" event at their top secret Chelsea Proving Grounds, almost 4,000 acres set in the woods about a half hour from Ann Arbor. Most was so secret, we could not reveal it until September. Today is your lucky day.

The entire lineup is present, along with a few concepts and show builds. Our venue comprises three regions, which could be broadly thought of as road, off-road and track, each with subsets. We are free to go back and forth among the three, but it's a very full day, so we generally break it down into extended sessions by locale.

In the first area, where the overall event is based, there are specialized equivalents of everyday pavement driving. On the perimeter is the ADR (Automated Durability Road), a 1.3-mile oval course with three "event lanes": a 50-mph smooth asphalt surface; a 20-to-30-mph lane with trenches, Belgian blocks and other fixed surfaces creating harsh driving conditions; and a 5-mph lane with the harshest obstacles of all. Inside that is the LLR (Lateral Load Road): a sidewinder-snake-shaped asphalt handling course with a succession of nine tight hairpin turns, to be taken at more or less a constant 30 mph. These two courses

were implemented this year in lieu of our usual larger oval and road handling course (more like a two-lane country highway), which were in use this year for something else, too complex and too secret to interrupt with our own complex and secret event.

The next is in a deep and secluded wooded corner of the Grounds, a shuttle ride away—a very long oval, or two long straightaways with semicircles at the ends. For "What's New," they set up a one-eighth-mile dragstrip on one of the straightaways and an autocross course on a huge patch of paved infield between the straightaways. Here, we have a stable of performance sports and muscle machinery for autocross, with Hellcats for dragstrip launch control and braking sessions.

For off-road driving, we use the famous 2.3-mile Lyman Trail evaluation course—a set of trails and obstacles nasty enough and wonderful enough for Jeep engineers to fully test and develop their dominant lineup.

Continuous Improvement has been a mantra in the Dilbert world of corporatespeak for a couple of decades. It comes to mind as we survey the FCA lineup for 2018. Can you think of a single vehicle in the lineup for which you say, I wish they would make an all-new whatever? Neither can we. Alfa Romeo, Chrysler, Dodge, Fiat, Jeep, Mopar and Ram Trucks product stables are so well developed, it's good to see this is a year of refinement but not



replacement. Each brand has a fresh stable of awards from this year's comparos, and each brand has significantly growing sales.

Featured at the event, by brand, were:
CHRYSLER: 300, Pacifica, Pacifica Hybrid.
DODGE: Challenger, Challenger SRT Demon, Challenger SRT Hellcat, Challenger SRT Widebody, Charger, Charger Pursuit, Durango, Durango R/T, Durango SRT, Grand Caravan, Journey.
FIAT: 124 Spider, 124 Spider Abarth, 500, 500 Abarth, 500e, 500L, 500X.
JEEP: Cherokee, Compass, Grand Cherokee, Grand Cherokee SRT, Grand Cherokee Trackhawk, Renegade, Wrangler JK (2-door and 4-door).

RAM TRUCKS: 1500 (including Limited Tungsten, Sport Appearance Package, Big Horn Black), 2500/3500 (including Limited Tungsten, Sport Appearance Package), 3500/4500/5500 Chassis Cab, ProMaster, ProMaster City
UCONNECT: 2018 update w/Apple/Android.

A lot of the news was in trims and positioning, and a lot of that was in trucks and SUVs. With one very full day, we chose a string of favorites and newsmakers in each venue.

RAM TRUCKS

With a string of on- and off-road trophies under its belt, the Ram Trucks lineup's capability is well established—from Tradesman to Rebel to Power Wagon, and from V6 to Cummins 6.7-liter turbo diesel with 31,210-pound tow capacity. For 2018, they are broadening finishes and features.

RAM LIMITED TUNGSTEN. Available on Ram 1500, 2500 and 3500 is a new Limited Tungsten trim, building upon prior top-of-the-line Limited, which already includes maximum features plus full high-back heated/ventilated leather interior and other exclusives. We grabbed a three-quarter-ton Ram 2500 version with 800-lb-ft 6.7-liter Cummins inline-six turbo diesel and went for a spin with Jim Morrison, Head of Ram Brand North America.

