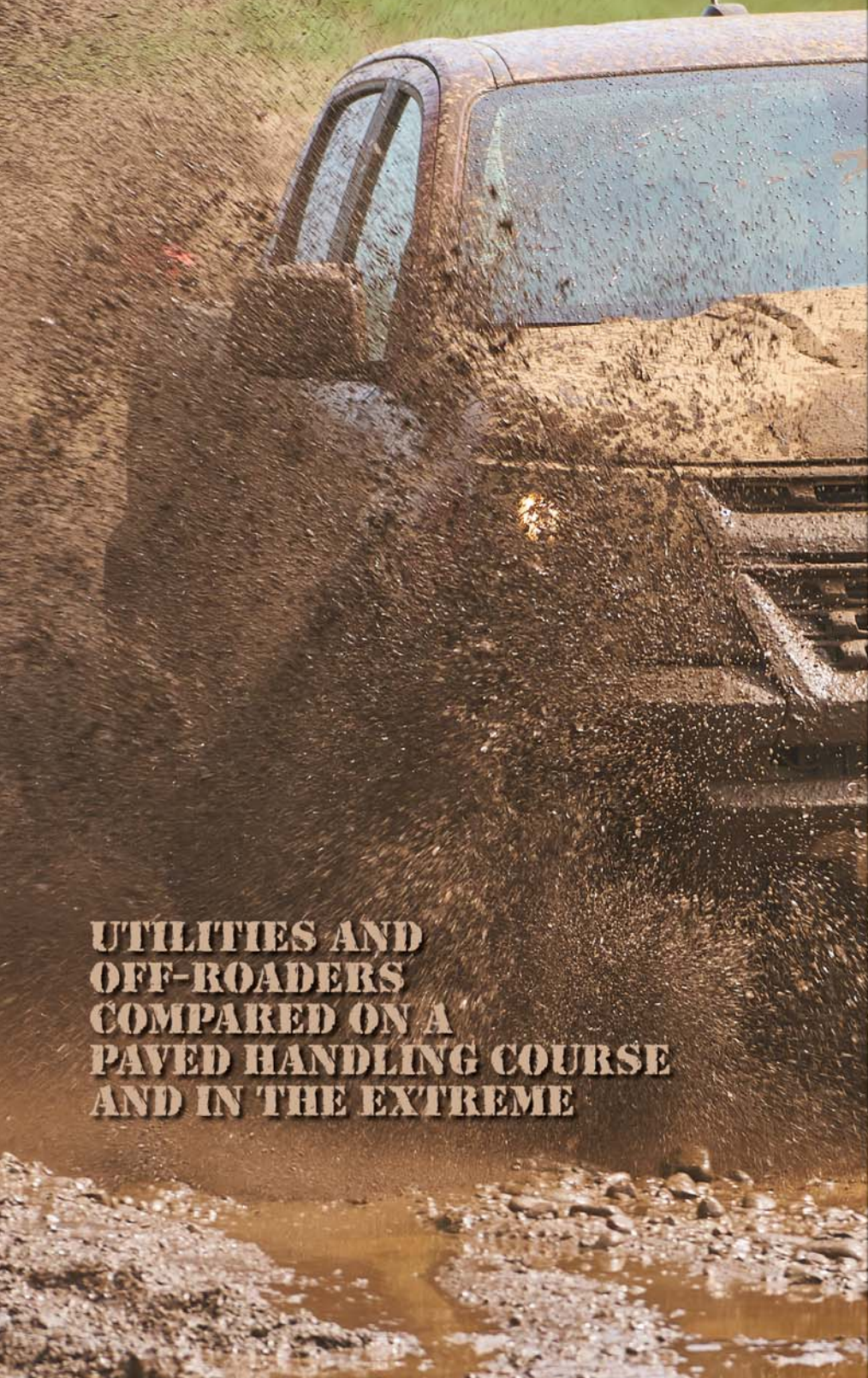


MUDFEST!

By Joe Sage / Photos: Ryan Douthit / NWAPA



UTILITIES AND OFF-ROADERS COMPARED ON A PAVED HANDLING COURSE AND IN THE EXTREME

Each spring, the Northwest Automotive Press Association (NWAPA) hosts the Northwest Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year awards—a vehicle comparo event popularly known as Mudfest, now in its 24th year. The event's parameters and results are of broad interest in the rugged Southwest, too, which is why we've been participating since 2013.

