

Duel in the dirt

By Joe Sage / Photos: Kevin McCauley, capturingthemachine

Pickup and SUV tastes and purposes in Texas are very similar to ours in Arizona, making the annual Texas Autowriters' Association (TAWA) Texas Truck Rodeo an always useful barometer.

The event moved this year to Eagles Canyon Raceway, a private, FIA-spec 2.7-mile paved road course in the wide open spaces of North Texas near Decatur (northwest of Fort Worth), with 15 total turns, over 200 feet of elevation change and a 2200-foot-long back straight. The venue, site of TAWA's spring Texas Auto Roundup a few times, has more recently roughly doubled in size, adding comprehensive, adaptable off-road terrain.

Texas means trucks, making TAWA Truck Rodeo trophies brag-worthy on a national and even global scale, for manufacturers who win here.

Which manufacturers participate and what they choose to enter always offer insights, much like studying how they focus their marketing. These past couple of pandemic years impacted events of all sorts, of course, from travel and group issues, to manufacturers' own challenges with plant closings or supply chain constraints affecting new model releases and model years. These logjams are easing, but still a bit disrupted. Given all that, manufacturer participation was healthy, but still a little light, especially on the pickup side of the event.

The event is broadly divided into SUVs and pickups, each further categorized by size (by standard definitions) or other attributes (luxury, off-road, green, all more subjective and up to the manufacturers whether they choose to enter). Some enter multiples of the same vehicle—different trims or powertrains, or just duplicates to help the pace.

The goal is to have all next year's models, which is never 100 percent the case. This year hit about 50-50 (model years are indicated throughout).

Shipping vehicles and key personnel to such an event is a considerable mobilization effort for the manufacturers, and decisions are surely always difficult. Plentiful entries from any one manufacturer may seem bound to skew award results, or perhaps not. In some cases, this splits votes against themselves. One-off entries still often win.

Vehicle category wins are determined through a complex formula of individual attributes, as well as an overall score, with room for subjective judgment, as well. The final results are always interesting and reveal new insights.

SUVs

This event was once all about pickup trucks, with SUVs added over the years. The intent had been to urge more crossover-like utilities into spring's Auto Roundup event, leaving pure SUVs in Truck Rodeo. But definitions are difficult, flexible or debatable, and the past few disruptive pandemic years disrupted any focused, smooth shift, anyway. Thus the utilities lean a bit more away from crossovers, but remain open to some degree of interpretation.

Note: prices were estimated for some (shown as ±) or not provided for some (shown as -na-). Base and as-entered price averages are calculated by what is available and are noted by "±" or an asterisk in those cases.

COMPACT SUV

HP RANGE...158 Honda - 270 Jeep (avg 216.5)
BASE \$\$23,650 Honda - \$34,370 Jeep (avg \$29.6k)
ENTERED \$..\$30,590 Honda - \$44,465 Jeep (avg \$37.9k)

Honda HR-V EX-L AWD (2023)
 158 hp / 30 mpg hwy\$23,650 / \$30,590

Jeep Compass Trailhawk (2023)
 270 hp / -na- mpg hwy\$34,370 / \$44,465

Mazda CX-50 2.5 Turbo Premium Plus AWD (2023)
 256 hp / 29 mpg hwy\$26,800 / \$43,170

Subaru Forester Wilderness (2022)
 182 hp / 28 mpg hwy\$33,520 / \$33,520

★ **WINNER: Mazda CX-50**

MIDSIZE SUV

HP RANGE...184 VW - 295 Nissan (avg 260)
BASE \$\$25,995 VW - \$52,920 4Runner (avg \$39.6k)
ENTERED \$..\$32,585 VW - \$55,440 4Runner (avg \$44k*)

Hyundai Palisade XRT (2023)
 291 hp / 25 mpg hwy\$35,250 / \$43,960

Nissan Pathfinder Rock Creek Edition (2022)
 295 hp / -na- mpg hwy\$44,115 / ---na---*

Toyota 4Runner TRD Pro (2022)
 270 hp / 19 mpg hwy\$52,920 / \$55,440

Volkswagen Tiguan 2.0T SE 4MOTION (2022)
 184 hp / 29 mpg hwy\$25,995 / \$32,585

★ **WINNER: Nissan Pathfinder**

FULL-SIZE SUV

HP RANGE...276 VW - 437 Toyota (avg 378)
BASE \$\$50,645 VW - \$76,900 Toyota (avg ±\$65.2k)
ENTERED \$..\$50,645 VW - ±\$80,000 Wag (avg ±\$65.9k*)

Toyota Sequoia TRD Pro (2023)
 437 hp / 24 mpg hwy\$76,900 / ---na---*

Toyota Sequoia Capstone i-FORCE MAX (2023)
 437 hp / 24 mpg hwy\$75,300 / ---na---*