"We talked to higher end buyers," says Morrison. "They wanted something classy, very distinguished and unique in the marketplace. But they didn't want a lot of flash, such as chrome bumpers and a big chrome grille. They wanted something with a more subtle appearance and an interior that's all luxury. So that's what we've delivered."

Chrome trim has been replaced, from the satin tungsten grille to the body-color RAM name on the tailgate. Wheels are grey or satin with tungsten pockets. A sport hood, body-color mirrors and running boards, and projector headlamps with black surround finish off the exterior. The interior is Frost and Indigo—the first light interior in a Limited, plus a blue so rich it's almost black—with the first suede headliner in a truck, as well as brushed accents. (A black leather interior is also available.)

With all its add-ons and all its class, Ram Limited Tungsten is only \$1600 more than Limited, just over \$55,000 on the Ram 1500. The new package is available all the way up to a one-ton dually.

And yes, the big truck was both powerful and nimble on the Lateral Load Road twisties.

SPORT APPEARANCE PACKAGE. The new Sport Appearance Package—available on Ram 2500 and 3500 Big Horn, Lone Star and Laramie trims—is immediately recognizable from its body-color grille to its black Ram's head tailgate badge. It includes 20-inch aluminum or black wheels (or 17-inch aluminum), body-color door handles and wheel flares, black mirrors, and front and rear park assist. Bilstein shocks are added on 2500 4x4s. Inside are heated seats and wheel, and sport seats (cloth/vinyl or leather in Laramie). Prices start at \$45,335 for Big Horn/Lone Star, \$49,640 for Laramie.

RAM 1500 REBEL. The 2017 Ram Rebel in special Mojave Sand finish was available with all-black fabric interior in lieu of the familiar red and black interior. For 2018, leather is available in the Rebel for the first time, for customers who love off-roading but also want to head farther upscale. Two new paint colors are Blue Streak and Delmonico



(At left) The 1.3-mile Automated Durability Road (ADR), which circles the Lateral Load Road (LLR).

(Right, top to bottom) 2018 Ram 2500 Limited Tungsten 6.7L Cummins turbo diesel; 2018 Ram 2500 6.4L HEMI® with Sport Appearance Package; 2018 Dodge Durango SRT; Sport Appearance Package details.



Red (a deep wine red as on Laramie). An appearance package adds black wheels and brush guard. Base price for a Rebel 4x2 is \$45,295, \$47,395 as a 4x4. The black package is \$595, leather interior just \$1545, and premium Alpine audio \$595.

Rebel accounts for six percent of Ram sales, but just three percent of those are 4x2. That's less than two-tenths of one percent of Rams overall, but it's an easy build, so they offer it for those who want the look with \$2100 savings. In fact, those buyers get more than the look—the same air suspension, Bilstein monotube shocks, Toyo tires, articulation, ground clearance and traction control system. And it's a way to get a HEMI V8 in a 2WD.

DODGE DURANGO

DURANGO R/T AND SRT. We had the Durango R/T in our Arizona fleet recently, in dark grey metallic, with tinted windows and dark wheels. It was a true sleeper—a seven-seat family hauler that could take on anybody on a freeway ramp. We've driven its cousin the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT on track at Circuit of the Americas. And we've driven the full lineups of Challenger and Charger, offered in carefully stairstepped models with the R/T at a great balance point of power, price and fuel mileage. Put it all together, and you have the Durango R/T, which we took for a run on the road courses.

Dodge, too, sees the 360-hp 5.7-liter HEMI V8 Durango R/T as a three-row Charger, and for 2018 they are doubling down on that, with a Charger performance steering wheel, Charger electronic T-



KEEP RIGHT >>

Story and photos: Joe Sage

shifter and light black chrome accents. From the cockpit, you feel that Charger DNA, especially as you fire it up and hear its exhaust note. Red accent stitching is available in the seats and console.

For 2018, Dodge is adding a Durango SRT with 475-hp 6.4L HEMI, bigger brakes and Pirelli tires.

