

School of Rocks: Six Toyota Women Put Themselves to the Test in Rebelle Rally

December 07, 2022

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On the surface, the Rebelle Rally is an eight-day, 1,600-mile off-road grind through the deserts of Nevada and California. But for the six Toyota women who took on the challenge in October, the lessons learned were nothing less than transformative.

Talk about a baptism by fire.

R&D's Kara Yde and Crystal Mink were in just the second day of their first-ever attempt at taking on the rigors of the Rebelle Rally — a grueling eight-day, 1,600-mile grind through the deserts of Nevada and California — when they discovered that their 2022 Tundra's offboard odometer wasn't working properly and was in the wrong place.

That might not sound like a big deal. But in a competition that's more about precision and timing than speed, it is. So Yde and Mink faced a tough decision: Do they make do with the odometer the rest of the way? Or do they expend precious time and energy to try to fix it...by rule, entirely on their own?

They chose the latter.

“We learned very quickly that Rebelle is all about working together as a team in tough situations,” said Yde, a senior program manager in the Product Development Office. “We had to take a tire off. We had to install additional sensors. We had to fabricate something so we could attach the odometer in a different location. And we had to reroute the wiring. It took two hours after a long and hot day in the desert. And we were a mess after lying in the dirt under the truck. But, in the end, we were really proud of what we had accomplished.”

Toyota's other two teams in this year's rally — Production Engineering's Samantha Barber and Becky Brophy in a 2022 Tundra and Libby Perego and Caroline Koenig in a 2018 Sequoia — can definitely relate. For all six women, this female-only event was the ultimate physical, mental and emotional motorsports test. And they'd all happily jump back into the fray if given the opportunity in 2023.



Working Overtime – During the early morning hours of the day, Becky Brophy (left) and Samantha Barber study the maps in detail while making their daily strategy and route plan.

Taking It to the Limit

Mike Sweers, senior vice president of the R&D's Product Development Office and Toyota's global truck chief engineer, is doing everything he can to make that happen. As an off-road enthusiast himself, he's well acquainted with the lessons that can be learned when you push yourself and your vehicle to the limits. And since

its inaugural run in 2016, there has been no better classroom for such learning for women than the Rebelle Rally.

“This is such a great event,” Sweers said. “You need to pair two strong-willed individuals who can work out how to communicate, problem solve and collaborate under stress. That makes it a tremendous development opportunity for our team members.”

This October, 45 teams competed in the 4×4 class and an additional eight faced off in the X-cross class. Barber and Brophy, who returned after earning top rookie honors in 2021, claimed Toyota’s first-ever place on the podium with a third-place finish in 4×4. Yde and Mink finished 28th and Perego and Koenig were 32nd, also in 4×4, in their first Rebelle.

But the quantitative scoring pales in importance to the qualitative experience. The real payoff were the skills and insights each competitor is taking forward with them away from the desert.

What makes this competition so transformative? Consider these ground rules:

- Rally organizers provide the meals, but the teams must pitch their own tents.
- Each day begins at 5 a.m. with the clanking of a cow bell.
- The next two hours are spent planning the route for the day and packing the vehicles.
- Starting at 7 a.m. and for the next 10-plus hours, the teams try to find their way to checkpoints armed with nothing more than a compass and a map. All GPS-enabled devices, including cellphones, are locked away for the duration of the competition. Points are awarded based on timing, precision and the level of difficulty of the checkpoint location.
- If the vehicles get stuck or encounter mechanical issues, the teams must sort them out on their own.
- At the end of the day, the teams set up camp, repair their vehicles if needed and try to rest and recharge for the following day’s challenge.

In other words, this is out of everyone’s comfort zone. Way out. Pre-event training, including a week-long session with Senior Project Manager Bob Ditner at the Toyota Arizona Proving Grounds, helped ready Toyota’s teams for battle. But there’s really no way to anticipate all of the things that could go right, or wrong, until you’re in the midst of the real thing. At that point, it’s all about thinking creatively and quickly on the fly.



On a Roll — Barber and Brophy, who earned top-rookie honors in 2021, returned this year and finished third in the 4×4 class in a 2022 Tundra.

The six women, though, will tell you they emerged from the experience far better off for it. Here are just some of the areas of growth they cited:

Communication

“When you’re under pressure like that, you quickly learn that you have to be very precise in how you communicate with one another. And I learned that you need to adjust to how someone else needs to hear the information,” says Barber, senior manager in Strategic Business Planning.

“We switched roles between driver and navigator each day,” Yde says. “That helped us understand each other’s perspective. I think that’s really important to improve collaboration.”

Project Management

“This isn’t the kind of thing you can get ready for in a weekend,” Yde says. “The planning started months before the rally. That’s helped make me a much better program manager in my daily work moving forward.”