Volkswagen Atlas V6 SEL R-Line 4MOTION (2022)
 276 hp / 23 mpg hwy\$50,645 / \$51,840

Wagoneer 4x4 Series II (2023)
 420 hp / -na- mpg hwy±\$68,000 / ±\$80,000

★ **WINNER: Toyota Sequoia**

LUXURY SUV

HP RANGE...355 Acura - 510 Grand Wagoneer (avg 426)
BASE \$\$49,050 Acura - \$102,345 Lexus (avg ±\$79.3k)
ENTERED \$..\$68,985 Gen - ±\$109,000 GW (avg ±\$89.5k)

Acura MDX Type S w/ Advance (2022)
 355 hp / 21 mpg hwy\$49,050 / \$73,595

Genesis GV60 Performance EV (2023)
 429 hp / 97 mpg hwy\$67,890 / \$68,985

Grand Wagoneer L Obsidian (2023)
 510 hp / 19 mpg hwy±\$98,000 / ±\$109,000

Lexus LX 600 F SPORT (2022)
 409 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$102,345 / \$106,305

★ **WINNER: Genesis GV60**

OFF-ROAD SUV

HP RANGE...270 Jeep - 437 Toyota (avg 333)
BASE \$\$58,595 Jeep - \$76,900 Toyota (avg \$68,438)
ENTERED \$..±\$67,000 Jeep - na Toyota (avg na*)

Jeep Wrangler 4xe Rubicon (2023)
 270 hp / 49 MPGe hwy\$58,595 / ±\$67,000

Toyota Sequoia TRD Pro (2023)
 437 hp / 24 mpg hwy\$76,900 / ---na---*

Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe Summit Reserve (2022)
 293 hp / 56 mpg MPGe\$69,820 / ±\$79,000

★ **WINNER: Toyota Sequoia**

GREEN VEHICLE

HP RANGE...293 Jeep - 429 Genesis (avg 361)
BASE \$\$67,890 Genesis - \$69,820 Jeep (avg \$68.9k)
ENTERED \$..\$68,985 Gen - ±\$79,000 Jeep (avg ±\$74k)

Genesis GV60 Performance EV (2023)
 429 hp / 97 mpg hwy\$67,890 / \$68,985

Jeep Grand Cherokee 4xe Summit Reserve (2022)
 293 hp / 56 mpg MPGe\$69,820 / ±\$79,000

★ **WINNER: Genesis GV60**

TITLE AWARD: 2023 SUV OF TEXAS ★

This had a healthy and meaningful set of contenders, including many giants of the segment, as well as a number of hot new entries everybody has been itching to know more about.

Numerical scoring by a variety of attributes—from power and performance, to comfort and features, to price and value—form the basis for logical conclusions. Logic, of course, can still be driven by any of these interwoven attributes, so we always dig into the results to see whether a particular group seemed to have its win triggered by horsepower against price, pure gotta-have-it enticement, or what. Any such results always vary—they certainly do here—with plenty of room to speculate about reasoning in various cases, and more importantly to ponder what it means to you as a potential buyer.

Whether by logic or happenstance, it turns out the big trophy here goes to the most expensive and most powerful entry, which is also one of the biggest.

★ **WINNER: Toyota Sequoia**

(cont'd)

COMPACT: MAZDA CX-50



MIDSIZE: NISSAN PATHFINDER



FULL-SIZE: TOYOTA SEQUOIA



LUXURY: GENESIS GV60



OFF-ROAD: TOYOTA SEQUOIA



GREEN: GENESIS GV60



TAWA SUV OF TEXAS: TOYOTA SEQUOIA



Pickups

Once the heart of this event, pickups were more lightly represented this year. There were no entries in the newest hot category, compacts. The popular midsize segment had two Japanese entries only, but these two define one of the hottest contests of the moment, as Nissan's totally transformed Frontier is less expensive but more powerful, first to break the 300-hp threshold. The core full-size category and its subsets were a two-brand faceoff, vitally useful to some buyers, an FYI to others.

Note: as-entered prices were not provided for some (shown as -na-). Again, averages are calculated by what is available, where possible, and noted by an asterisk.