As a dividend, the new SRT's performance hood and performance fascia are standard on the 2018 R/T, distinguishing it further from the GT, which also has body-color grille and crosshairs.

Bonus: Durango R/T and Durango SRT are "three-row Chargers" that can tow 7400 or 8400 pounds, respectively. Both have standard heated/cooled front and heated rear Nappa leather seats and heated steering wheel. Durango SRT is AWD only, while others are rear-drive or AWD.

FIAT

FIAT 124 SPIDER. Built upon the bones of the universally acclaimed Mazda MX-5 Miata, the Fiat 124 Spider brings its own engine to the game. Its transmission is Mazda's, but from the prior-gen Miata, matched to Fiat's higher torque (while engine power is just five horses higher, torque is 184 lb-ft in the Fiat vs 148 in the Mazda). We took the Spider on both road courses, nailing it through the hairpins as surely as if we were in the Italian Alps. You can pop its manual soft top down faster than you could ever pull out a stopwatch to time it (2 to 4 seconds), and its trunk is larger than Miata's, all the better for a weekend in those switchbacks. As staff at the event noted, everybody comes back

from this drive with a smile on their face—and we just had to go around the course another time. New for 2018 will be more flexibility in option packages for Lusso luxury and Abarth performance versions, plus three new paint colors, which as usual are as much fun to say as to see: Puro Bianco Perla, Grigio Chiaro and Blu Scuro (white, silver and dark blue). A new Red Top Edition Lusso will be released later in the year.

FIAT 500 SERIES. Fiat 500 gets a lower base price, just \$14,995, the 500 Abarth now \$19,995. Any convertible is just \$1495 more, starting at \$16,490 (the most affordable in its class). The Fiat 500e electric delivers 121 MPGe city. Fiat 500X, cousin to Jeep Renegade, makes Uconnect standard on all models, with that system's 2018 updates including Apple/Android. Fiat 500L has its body refreshed stem to stern, adds technologies from Uconnect with Apple/Android, to USB ports, to ambient lighting, plus new colors including pastel orange, metallic bronze and blue denim.

FIAT ON THE AUTOCROSS. We drove the Fiat 124 Spider Abarth and 500 Abarth on the autocross course, along with a high-power stable including Dodge Challenger T/A 392, Charger 392 Daytona and Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT—a dream team, to be sure, but as we have found here before, the small, lightweight and highly nimble Fiats were arguably the most fun through the cones.

DODGE MUSCLE

SRT HELLCAT LAUNCH CONTROL. A short walk from

the autocross course is our eighth-mile dragstrip, set up on this track's south straightaway. Vehicles here get right to the point—Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat and Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat, both with 707-hp, 650-lb-ft 6.2L supercharged HEMI® Hellcat V8. These purpose-built 9.5:1 compression engines feature deep-skirt cast iron block with cross-bolted main bearing caps, unique aluminum alloy heads with hemi combustion chambers; sequential multiport electronic returnless fuel injection; 16 pushrod overhead valves with sodium-filled exhaust, hollow stem intake and hydraulic lifters; separate dual intercoolers and high-flow variable-speed electric water pump; and dual 2.75-inch straight-through exhaust with twin electronic exhaust valves (EEV). All this is fed through a ZF eight-speed automatic to the rear end. The cars' Performance Pages, accessed through the Uconnect screen, include Launch Mode, a form of traction control engineered to provide maximum acceleration in a straight line. It's for closed course use only, where zero-to-60 and quarter-mile times are measured. Or in our case, eighth-mile, and measured only for the curious—the real point is to experience the system, the raw acceleration and the braking, which is coned for the very last bit of the strip. Front brakes are 15.4-inch two-piece aluminum-hat vented/slotted discs with six-piston fixed monoblock aluminum Brembo calipers. Rears are 13.8-inch vented/slotted discs with four-piston aluminum-housed Brembo calipers. Four-wheel ABS is standard. You can't go wrong with this sys-

tem. Or maybe you could—the system is so potent, it's disabled for the first 500 miles of the vehicle's life. Challenger or Charger, the Hellcats are basically indistinguishable on this run. It's a blast. We could do that eighth-mile all day long.

