

Back in the saddle again

By Joe Sage / photos by Kevin McCauley (and Greg Riley as noted)

We belong to a number of regional media associations around the country, most of which have vehicle comparo award events. We've participated in a number of them and wouldn't mind doing them all, but we pretty much never miss the ones in Texas. Texas has much in common with Arizona, from simultaneously deeply historic and ultramodern sunbelt cities, to beautiful two-lanes through the hills, to wide open Interstates—generating very similar vehicle tastes. They may not have our snowy high elevations, but a Texan will generally head there, too, at the drop of a ten-gallon hat. These affinities make their events especially useful to us, and to you.

The Texas AutoWriters' Association (TAWA) has been presenting two primary events over its quarter-century of existence: the Texas Truck Rodeo in the fall and Texas Auto Roundup each spring.

For years, the split between the two events was simple: trucks for Truck Rodeo, cars for Auto Roundup. But as in the vehicle marketplace writ large, there has been evolution in these events. It was a

natural to add the first body-on-frame SUVs to the Texas Truck Rodeo. Then came crossovers, and as that category evolved, undeniable debate grew about their truckiness. The decision was made a couple of years ago that crossovers would thus be moved to Auto Roundup in the spring, with SUVs remaining part of Texas Truck Rodeo. This surely would leave room for more debate, but overall it was a clear and useful change.

Because Auto Roundup comes first, in spring, we had wondered whether all the manufacturers would get the memo, expecting Truck Rodeo to roll around in the fall with some of them ready to enter crossovers, as in the past. That'd be an unfortunate time to learn things had changed, as their opportunity to enter crossovers in Auto Roundup would have slipped by. Could this all take hold?

Enter a rare pandemic bonus: Auto Roundup for spring 2020 was cancelled, so when fall rolled around and it was time for Truck Rodeo, someone whose crossover was turned away wouldn't suffer the anguish of having missed their chance in spring.

We may be among the few to see this as a benefit or solution, but it made for a smooth transition.

Another pandemic factor has been whether the manufacturers would or could enter at all. New model release delays were a huge factor last year, as well as the pandemic's direct impacts. All the details of participating in such an event aside, those big players had many levels of consideration and restriction corporate-wide. Without a good variety of vehicles, there's no comparo. But come fall 2020, Truck Rodeo did come to life, during a brief bubble when some of the manufacturers starting sticking their toes back in the water, as far as auto shows, new model launch drives, and indeed comparos. Some of these started up again, cautiously, but then things tightened back up.

Conditions had kept manufacturer participation a bit narrow for last fall's Truck Rodeo. The manufacturers had pretty well mastered online launches and had largely brought their model year cycles back in line. Now the big auto shows, cancelled or postponed, are coming back to life. New vehicle launch drives are starting to happen live and in person. Come springtime, things were opening up again, notably in Texas, and comparo participation began expanding again with Auto Roundup.

The growth of crossovers is noticeable in this event's vehicle entries and categories. But lest we draw too broad a conclusion from that, remember that the Detroit, Chicago, Geneva, New York and other shows have been moved to later this year, which may still skew what new models have been released to date. Some manufacturers will presumably hold back from a comparo when they know what they can enter today is not their latest.

Texas Auto Roundup also seized the opportunity for a welcome change in venue this year—a heroic effort among shifting pandemic limitations—back to Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth, a big oval Formula One and IndyCar track containing an excellent road course track within—surrounded by the venue's own roads, then public roads and highways in the immediate vicinity. This was the location the first few times we drove in the event. Then a few years ago, it moved to Circuit of the Americas outside Austin, a magnificent track, but so large it took longer to get through the list of vehicles—and get through it we must. Next, it moved to Eagles Canyon Raceway, a smaller club track outside Denton, which proved to be a great course, right-sized for getting the job done. It was then held in the streets of Denton, on the premise that this is how most people drive the vehicles, but a lot of magic is lost that way. We were very glad to be back at TMS.

(cont'd)



Photo: Greg Riley / GarageDix (1)





It all leads to this: vehicle categories are created, manufacturers are invited to put their best foot forward in any or all, a bit of back-and-forth generally adapts final categories to final entries and vice versa, everybody shows up, and each person drives every vehicle. Mental, written, photographic and/or video notes are taken, and tally sheets are carefully filled out for each competing vehicle. Trim level of vehicles entered varies—some manufacturers choose to enter their top model, while some choose to compete with lower prices and/or a trim/price value equation. Specific trim level information is provided here to the degree it was available to us. All are 2021 models unless otherwise noted.

CATEGORY AWARDS

Drivers-judges award points to each vehicle for a variety of attributes, with cumulative tallies determining winner(s) of each group. (Attributes votes are also broken out for Calculated Awards, below.)

Compact Vehicle

NOTES: Originally set to be a compact car category and a compact CUV category, there turned out to be four CUV entries and two car entries, one of which (Hyundai Venue) was entered in both. For the sake of statistical usefulness, the two groups were combined, putting the Mazda3 in with crossovers, which was deemed to be appropriate enough, as a hatchback. And surprise—though the only “car”-only entry among the original two sets, it was the top point achiever and crossover-heavy category winner.

Buick Encore
Hyundai Venue Denim
Mazda CX-30 Turbo Premium Plus
Mazda Mazda3 Hatch Turbo Premium Plus
Nissan Kicks SR

WINNER: Mazda Mazda3 Hatch
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$33,750 / 35,415
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)23/31/26

Midsized Car

NOTES: The top-selling vehicle category for years, until just a couple of years ago, this group was very light this year—just two entries—as manufacturers chose to present more crossovers and SUVs.