This year's event was held for the third time at The Ridge Motorsports Park (the third locale during our years with the event), northwest of Shelton, Washington on the Olympic Peninsula. Overnights were along Hood Canal (a natural body of water) near Union, Washington.

The 170-acre facility features a 2.47-mile, 16-turn track with 300-foot elevation changes (which we don't use); a one-sixth-scale version of that as a kart track (which we do use); and motocross courses and other acreage that are modified or specially built for our four-wheel off-roading.

There is always a better than average chance of rain in the Pacific Northwest, with almost perfect odds of mud. The Olympic Peninsula averages more than three times the annual rainfall of Seattle, and more than twice that of Snoqualmie Pass, where the event was run for some years. If it doesn't rain, we make our own mud.

Driving takes place over two days, with the first day devoted to pavement (the kart track allows for meaningful acceleration, braking, steering and handling evaluation) and the second to dirt, mud, logs, hill ascent and descent and generally serious off-roading. The pavement day has grown in scope over the past several years, using opportunities our newest venue offers and in response to the increasing use of utility vehicles and pickups as daily drivers. The algorithms used in vote tabulation were also reengineered last year to give more weight to the pavement day than in prior years, though the off-roading day still surely defines the personality of Mudfest overall.

The paved day's events start with a coned handling course and a grid to test backup and proximity systems. Next is the kart track, with a zoom-then-stop straightaway, followed by a succession of challenging turns, all within 50-foot elevation

changes. Every vehicle entered in the event is run through this course, where increasingly sleek and aerodynamic models with lower ground clearance may see an advantage, while some big pickups and SUVs can feel almost just as nimble.

Day two is what makes Mudfest Mudfest—the off-road portion, with climb, descent, rough surface, side slope, obstacle and mud elements. One course is used by all vehicles, with Extreme Capability offshoots available for some (see below).

Vehicles are designated by their manufacturers to compete in any of five categories—four for utilities, one for pickups. A sixth category, Extreme Capability, was done a little differently this year (see more info below). The same classes apply for both the on-road and off-road days.

An Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year winner is also chosen from the overall slate of entries, independently of individual category results.

Driving/judging media seek to learn all they can about each vehicle's features, capabilities and performance, especially within parameters of the event's outdoor activity theme, which they can pass along to readers who seek guidance in what they might buy. The manufacturers' goal is to put their best foot forward in each category. We all benefit from gauging the relativities of it all, not soley the final crowned winners.

Fourteen manufacturers entered 26 vehicles—seven from Detroit, seven from Europe, ten from Japan and two from Korea. Most were 2018 models, along with a few 2019 releases and one 2017.

Twenty-six media members drove and voted. Brand specialists were on hand to point out features and answer questions, and a team of hard-working press fleet representatives ran the event.

Scoring considers vehicle design and build specifics (powertrain, brakes, exterior styling, interior comfort, function and technology); ride and handling on-pavement; and handling and capability off-pavement. Factors are added for fuel economy and for value, both of interest in both absolute and relative terms. Despite this event being rooted in the dirt, on-road and off-road attributes now carry equal weight, reflecting real world use.

Each vehicle's numbers are added up to deter-





mine first, second and third place finishes in five of the six categories, sometimes confirming a gut favorite, other times delivering a surprise. Though it's hard to buy a bad vehicle these days, challenging competition is a great way for differences large and small to make themselves clear.

Results can be tight, with casual favorites not always statistical winners or vice versa.

Entrants and results are as follows. We include the range of price, power and highway fuel mileage for each category overall, to help you gauge where the winners fall. We've added torque this year, as buyers become increasingly aware of its importance and as horsepower and torque numbers diverge more than they used to.

All are 2018 models unless noted otherwise.

