Mixin' if up in the Texas diff TEXAS TRUCK AND UTILITY COMPETITION PRODUCES INTRIGUING DATA AND HAS UNIVERSAL IMPACT

A s American as baseball, the Texas Truck Rodeo, hosted by the Texas Auto Writers Association and presented by the Steel Market Development Institute (SMDI), also produces results equally interesting to an enthusiast or statistician.

The event is also highly significant for truck and utility manufacturers. Texas means trucks (it's the truck capital of the world for ownership, manufacturing, testing, even one headquarters). A win here is so important, you will see it mentioned everywhere from global news to Super Bowl ads.



or as noted

Many people say you just can't buy a bad vehicle these days. With universal application of many safety and technology features, plus vast improvements in construction methods, this is a defensible point. Manufacturers enter their best contenders, and final vote tallies are often separated by just tenths, hundredths or last year even thousandths of a point. But only one vehicle per category goes home with a trophy.

There are a number of factors in creating competitive entry categories. Whether something is a pickup or not is easy, as is telling midsize from fullsize pickups. Commercial vehicles can be open to more interpretation, often also including pickups.

For utilities, it's more complex. What's an SUV, and what's a crossover (CUV)? Manufacturers are free to designate either as they see fit, and they can self-select entries as off-road or luxury (similarly with utilities and pickups). As you skim the lists of contenders and winners, you will see that some of this is crystal clear, some subjective, most maybe a little of both. Hardest of all for classifying utilities is size (also true of passenger cars today). The EPA and other standards organizations have long had a basis for this, but measures have been increasingly overlapping. It's not uncommon for a vehicle to be classified as a compact but have an EPA-spec midsize or full-size interior, and so on. For cars, some manufacturers avoid this by marketing with such terms as "executive sedan."

It's increasingly a point of discussion in event organization. Bottom line for now: the manufacturers have the most influence on size designations and the SUV/CUV option, as any who win a trophy deserve a plaque that represents the vehicle as they market it, such as a midsize crossover.

At this year's Truck Rodeo, sixty-four trucks and utilities with a combined value of nearly \$4 million —2017 or 2018 models—were compared over two days at Longhorn River Ranch in the Texas Hill Country, near Dripping Springs outside Austin.

Three levels of off-road course are prepared (with each vehicle designated appropriately), successively including rougher terrain, rock climbing, creek crossings—all sometimes also dodging the host ranch's exotic wildlife. Two-lane highways are also available for pavement evaluation. Engineers from competing manufacturers are on hand to point out key features and answer questions.

More than 70 automotive journalists as judges spend more than 300 hours driving. They vote on each vehicle individually, with a point-score applied to a matrix of attributes—exterior, interior, performance, value and personal appeal.

Seventeen categories consider vehicle type, size, off-road intentions, luxury level and so on, as listed on following pages. The event for years generated one top

TITLE AWARD WINNERS

(at right, top to bottom):

Truck of Texas 2018 Ford F-150 ★ Ford F-150 Raptor (specifically) also won Off-Road Pickup and scored best for Exterior and Personal Appeal

SUV of Texas 2018 Volvo XC60

★ XC60 also won Best Connectivity, Best Powertrain, scored 2nd best for Interior and 3rd for Personal Appeal

Crossover of Texas 2018 Alfa Romeo Stelvio ★ Alfa Romeo Stelvio also scored 2nd best for Interior

and Personal Appeal and 3rd best for Performance

dog Title Award—Truck of Texas—but now there are three: Truck, SUV and Crossover of Texas (and thus arguably implying Truck, SUV or Crossover of the world in the eye of many consumers).

The Title Awards are based on a separate ranking for each of the three vehicle types by the judges, with those results then weighted with a carefully engineered algorithm incorporating the individual categories' ratings as well.

Results are as they are with any contest: exhilarating for the winners, sometimes frustrating for the other contenders—after all, each has brought the best of the best from their stables—and fascinating for statisticians with access to all the details. As you skim the results, this is apparent.

