

Toyota Gets on Track for 24 Hours of LeMons

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What do Toyota engineers do for fun on the weekends? Race cars, of course.

In February, the Toyota Engineering Motorsports team arrived in Birmingham, Alabama, for “24 Hours of LeMons,” an off the wall, endurance racing series, now in its 12th season. LeMons pits amateur drivers against auto enthusiasts and professional racers in a two-day rally where’s there’s only one essential rule for entry: No vehicle can have a street value of more than \$500.

As you might expect, you don’t get much in the way of a race car for \$500. Required safety equipment; roll cage, fire suppression, racing seat, harness, etc. are not accounted for in the final cost of the car. But, these cars are expected to perform anywhere between 12 and 24 hours continuously at speeds sometimes approaching 100 mph.

“Every car out here is going to break,” says Steven Byington, specialist in Stamping Engineering at the Georgetown, Kentucky, manufacturing plant who has led Toyota’s race team at LeMons since 2013. “A lot of these cars are found on Craigslist, in junkyards, or in somebody’s backyard. The key to the whole thing is getting your issue corrected and getting your car back out on the track.”

For years Toyota has been racing a 1987 Corolla FX wagon, complete with wooden side paneling and a vintage surfboard affixed to the roof in homage to the car’s origins in Southern California. So far it has lasted 25 races. “It’s living proof that a Toyota car that’s been actively driven hard can survive and be competitive,” says Byington, noting the vehicle has had multiple engine and transmission rebuilds. While the LeMons event is known for its tongue-in-cheek ethos and eccentric personalities, some spectators come to witness the mishaps that occur when you push low-performance vehicles to an extreme.

“The craziest thing I’ve ever seen here,” Byington recalls, “was a vehicle in front of me that caught on fire. It was a brand new team and they got a little bit scared and jumped out. But the car continued to roll down the track with nobody in it. And it actually passed another vehicle, gaining position in the race. That’s LeMons in a nutshell.”

Grassroots race events like LeMons and One Lap of America gives the Toyota engineers an opportunity to build their teamwork skills and showcase their knowhow.

“If you look around there’s a lot of other teams here racing Toyota vehicles,” Byington says. “They’re constantly asking us questions about how to build or modify something or whether we have a spare part.”

Does the team oblige, even in the heat of competition? Byington nods.

“We’re extremely proud of our cars.”

To watch full video, click [here](#).