SUBCOMPACT UTILITY

Ford EcoSport Titanium FWD
Hyundai Kona Ultimate AWD
Mitsubishi Eclipse Cross SEL S-AWC

PRICE RANGE\$23,985 Ford > \$32,310 Mitsubishi
POWER RANGE...HP....123 HP Ford > 175 HP Hyundai
.....TORQUE.....125 LBFT Ford > 195 LBFT Hyundai

HWY MPG RANGE26 MPG Mitsu > 29 MPG Ford/Hyundai
ANALYSIS: When there's a completely new and shiny vehicle in the set, it often has an edge. This category, however, had nothing but. All three were also in top trims. Hyundai Kona's price was 24 percent above the EcoSport's (and just 8 percent below Mitsubishi's), but the EcoSport was a front-driver (a daring entry in an off-road-centric event), putting Kona nicely in the middle on value. Fuel mileage was similar on all, but Hyundai wins the horsepower wars here.

WINNER: 2018 Hyundai Kona Ultimate AWD
175 HP, 195 LBFT, 29 MPG hwy, \$29,805 as tested

COMPACT/MIDSIZE UTILITY

Jeep Cherokee Trailhawk Elite 4x4 (2019)
Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 4x4
Mazda CX-5 Grand Touring AWD
Mitsubishi Outlander PHEV GT S-AWC
Subaru Outback 2.5i Touring
Toyota RAV4 Adventure AWD
Volkswagen Tiguan 2.0t SE 4Motion
Volkswagen Golf Alltrack TSI SE 4Motion

PRICE RANGE\$30,615 VW Golf > \$53,200 Wrangler
POWER RANGE...HP....170 HP VW Golf > 285 HP Wrangler
.....TORQUE.....172 LBFT Toyota > 295 LBFT Cherokee

HWY MPG RANGE23 MPG Wrangler > 32 MPG Subaru*
*Note: Mitsubishi PHEV is rated 75 MPGe in electric mode
ANALYSIS: With eight entries, this was the biggest category by count, not surprising as it combined Compact and Midsize this year (vehicle size categories are in such a state of flux—and subjectivity—that this is not inappropriate). Horsepower varied widely. Fuel mileage looks wide, but most hung within a couple of points of 30 mpg highway. All together in this case, the numbers didn't seem to decide the race, which was won by the most expensive vehicle, with the lowest fuel mileage, but with durable and enviable utility credentials.

WINNER: Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 4x4
285 HP, 260 LBFT, 23 MPG hwy, \$53,200 as tested

FAMILY UTILITY

Ford Expedition XLT FX4 Off-Road 4x4
Kia Sorento SXL AWD (2019)
Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 2500 Crew Van 4x4 (2017)
Nissan Armada Platinum 4WD
Volkswagen Atlas V6 SEL 4Motion

PRICE RANGE\$41,495 MB Sprinter > \$66,695 Nissan
POWER RANGE...HP....188 HP MB Sprinter > 390 HP Nissan
.....TORQUE.....252 LBFT Kia > 470 LBFT Ford
HWY MPG RANGE18 MPG Nissan > 24 MPG Kia

ANALYSIS: The prices alone here are enough to teach anyone not to generalize, with Mercedes-Benz the cheapest and Nissan the most expensive. The Volkswagen Atlas, toward the low end on pricing, higher end on fuel mileage, in the middle on horsepower yet the low end on torque, is not mathematically in the Goldilocks spot. Instead, Atlas (which has done well in a number of comparos this year) seems to have prevailed through an equation of tradeoffs overall.

WINNER: 2018 Volkswagen Atlas V6 SEL 4Motion
276 HP, 266 LBFT, 23 MPG hwy, \$45,235 as tested

PREMIUM UTILITY

BMW X2 xDrive28i
BMW X3 xDrive30i
Lexus LX570 2-Row
Mercedes-Benz G550

PRICE RANGE\$50,920 BMW X2 > \$141,995 M-Benz
POWER RANGE...HP....228 HP BMW X2 > 416 HP M-Benz
.....TORQUE.....258 LBFT BMW X2/X3 > 450 LBFT M-Benz
HWY MPG RANGE14 MPG M-Benz > 31 MPG BMW X2

ANALYSIS: Prices in this category of just four vehicles range almost three-fold, horsepower and torque close to double, and fuel mileage more than double, seeming to confirm that there is more just one answer to "What's the best vehicle?" Well, for what? And for whom? With two lower-power and two higher-power vehicles, the decision may likely have come down to spending money (both purchase price and on-going fuel) versus saving it, and the little BMW X2 snagged enough votes from the more frugal among the judges.

