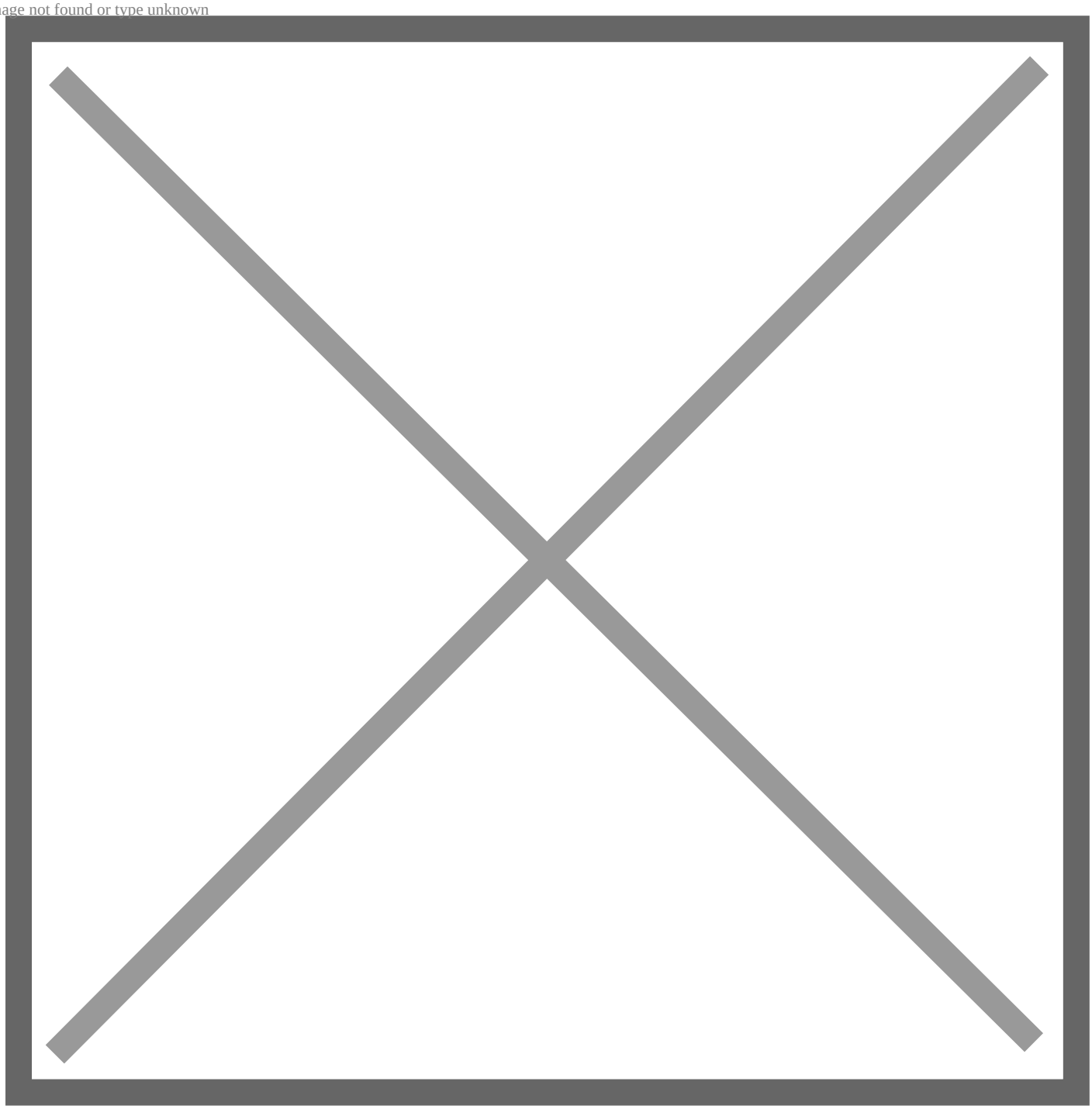
Toyota Research & Development’s Desert Racing Team Takes on the Mint 400

April 03, 2026

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The goal was simple. Just finish one lap. That would prove all the work and nerves leading up to the Mint 400 were worth it.

