

Off-road comparo during a pandemic: the first step is showing up

By Joe Sage • Photos: Kevin McCauley / capturingthemachine

We don't often mention the pandemic, just when it's pertinent or explanatory to a situation at hand. For the Texas Truck Rodeo this year—the first such event in many, many months—it was definitely a considerable factor.

We also generally avoid “inside baseball,” for its own reasons. But there is always a backstory, and this odd quarantine year has made the backstory pretty key to understanding this event.

We are members of ten regional media associations—in Arizona, in our wider region and across the US. Of special interest are the groups' multi-vehicle events (most of which bestow awards).

There are several we try to never miss, in Texas and on the West Coast. And this year, we planned to do others—with the pandemic curtailing shows and conferences large and small, drive events, road rallies and much more, these group comparos

would be a great way to interface with colleagues and automakers and to try their latest products.

But all these soon fell victim, too, to lockdowns and other restrictions. Organizations worked diligently to modify the events, postponing and re-scheduling as they went, but one by one they were all cancelled, as no matter how hard they worked, and no matter how hard the automakers also worked to bring fleet staff, executive staff and the vehicles themselves to points far and wide, there were far too many obstacles in the way.

Thus it was a big deal when the TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo came together, in October. Of course we would not want to miss this!

Adaptive behavior

Putting together an event like this is intensely complex even in normal times. After months of down-

time, deciding to try to move forward with this meant gauging whether media would be ready and willing to travel, share meals and wheels, and stay overnight—participation the manufacturers need—while simultaneously seeing whether manufacturers were ready, willing, able—and had enough current and future product—to themselves travel and bring the vehicles essential to the event. Neither comes first; they are heavily interwoven.

With hard work by both sides, a plan came together. Adaptations were many. In addition to extremely vigilant sanitation and separation procedures we all know by now, the event was restructured. Usually spanning an arrival dinner and meeting, two days of driving, the second followed by awards, this year it would be a one-day event. Its dawn start made arrival the evening before essential, but with no evening programs. It would wrap

up by 5:00 pm, as soon as the last vehicle was driven. Awards would be calculated later and presented at the Houston Auto Show in late January. Head count was greatly reduced and split into two separate days, never interfacing (though automakers would interface with all).

For us, there were several practicalities to conquer. Flights are quite limited these days, and the wrap-up schedule precluded any return that same evening, meaning another hotel night—three days of travel for one drive day, okay but a little illogical (and expensive). And the awards waiting till late January would mean a story now, but with no information on who won, then a March-April follow-up, by which time it would all be pretty old news.

It would also be old news for the manufacturers by late January, almost a third of a year after the event and crossing the new year threshold of an already delayed and compacted model year cycle. By then, many of the vehicles in this event may be replaced by newer models.

With new model introductions delayed this year by everything from factory and supplier closures to lack of auto show

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reveals and launch drives, not as many 2021 models would be available as normal.

One useful lane change arrived in the form of the Houston Auto Show being cancelled. Awards would now be announced on November 5—handy for us and surely more useful to the automakers.

The more we wrestled with airline schedules, fares and multiple airports (as well as seat maps for full-boat carriers), the more we thought about just driving (a big “just,” 2500 miles with mysterious motel nights en route). And drive, we did (see following story).

Truck Rodeo evolution

All those variables aside (or in mind), the Texas Truck Rodeo itself has evolved over time, as many similar events have. Starting out as a pickup truck comparo more than 25 years ago, it soon also encompassed early body-on-frame SUVs. Evolving and multiplying, spawning crossovers, 4x4 performance coupe utilities and all the rest, SUVs and their derivatives were redefining the ever-shifting category, and with it the Truck Rodeo. By a couple of years ago, the Truck Rodeo had entries that were as much slightly-tall wagon or coupe as they were truck, by almost any definition. A few would even be confined to pavement only.

Since these are comparative events, a decision had been made to move such vehicles to spring’s (largely track-based) Texas Auto Roundup, leaving Truck Rodeo with purely pickups and rugged SUVs. (We’d been a little concerned some might not “get the memo,” realizing too late they should have entered those in the spring Roundup, possibly causing the planned correction at Rodeo to erode. Good news bad news, last spring’s cancellation of Auto Roundup kept that scenario from materializing; now all is focused and on track long term.)

For Truck Rodeo, this change itself had thinned the herd, which played out well against this year’s tighter timeframe and smaller headcount, anyway.

Operations and preparations

The manufacturers have not been doing events, neither their new vehicle launch events (although those are starting back up as of this writing), nor the media association comparos. In fact, like most of us, few have even been working in their offices.