MIDSIZE PICKUP

HP RANGE...278 Toyota - 310 Nissan (avg 294)
BASE \$\$37,240 Nissan - \$46,585 Toy (avg \$41.9k)
ENTERED \$..\$46,570 Nissan - \$50,802 Toy (avg \$48.7k)

Nissan Frontier PRO-4X Crew Cab (2022)
 310 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$37,240 / \$46,570

Toyota Tacoma TRD Pro Double Cab (2022)
 278 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$46,585 / \$50,802

★ **WINNER: Nissan Frontier**

FULL-SIZE PICKUP

HP RANGE...395 Ram - 437 Toyota (avg 415)
BASE \$\$62,460 Ram - \$73,530 Toyota (avg \$67.1k)
ENTERED \$..\$69,315-\$77,339 both Tundra (avg \$73.7k*)

Ram 1500 Limited (2002) (two entered)
 395 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$65,985 / \$75,710
 395 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$62,460 / \$72,420

Ram 2500 Heavy Duty Rebel (2023)
 410 hp / -na- mpg hwy\$67,045 / ---na---*

Toyota Tundra Capstone i-FORCE MAX (2022)
 437 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$73,530 / \$77,339

Toyota Tundra TRD Pro CrewMax (2022)
 437 hp / 20 mpg hwy\$66,805 / \$69,315

★ **WINNER: Ram 1500**

HEAVY DUTY PICKUP

(This category was uncontested.)

Ram 2500 Heavy Duty Rebel (2023)
 410 hp / -na- mpg hwy\$67,045 / ---na---
 (winner by default)

LUXURY PICKUP

HP RANGE...395 Ram - 437 Toyota (avg 417)
BASE \$\$73,530 Toyota - \$75,710 Ram (avg \$74.6k)
ENTERED \$..\$77,339 Toyota - na Ram (avg na*)

Ram 1500 Limited 10th Anniv Ed (2002) (two entered)
 395 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$75,710 / ---na---*

Toyota Tundra Capstone i-FORCE MAX (2022)
 437 hp / 22 mpg hwy\$73,530 / \$77,339

★ **WINNER: Ram 1500**

OFF-ROAD PICKUP

HP RANGE...437 Toyota - 702 Ram (avg 569.5)
BASE \$\$66,805 Toyota - \$78,790 Ram (avg \$72.8k)
ENTERED \$..\$69,315 Toyota - \$98,780 Ram (avg \$84.0k)

Ram 1500 TRX (2002) (two entered)
 702 hp / 14 mpg hwy\$78,790 / \$98,780

Toyota Tundra TRD Pro CrewMax (2022)
 437 hp / 20 mpg hwy\$66,805 / \$69,315

★ **WINNER: Toyota Tundra**

TITLE AWARD: 2023 TRUCK OF TEXAS ★

Given the dominance of just two brands in this whole competition, it's refreshing to see the new Nissan Frontier take the Midsize category. This truck (featured in our previous issue) has much to brag about, notably having the only 300-plus-horse powertrain at all, for now, and remaining so through the entire lineup next year, even as at least one other offers a competitive option. The Frontier lineup also offers cab and bed combinations hard to find elsewhere. On the rest, it was all Ram and Tundra, head to head—except in Heavy Duties, where Toyota does not have an offering (perhaps someday they will?), which likely swayed the total numbers for the title award.

★ **WINNER: Ram 1500**

Calculated awards

These attributes are judged by all drivers on all vehicles and are a key part of the evaluation process for vehicle categories. Here, they are split out from those more complex and sometimes subjective tallies and revisited purely mathematically. All vehicles are in play here. Where various multiple versions of a vehicle were entered, these awards are calculated by combining them.

Best Interior: WINNER: Grand Wagoneer

Best Exterior: WINNER: Toyota Sequoia

Best Value: WINNER: Genesis GV60

Best Performance: WINNER: Ram 1500

Best Personal Appeal: WINNER: Ram 1500

Feature award

Manufacturers choose whether to showcase individual technologies and features for additional awards. Two solid new technologies were entered, with the most votes going to this internal combustion powertrain.

Best New Feature:

WINNER: Hurricane Twin Turbo, Wagoneer

There are always insights, even as a narrow breadth of entries suggest that some categories' results be taken with a grain of salt. Notably absent are two of the Big Detroit Three, as well as Europeans other than VW. Asia was well represented, though Honda, Mitsubishi and Kia stand out by their absence. Also missing are EV-only brands, including Tesla or major startups like Rivian.

Surprises? Always a few. It's interesting that Toyota dominated the SUVs, where there were so many choices. And yet, the all-new Tundra, which has done well in other competitions, had just one top score among pickup categories. As noted in that section, though—especially with most contests just a one-on-one—their lack of a heavy duty could be a key reason why. No way to be sure.

So much has to do with who showed up to compete. We're looking forward to more familiar faces—and some new ones—next year. ■

MIDSIZE: NISSAN FRONTIER



FULL-SIZE: RAM 1500



HEAVY DUTY: RAM 2500 REBEL



LUXURY: RAM 1500 LIMITED



OFF-ROAD: TOYOTA TUNDRA



TAWA TRUCK OF TEXAS: RAM 1500



(cont'd)