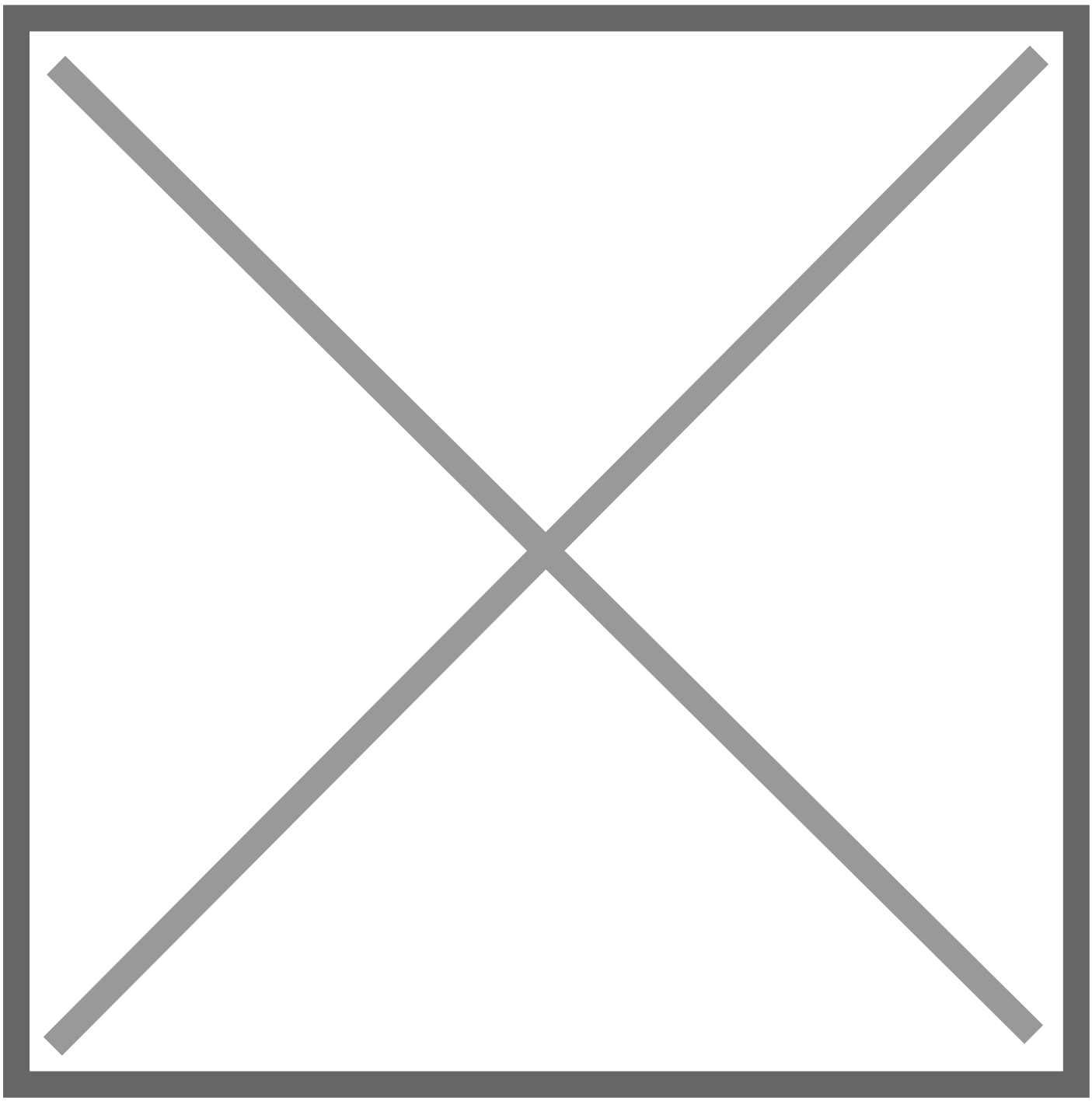
And for novice competitors in an off-road race where about half the drivers don't finish, one lap in a stock TRD Pro Tundra would be an impressive accomplishment.