Nonetheless, most have been continuing to provide vehicles for weekly drives and reviews by individual media people, as you see in our pages. To accomplish this, the indispensable fleet services—various operations that receive, schedule, prep and provide these weekly vehicles—have adopted complex sanitation and no-contact procedures to keep the ball rolling. Many of these are the same

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Category Winners



Compact SUV: Toyota RAV4 TRD Off-Road



Midsize Pickup: Jeep Gladiator Mojave



Midsize SUV: Hyundai Palisade



Full-size Pickup: Ram 1500 TRX



Full-size SUV: Dodge Durango SRT Hellcat



Heavy Duty Pickup: Ram 2500 HD



Luxury SUV: Land Rover Defender 110 SE



Luxury Pickup: Ram 1500 Limited Longhorn



Off-Road SUV: Jeep Wrangler Rubicon



Off-Road Pickup: Ram 1500 TRX

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event services operations that work on site at a comparo, prepping and cleaning dozens of vehicles not just once a week for review drives, but rather every minute, all day, so comparo vehicles put their best foot forward, plus are always ready for any photography or videography, all the more challenging at an off-road event. Add those layers of deep cleaning, sterilization and separation, and theirs would be a Herculean effort.

The cast of characters

Twenty-seven media members attended, sixteen on day one and eleven on day two—about half or less the total of a normal year, as intended.

There were 36 vehicles entered, by our count, 22 SUVs and 14 pickups. Japan was represented by 12 vehicles from five brands. The two Korean brands brought four vehicles. Europe offered a rich and eclectic mix of Alfa Romeo, Land Rover and Rolls-Royce. Domestically, FCA brought 17 vehicles (plus the Alfa). Ford and GM did not participate, despite their heavy involvement in 4x4 pickups and utilities and some key new models. Needless to say, this puts some spin on awards odds.

An early list stood at close to 50-50 for model year 2020 versus 2021, the state of things in this odd pandemic year. But by event time, as factories picked up the pace and more reveals were handled via online streams, the mix rolled forward considerably, to eleven 2020 and 25 2021 models.

Vehicles were divided into pickups and SUVs, each then into five categories by size, luxury and off-road. A few categories had either just one or dueling-cousins entrants in this unavoidably restricted year. Entrants and winners are as follows.

COMPACT SUV

2020 Honda CR-V Hybrid
2021 Hyundai Kona Limited
2021 Jeep Cherokee Latitude LUX 4x4
2021 Kia Seltos EX AWD
2020 Mazda CX-30
2021 Nissan Rogue
2021 Toyota RAV4 TRD Off-Road

WINNER: 2021 Toyota RAV4 TRD Off-Road

MIDSIZE SUV

2021 Hyundai Palisade Calligraphy
2020 Jeep Wrangler EcoDiesel
2020 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sahara 4x4
2021 Kia Telluride SX AWD
2021 Mazda CX-9
2021 Toyota 4Runner Trail
2021 Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro

WINNER: 2021 Hyundai Palisade Calligraphy

FULL-SIZE SUV

2021 Dodge Durango SRT Hellcat

WINNER: 2021 Dodge Durango SRT Hellcat

OFF-ROAD SUV

2021 Jeep Wrangler

2021 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon

WINNER: 2021 Jeep Wrangler Rubicon

LUXURY SUV

2020 Alfa Romeo Stelvio

2021 Infiniti QX80 Premium Select 4WD

2021 Jeep Grand Cherokee Summit 4x4

2020 Land Rover Defender 110 SE

2020 Rolls-Royce Cullinan

WINNER: 2020 Land Rover Defender 110 SE

MIDSIZE PICKUP TRUCK

2021 Jeep Gladiator High Altitude

2021 Jeep Gladiator Mojave

2021 Toyota Tacoma Trail

WINNER: 2021 Jeep Gladiator Mojave

FULL-SIZE PICKUP TRUCK

2021 Nissan Titan 5.6L Endur V8 PRO-4X 4x4 CC

2021 Ram 1500 TRX

2021 Toyota Tundra

WINNER: 2021 Ram 1500 TRX

HEAVY DUTY PICKUP TRUCK

2020 Ram 2500 HD Laramie Night Edition

2020 Ram 3500 HD Laramie Night Edition dually

2020 Ram 3500 HD Laramie Night Edition dually

WINNER: 2020 Ram 2500 HD Laramie Night Ed

OFF-ROAD PICKUP TRUCK

2021 Jeep Gladiator Mojave

2021 Jeep Gladiator Rubicon EcoDiesel

2020 Nissan Frontier PRO-4X 4X4

2021 Ram 1500 TRX

WINNER: 2021 Ram 1500 TRX

LUXURY TRUCK

2021 Ram 1500 Limited Longhorn 10th Anniv Ed

2021 Ram 1500 Southwest Edition

WINNER: Ram 1500 Lim Longhorn 10th Anniv Ed

The TAWA Texas Truck Rodeo is also long known for its annual Truck of Texas and now also SUV of Texas awards. These are separate votes, not an aggregate of category votes. As "Texas is trucks," this honor often generates everything from billboards nationwide to Super Bowl ads. Winners hold their 2021 titles until next year's Rodeo.

TITLE AWARD ★ 2021 TRUCK OF TEXAS
2021 Ram 1500

TITLE AWARD ★ 2021 SUV OF TEXAS
2021 Dodge Durango

"This year has brought a lot of challenges to the automotive industry," said TAWA President Kristin Shaw, "and we are grateful for the partnership of our journalist and OEM members to provide an opportunity to have access to vehicles, network, and create content that is vital to our livelihoods and shared passion." Tough job, well done. ■

Title Award Winners



2021 Truck Of Texas ★ Ram 1500



2021 SUV Of Texas ★ Dodge Durango