It's always interesting to see brands that dominate categories but do not grab the Title Award and/or vice versa. But upon the closest scrutiny, the process always stands up, revealing the depth and complexity of the mission itself.

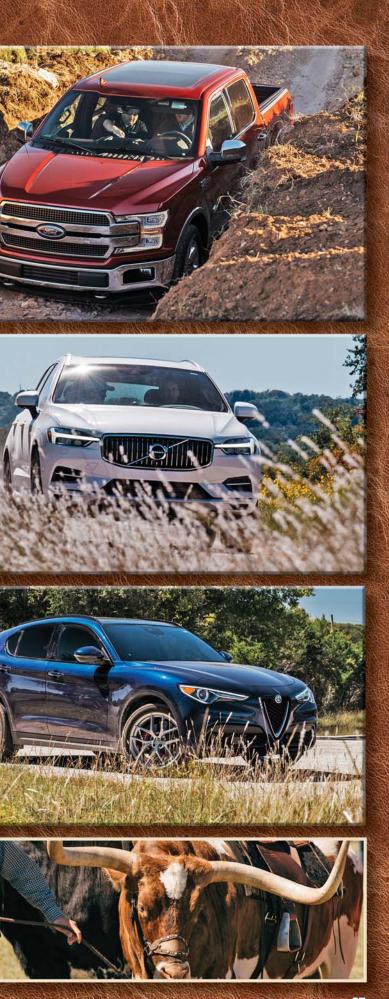
Some years, the Truck of Texas title award is easy to guess up front: the first all-aluminum Ford F-Series in 2014 or the first full-size Nissan Titan XD in 2015. But you never know till the votes are tallied. There was nothing so obviously "new and shiny" this year, although a series of new Eco-Boost engines and 10-speed transmissions may have contributed to the Ford F-150's title win.

Individual categories are just as important, though. Among six pickup categories, title winner Ford won just one, while Ram and Nissan each won two and Toyota one.

SUVs and crossovers are inherently more complex and certainly less predictable. While Volvo took the SUV title trophy, out of seven SUV cate-



(Bottom right): Our host venue's namesake at the 1632-acre Longhorn River Ranch near Dripping Springs, in the Texas Hill Country outside Austin. TAWA members with extensive off-road experience create an extreme off-road course, a moderate offroad course and one simple gravel course on site, with manufacturer input for special features; we also use neighboring two-lane Hill Country roads for pavement impressions of certain vehicles.

















CATEGORY WINNERS: PICKUPS

(Near left, top to bottom; runners-up alphabetical):

Midsize Pickup 2017 Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro vs.....2017 Honda Ridgeline RTL-E ..2018 Nissan Frontier Midnight Edition

Full-Size Pickup 2018 Nissan Titan Midnight Edition vs.....2018 Ford F-150 King Ranch ...2018 Ford F-150 XLT

......2018 Ram 1500 Rebel

......2018 Toyota Tundra Limited 4x4 CrewMax

Heavy Duty Pickup 2018 Ram 2500 Limited Tungsten vs.....2017 Ford F-250 King Ranch

Off-Road Pickup 2017 Ford F150 Raptor vs.....2017 Nissan Titan PRO 4X CrewCab 4x4 ...2017 Ram 2500 Power Wagon Luxury Pickup

2018 Ram 1500 Laramie Longhorn Southfork vs.....2018 Ford F-150 Limited ..2018 Ford F-250 Limited

..2017 Nissan Tita Platinum Reserve CC 4x4 **Commercial Vehicle**

2018 Nissan Titan King Cab SV vs.....2018 Ford F-150 XL ..2018 Ford F-250 XL ...2017 Mercedes-Benz Sprinter Crew Van

.......2018 Ram 5500 Chassis Cab Tradesman (w/dump) gories, that was their only win, while Jeep and

Dodge took four, and Nissan/Infiniti won two, FCA also won the Crossover of Texas title award, while Mazda swept the other three CUV categories.

