

The Auto Industry Is Driving Through Hell

Every year, the small town of Hell, Mich., plays host to journalists selecting the North American Car and Truck of the Year awards

BY GARY WITZENBURG



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCIE RICE

Motor Trend magazine has its famous “Car of the Year,” and more recently “Truck of the Year,” and “SUV of the Year.” Then there’s Car and Driver with its annual “10 Best Cars,” (or, more accurately, its editors’ 10 favorite cars). And *Automobile* has its subjectively chosen “Automobile of the Year.” All sorts of newspapers, magazines, TV shows, and Web sites make similar picks each year. Yet all of them, fairly or not, might be somewhat suspect because of their financial dependence on automaker advertising.

By contrast, a collection of European auto writers with no ties to advertising or advertisers has, for decades, chosen a highly credible and prestigious European Car of the Year. “Why not do that here?” veteran auto journalist Chris Jensen wondered 16 years ago.

“I was aware of the Car of the Year in Europe and saw no reason why we shouldn’t have the same thing here,” Jensen recalls. “So I started contacting a small group of automotive reporters and asked them to help. From that, we formed an organizing committee and began inviting people to be jurors.”

Back then, when the difference between a car and a truck was a lot more clear, it was decided to give two awards each year, North American Car and North American Truck of the Year. Today, with part-car/part-SUV “crossover” vehicles taking over so much of the market, there are lively debates about which list some of these belong to.

The jury is composed of 50 veteran auto writers and broadcasters from across the United States and Canada. Each juror pays annual dues to cover expenses. To avoid any appearance of a conflict of interest, jurors not do any work that’s paid for by a vehicle manufacturer or its advertising agency.

“From the beginning, we always limited the jurors to 50,” Jensen explains. “There were hundreds of journalists in the U.S. and Canada covering the auto industry, but we thought 50 would provide sufficient

breadth and depth without getting so many that it became unwieldy.”

Jurors drive and evaluate candidate vehicles on a variety of criteria, including design, technology, innovation, ride, handling, performance, safety, overall driver satisfaction, and value for the dollar. Their goal is to select one car and one truck each year that best establish new benchmarks in their respective classes.

To be eligible, candidate vehicles must be all-new or substantially changed from the previous model, and available for sale no later than early January. The annual process begins with two “long lists” of every qualifying car and truck. A mid-September initial vote narrows that to a pair of “short lists” of 10 to 15 semifinalists in each category.

A second round of voting in early December is conducted to select three car and three truck finalists. These secret ballots are sent directly to the Detroit office of Deloitte & Touche. A third vote in early January determines the winners, which are unveiled during the first day of press conferences at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit (Jan. 11-13). Until then, the outcome of the final vote is known only to Deloitte & Touche. And while the awards are announced and presented at the Detroit auto show, it has nothing to do with the selection process.

Five years ago, Jensen organized a fall comparison drive of the short-list vehicles and invited jurors to participate. Because both foreign and domestic automakers maintain Detroit-based fleets of media-evaluation vehicles, he based it at first in nearby Ann Arbor. “But there were logistical problems,” he says, “and the roads weren’t all that good.”

Looking for a replacement, Jensen spent a day driving around Hell, Mich., an area well-known for its excellent roads. “I stopped by the Hell Creek Ranch, asked about the place, and was told it was a motorcycle club,” Jensen says. “After a couple chats with the fellow who runs the place, the club agreed to rent it to us.” Notwithstanding its ominous name, Hell has proved an excellent location.

As a juror and organizing committee member, I’ve participated in these comparison drive events for the last three years and have found them extremely valuable. To the tiny Hell community, it’s three days of shiny new cars and trucks cruising back and forth through town on their way to and from some of the best test roads in Michigan, plus a few extra lunches in the two local diners. To jurors, it’s an opportunity to narrow our ultimate choices for North America’s most prestigious automotive awards.

The test drives also complement Hell’s strong automotive following, including the annual Helluva Cruise, which draws classic and muscle cars; the Vista Cruise to Hell and Back; and the Blessing of the Rides, where clergy bless motorcycles. db