But when the Toyota Motor North America Research & Development (R&D) team of Senior Engineer Skylar Watson, Principal Technician Tim Woychowski, Senior Manager Bob Ditner and Supervisor Derek Gibbs finished that one lap in Primm, Nevada on March 7, they decided to do one more just for fun.

And then they did another one.

This is probably a good time to point out that one lap of the Mint 400 is 95 miles of every kind of off-road terror imaginable: Rocks bigger than the car itself, dirt, mud, water hazards, steep inclines and declines. Over the course of a 10-hour day on March 7, the team's three laps meant driving 285 miles without ever turning the Tundra off.

No other car in the production class drove more than one.

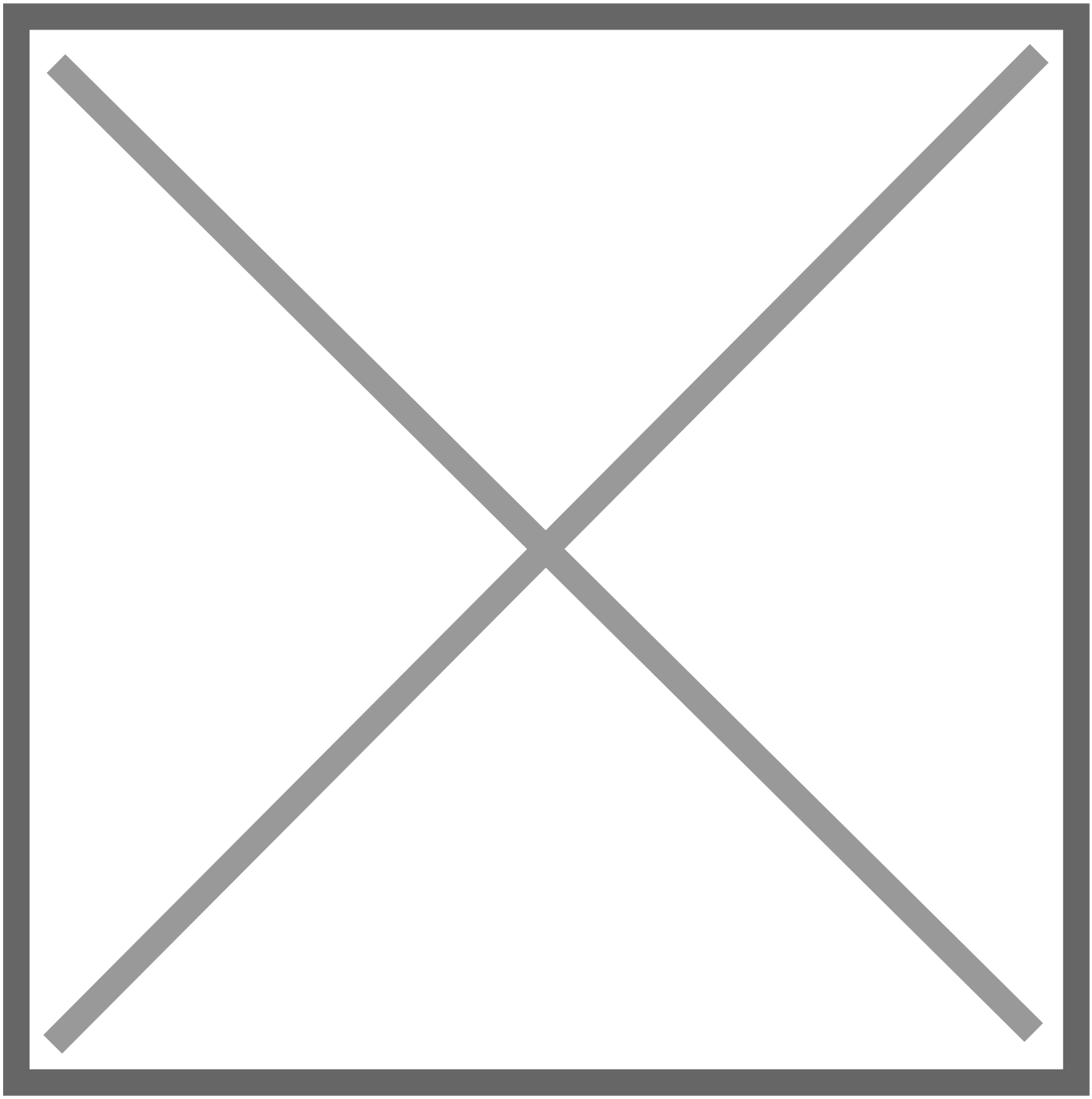


A Tundra Made for the Terrain – The stock TRD Pro Tundra barrels down the track at the Mint 400. Over 10 hours, the truck drove 285 miles of a treacherous off-road course.

Each lap took between 3 hours, 18 minutes and 3 hours, 49 minutes. And after that, they bypassed their trailer and drove the Tundra 20 more miles back to the garage “for no other reason than we trusted the truck, and we wanted to say we did it,” Watson said.

The Mint 400 proved to be a triumphant event for R&D's Toyota Desert Race Team. In all, 12 R&D team members – including the four drivers and eight support staff – made the trip to Nevada to compete as the first ever entry and finisher in the Hybrid Production class. The team finished 121st of 249 total entries. Even more impressive considering 120 teams failed to finish.

"It's the ultimate test of durability," Watson said. "It's one of the harshest courses you can run. The course degrades the longer you're out there, so that final lap was incredibly tough. But we truly believed the truck could do it, so when we finished that first lap, we just kept going."