CHALLENGER DEMON AND WIDEBODY. The most anticipated halo car was the Dodge Challenger SRT Demon—the world's first showroom stock dragstrip-ready car—on static display, not for driving. You've surely heard of the Demon during its months-long teaser campaign or since its reveal at the New York Auto Show in April. Its own supercharged 6.2L HEMI is engineered for a whopping 840 hp with 100 octane fuel (check your airport or track performance shop) or 808 hp on 91 octane pump fuel. Weight is stripped off inside and out, while its body is widened to accommodate drag-caliber rear wheels (the fronts are narrower; all are street legal). Demon will be built for one year only, limited to 3300 copies.

Demon has also spawned the Challenger SRT Hellcat Widebody, adapting the Demon's wheel flares to a regular (if there is such a thing) Hellcat, fleshed out with 305/35 Pirelli P Zeros all around, on 20x11 wheels. With all this grip, the Widebody is good for zero-to-60 in 3.4 seconds. For those whose timing, budget or sensibilities don't put a Demon in the garage, this can fill the bill nicely.

JEEP

Lyman Trail is engineered to break a Jeep if it can, a harsh course used by engineers during the toughest off-road development, with rock crawls, extreme articulation courses, deep water troughs, log climbs, approach, breakover and departure challenges and generally rough and narrow trails.

There are two courses here (one shared by all vehicles, plus an extension for the most extreme). We run all vehicles in 4-wheel low range here, as the primitive trail snakes through the woods, with special features known as the Rock Garden, Log Pile, Stairs, Peat Bog and Water Hole—each of which is a substantial understatement, with a recommended speed of just three miles per hour.

We drove every model of Jeep—Wrangler, Renegade, Compass, Cherokee, Grand Cherokee—Trailhawk if available—and all handled their courses flawlessly. One very wet log, highly polished on this busy day, had us back up and find a better spot a foot or so to the side of the first try.

A highlight of our Lyman Trail session was having the perfectly executed Ram Rebel's lead engineer Elizabeth Krear along, right-seating. She is, of course, a seasoned off-roader, but her interest in Jeeps had just amped up. We were among the first to learn she is moving over to Jeep, to take on one of the most challenging and fulfilling tasks imaginable: leading development of Wrangler's



(At left) Fiat 124 Spider Abarths, Fiat 500 Abarths, Dodge Charger 392 Daytona and Dodge Challenger T/A 392 in the grid at the autocross course.

(Right, top to bottom) 2018 Dodge Challenger SRT Demon; Fiat 124 Spider Abarths and a variety of Dodges on the autocross course; Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat and Charger SRT Hellcat stage for launch control demo; Demon and Widebody details.

highly anticipated next generation, inventing a new version of a vehicle with one of the most venerable souls in the business. With increasingly stringent regulations, she has her work cut out for her. This project is in the best of hands: we are confident her team will take this perfect vehicle and make the next one even better. She's very much looking forward to the challenge, and we're very much looking forward to the results.

GRAND CHEROKEE TRACKHAWK. Another halo vehicle is the new 2018 Jeep Grand Cherokee Trackhawk. With the Trailhawk already at the top of this award-winning vehicle's off-road lineup, the Trackhawk picks up where the high-performance Grand Cherokee SRT left off. It has of course been irresistible for enthusiasts to ask whether the Challenger and Charger SRT Hellcats' engine could be dropped into a Jeep. FCA engineers are as enthusiastic as any enthusiast, so of course they have now done so. We drove the Trackhawk at its launch a few weeks later, including highway time, two-lane time, track time and, yes, dragstrip Launch Control time; see our writeup in this issue.

Midday break brought classic Michigan hospitality to our event tent, featuring Faygo pop, Vernor's Ginger Ale and sandwiches from Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor.

We've said before that it's easy to emerge from this event feeling the need for a seventeen-car garage. Add to that a proximity to mountains, canyons and a racetrack—the Arizona formula. ■