WINNER: 2018 BMW X2 xDrive28i
228 HP, 258 LBFT, 31 MPG hwy, \$50,920 as tested

PICKUPS

Chevrolet Colorado 4WD ZR2 Crew Short Box Diesel
Ford F-150 4x4 SuperCrew Diesel
Honda Ridgeline AWD RTL-E (2019)
Nissan Titan Pro-4X 4x4
Ram 1500 Rebel (2019)
Toyota Tacoma TRD Off-Road 4x4 Dbl Cab Long Bed

PRICE RANGE\$42,672 Toyota > \$68,530 Ford
POWER RANGE...HP....181 HP Chevrolet > 395 HP Ram Rebel
.....TORQUE.....262 LBFT Honda > 440 LBFT Ford
HWY MPG RANGE20 MPG Nissan > 25 MPG Honda

ANALYSIS: Chevy's 181 horses look low, and they are, but for torque, which matters a lot in pickups, Chevy is at 369 lb-ft, up with the big dogs from Ford, Nissan and Ram. Fuel mileage is fairly close among all. Four prices range within about eight grand. Chevy, Nissan, Ram and Toyota came in trims especially built for off-roading. The winning Ram Rebel was second most expensive and had the lowest highway fuel mileage (by a point), but has torque second only to the diesel (not by much), top horsepower (not by much), solid chops in the mud and dirt, and thus charmed the judges overall.

WINNER: 2019 Ram 1500 Rebel
395 HP, 410 LBFT, 21 MPG hwy, \$60,050 as tested

EXTREME CAPABILITY

ANALYSIS: This category is different from the previous five, in that a certain slate of vehicles was not designated as entries. Instead, it was up to the manufacturers whether they wanted to allow a vehicle on the extreme course, itself a set of more challenging side routes in lieu of portions of the primary course. Then it was up to each driver whether they chose to take those legs or not. The number of times any vehicle might be driven on the extreme course could vary considerably. For voting, rather than tabulating specific attributes as in other categories, judges simply voted for first, second and third from among those they themselves had driven that way (though specifics from voting in other categories surely provided insights). There's no list of which ran these legs. Some (perhaps with extremely high or low price, power or fuel economy) may have been driven by only one or two, while others may have been driven by almost everybody, either of which could skew perceptions if it were done as in the others. The winner through this process turned out to be the same as in the Compact/Midsize Utility category.

WINNER: Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 4x4
285 HP, 260 LBFT, 23 MPG hwy, \$53,200 as tested

OVERALL WINNER

NWAPA Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year

ANALYSIS: Five categories are judged by a matrix of criteria, one subjectively, and there are ways all that data could just be combined and averaged for an overall winner, but there are many ways that could prove to be unrepresentative or skewed. In the five categories with numerical evaluation by a set of criteria, each judge calculates a first, second and third in each category. Then all judges' results are tabulated with an algorithm to determine each category's winner. The exception by category was Extreme Capability this year, in which first, second and third were just a judgment call, no matrix. The overall winner—the Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year—is similarly determined by subjective first, second and third votes by each judge, also run through the algorithm, but every vehicle is in play (as opposed to the subset in Extreme Capability). The overall winner does not need to have even won an individual category, but it's always likely—this year's overall winner was also winner of both the Extreme Capability and Compact/Midsize Utility categories. But there are no foregone conclusions, with the algorithms now adjusted to give more weight to the type of driving even the most aggressive off-roader might subject the majority of these vehicles to on a daily basis. Ultimately, though, a highly capable off-roader has still won the big prize, both last year (Land Rover Discovery) and this.

WINNER: Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon 4x4
285 HP, 260 LBFT, 23 MPG hwy, \$53,200 as tested

Last year's overall champion brand, Land Rover, did not enter this year. This year's overall champ, winner of three trophies out of seven overall—the completely new Jeep Wrangler JL—had not won any trophies last year with its JK model, though two other Jeep models had. We've often tried to deduce which category might define the event's spiritual core, year to year. Wrangler certainly did well this year, and it fits the Outdoor Activity title well. But the variety among category winners overall reflects the market itself—tremendous variety among the ever-growing stable of vehicles falling under the utility umbrella. ■

Best Subcompact Utility



Best Compact/Midsize Utility



Best Family Utility



Best Premium Utility



Best Pickup



Best Extreme Capability



Best Overall : Outdoor Activity Vehicle of the Year