Texas Truck Rodeo also grants several Feature Awards, in categories self-nominated by the manufacturers and voted upon based on each judge's collective experience from the two days. Here, the SUV Title-winning Volvo XC60 catches up, winning both Best Connectivity and Best Powertrain. The Best Technology trophy went to Nissan ProPilot Assist, an impressively implemented set of driving aids carefully balanced to not be autonomous, rather to help a driver but not take over.

One final step taken by the results statisticians is to tally the numerical votes for all vehicles in each evaluation category, not for trophies but rather just for interest (and glory, for some). When all scores for Best Overall Exterior were added up. Ford F-150 Raptor was highest, followed by the new Alfa Romeo Stelvio and the new Ram Laramie Longhorn Southfork trim. Ram Longhorn

(Far left, top to bottom): History on display, as Ford brought a running 1948 Ford F-1 to mark F-Series' upcoming 70th birthday. // History in the making with a running prototype of the Bollinger B1 electric utility truck (en route next to desert testing in Utah, then SEMA in Las Vegas). // Emus running free at the ranch kept us entertained and alert, with personalities part Dr Seuss, part Jurassic Park. The flightless birds, standing about six-foot-three, were not shypoking their heads into vehicles, joining us on walks and climbs, opening ice chests with their beaks, and helping themselves to bottled drinks and bagged ice. They seemed to be everywhere all the time, but most agreed there were actually only two or three.

CATEGORY WINNERS: UTILITIES

(Top to bottom by column; runners-up alphabetical) Subcompact SUV

2017 Jeep Renegade Desert Hawk vs.....(no others in category)

Compact SUV 2018 Nissan Roque Platinum vs.....2018 Jeep Compass Limited

....2018 Toyota RAV4 Adventure

Compact Luxury SUV 2018 Infiniti QX30 Premium AWD vs.....2018 Mercedes-Benz GLA250 4MATIC

Midsize SUV 2017 Jeep Grand Cherokee Trailhawk vs.....2018 Volkswagen Atlas

Midsize Luxury SUV 2018 Volvo XC60 T6 Inscription / T8 Inscription vs.....Jeep Grand Cherokee Summit Mercedes-Benz G550Land Rover Discovery HSE Luxury Td6Land Rover Discovery HSE Luxury

Full-Size SUV 2018 Dodge Durango SRT 392 vs.....2018 Nissan Armada Platinum

Off-Road Utility Vehicle 2017 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon Recon vs.....2018 Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro

Compact Crossover 2018 Mazda CX-3 Grand Touring FWD vs.....2017 Fiat 500X Urbana Edition ...2017 Nissan Rogue Sport SL 2018 Subaru Crosstrek 2 0i Limited

Midsize Crossover 2017 Mazda CX-5 Grand Touring GT vs.....2017 Nissan Murano Platinum AWD2017 Volkswagen Tiguan SEL Premium 4MOTION

Full-Size Crossover 2018 Mazda CX-9 Grand Touring AWD vs.....2017 Nissan Pathfinder Platinum 4x4

Luxury Crossover 2018 Alfa Romeo Stelvio Ti Sport vs.....2017 Lexus RX 350 F SPORT

Southfork also tallied tops for Best Overall Interior, followed by Volvo XC60 and Land Rover Discovery. Best Overall Performance reflects the overall balance of entries, with the brand new Dodge Durango SRT 392 first, underscoring the reason for a paved component to the event, followed by the extreme off-road-capable Ram 2500 Power Wagon and the some-of-both Alfa Romeo Stelvio. As pickup popularity and prices soar, Nissan has shown enough restraint to sweep Best Overall Value with three different Titans. Since a statistical tally is never the last word when vehicle shopping, any more than it is when choosing a spouse or a house, the Highest Overall Personal Appeal score adds dimension, with Ford F-150 Raptor again tops, followed by yet another "place" for the Alfa Romeo Stelvio and another "show" for the Volvo XC60.

Ultimately, despite all the moving parts in the process, certain trends-whether transient or running deep-do become apparent.

As always, we look forward to next year.