Honda Accord Hybrid Touring
Volkswagen Arteon
WINNER: Volkswagen Arteon
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$36,995 / na
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)22/32/25

Luxury Car

NOTES: These were not broken down by size category, but were broken into two price tiers, as in the past—for the entry list, but for the winner tallies—though the break point was bumped up from \$60,000 to \$65,000 this year. This split reflects base price, as you will note that the winner in the lower price group happens to have had a higher-than-65k price as equipped.

Genesis G80
Lexus LC 500 Convertible
Lexus RC 350 F Sport Blackline Edition
Lexus RC F Fuji Speedway Special Edition

WINNERS:
To \$65k: Genesis G80
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$62,250 / 69,075
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)18/26/21

Above \$65k: Lexus LC 500 Convertible
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$101,000 / 112,700
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)15/25/18

Performance Coupe

NOTES: Performance vehicles remain a mainstay of the Texas Auto Roundup—it is held at a major racetrack, after all! Performance Coupe, Performance Sedan and Performance SUV collectively vie for the Performance Vehicle of Texas Title Award.

Dodge Challenger R/T Scat Pack Widebody
Toyota GR Supra 3.0
WINNER: Toyota GR Supra 3.0
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$54,490 / 58,250
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)22/30/25

Performance Sedan

Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat Redeye Widebody
Lexus IS 350 F Sport
WINNER: Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat Redeye
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$69,995 / 90,560
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)12/21/15

Minivan

NOTES: Minivans vied for a tabulated Category Award, while Family Vehicles (below) went straight to subjective Family Vehicle Title Award competition, which folded in the Minivans again, as well. With two manufacturers each entering two sibling vehicles, there were five to drive, but voting was based on three.

Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid Pinnacle
Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid Pinnacle AWD
Honda Odyssey Elite
Toyota Sienna Platinum
Toyota Sienna XSE
WINNER: Chrysler Pacifica
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$50,845 / 50,845
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)PHEV: over 80 MPGe

Midsized CUV

Nissan Rogue Platinum AWD
Toyota Highlander XSE
Toyota Venza
WINNER: Nissan Rogue
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$36,930 / 39,685
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)25/32/28

Luxury CUV

Acura MDX A-Spec SH-AWD (2022)
Genesis GV80
WINNER: Genesis GV80
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$59,150 / 65,775
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)18/23/20

The following three groups did not have Category Awards, going straight to Title Award competition.

Performance SUV

Dodge Durango SRT Hellcat
(combined with Performance Coupe and Performance Sedan vying for Performance Vehicle Title Award)

Green Vehicle

Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid Pinnacle
Honda Accord Hybrid Touring
Toyota RAV4 Prime
Volkswagen ID.4
(see Green Vehicle of Texas Title Award)

Family Vehicle

Buick Encore
Cadillac Escalade
Volkswagen Arteon
Volkswagen ID.4
(see Family Vehicle of Texas Title Award)

UNICORNS

These manufacturers brought out something special, without seeking the glory of the trophies.

DISPLAY ONLY
Karma GS-6 Special Edition
Lexus IS 500 F Sport (2022)

DEMO DRIVE, NOT COMPETING
Rolls-Royce Ghost

CALCULATED AWARDS

Many of the subset attributes used to calculate the above Category Awards are also broken out or cross-tabulated individually, as follows.

BEST INTERIOR
Lexus LC 500 Convertible
BEST EXTERIOR
Lexus LC 500 Convertible
BEST PERFORMANCE
Dodge Charger SRT Hellcat Redeye Widebody
BEST VALUE (tie)
Dodge Challenger R/T Scat Pack
Lexus IS 350 F Sport
HIGHEST PERSONAL APPEAL
Lexus LC 500 Convertible

FEATURE AWARDS

Contenders for these are displayed separately and voted for subjectively, apart from the vehicle-by-vehicle Category Awards tabulation and voting.

BEST NEW FEATURE
Chrysler FamCAM Interior Camera
BEST NEW INTERIOR
Chrysler Pacifica Pinnacle Interior

TITLE AWARDS

The event's biggest trophies are determined by a separate vote from among all vehicles, each judge ranking a top three subjectively rather than by points, simply thinking about overall impressions and going with their gut, which may or may not cast things in a different light in some cases.

PERFORMANCE VEHICLE OF TEXAS
Toyota GR Supra
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$54,490 / 58,250
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)22/30/25

LUXURY VEHICLE OF TEXAS
Lexus LC 500
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$101,000 / 112,700
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)15/25/18

GREEN VEHICLE OF TEXAS
Volkswagen ID.4
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$39,995 / na
 RANGE (estimated)250 miles

FAMILY VEHICLE OF TEXAS
Chrysler Pacifica
 PRICE (Starting / as equipped)\$50,845 / 50,845
 MPG (city/hwy/comb)PHEV: over 80 MPGe

The awards from these events add perspective for anyone shopping these categories, though they are certainly not the last word.

Experience has shown that while some of the mathematical calculations, including our own, can surprise ourselves versus some of our gut expectations, final results generally fall well into line.

We never reveal our own votes, a policy that continues to hold up as long as we never call 'em all or miss 'em all. As always, not everything here is as we may have chosen, but as always there was not a bad apple in the well-chosen barrel. ■

PERFORMANCE VEHICLE OF TEXAS ★ Toyota GR Supra



LUXURY VEHICLE OF TEXAS ★ Lexus LC 500



GREEN VEHICLE OF TEXAS ★ Volkswagen ID.4



FAMILY VEHICLE OF TEXAS ★ Chrysler Pacifica