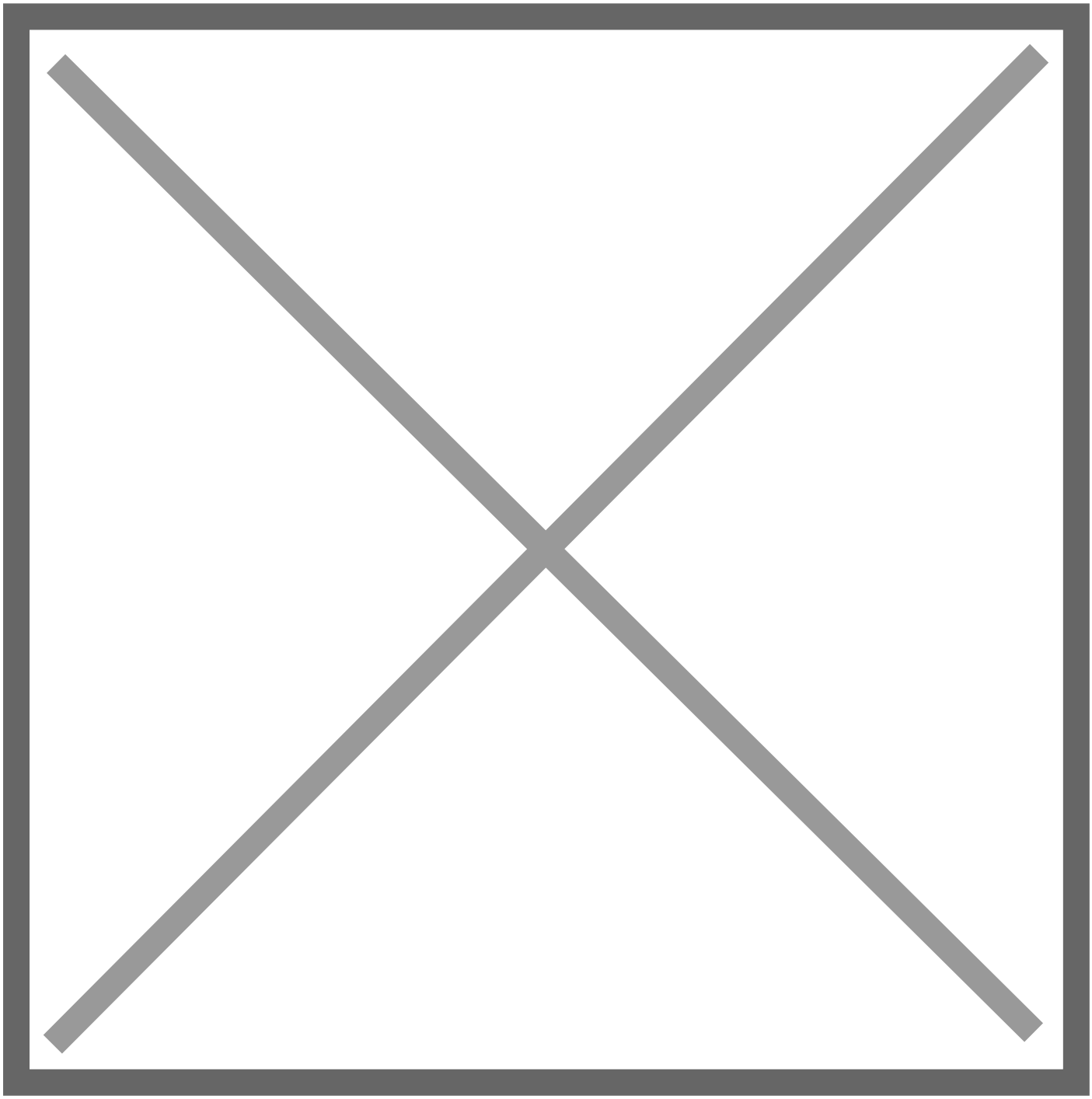
Eyes on the Dirt – R&D Desert Racing Team driver Skylar Watson behind the wheel at the Mint 400.

As all four drivers will suggest, the Tundra was the real hero here. And that testament is hard to argue. In the Production classes, vehicle modifications are severely limited. So, the team used a stock TRD Pro Tundra prototype from R&D's development fleet, adding just a few safety adjustments along with a lift, some skid plates and 37-inch tires.

“Beyond that,” Watson said, “stock powertrain, stock transmission. You can’t change the geometry of the vehicle.”

Still, a diverse R&D team worked steadily on the truck for months. Their depth and breadth of knowledge set them apart from the rest of the field.

“They’re all bringing their unique perspective,” Watson said. “For example, members who work on noise and vibration might remember an issue they had while working on the Tundra, so we should avoid that. There’s a lot of institutional knowledge like that that might not exist on a regular race team, but we carried that naturally.”



The Drivers – R&D's Mint 400 drivers (from left) Skylar Watson, Tim Woychoswki, Bob Ditner and Derek Gibbs after the race.

The idea to compete in the Mint 400 had been bubbling for years, as Watson, Ditner, Gibbs and Woychowski had attended the race in recent years to keep an eye on the industry. It solidified last October when R&D's off roading club decided to take the leap.

Of course, the true value of the experience will be felt by Toyota's customers.

“The engineers and technicians that are part of the team are going back to work and apply the knowledge we gained here. The desert is teaching us what to do at our desks to ensure our cars and trucks meet our customer needs.”

But perhaps there are still more lessons to learn. The next American Off-Road Racing Championship (AORC) – the body that sanctions the MINT 400 – event is the Silver State 300 in Tonopah, Nevada on April 22. Of course, the team wants to compete there, too.

“First we wanted to go and finish the big race. We did that,” he said. “The next step is to show that this Tundra can keep going. We want to keep learning and see what happens to this vehicle. We want to show we can do it again.”