“It’s also about understanding your vehicle and your gear,” Sweers says. “For example, what is it going to feel like to wear a helmet for 10 hours a day? That’s just one of the many details you need prepare for.”

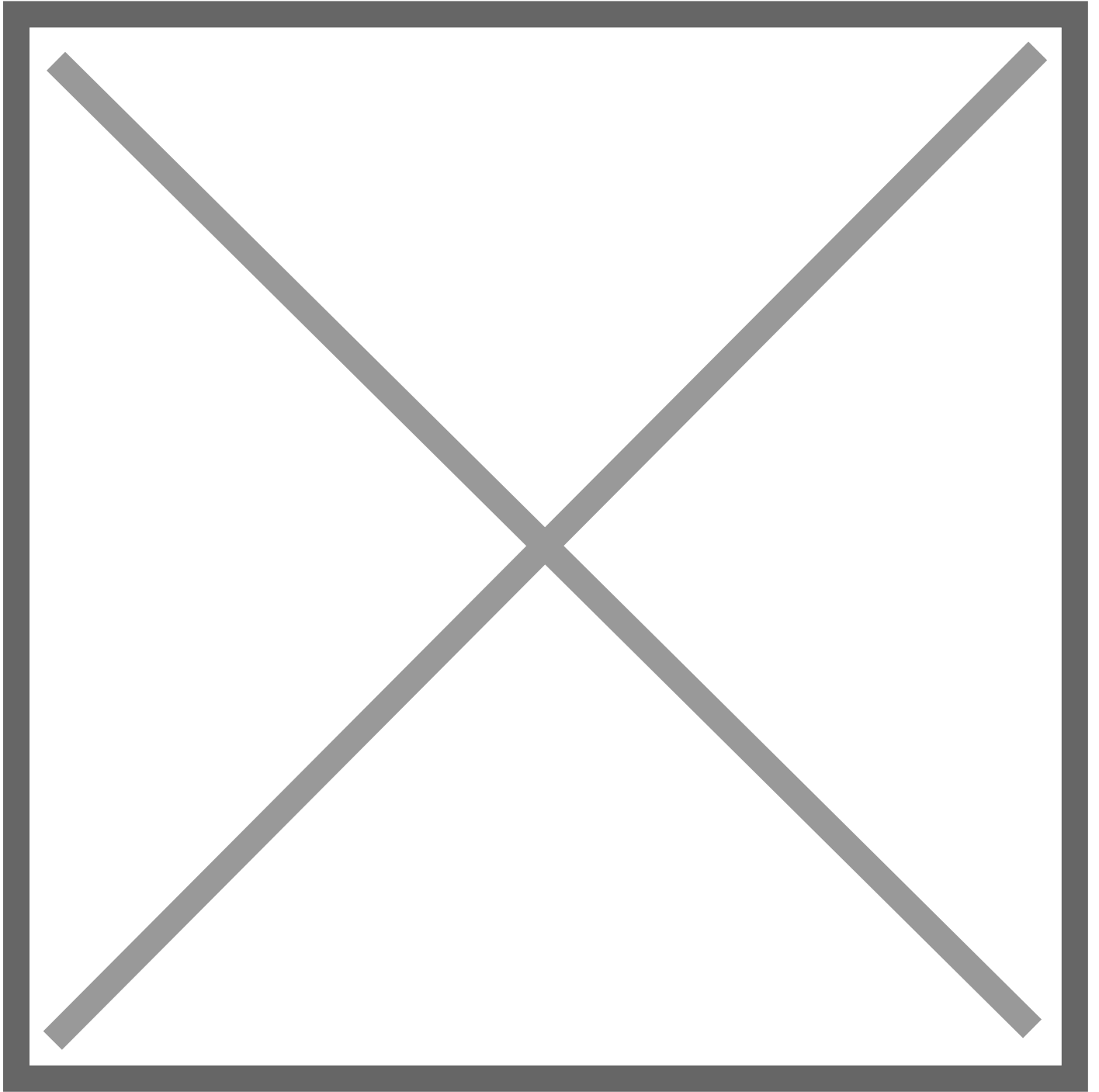
Decision Making

“One of the big keys to success in Rebelle is taking in information, figuring out what matters most and then making a quick decision,” Barber says. “It’s the same as a team member. What is the highest priority? Can you make a decision, move on and adjust as necessary?”

Perseverance

“Each day at Rebelle is long, hot and tough,” said Yde, who has competed in half-ironman triathlons. “You have to keep going, no matter what. Through that, you learn what you are really capable of which you can then fall back on when you encounter new challenges — no matter if it’s on the job or at home.”

“I know for a fact that I have a lot more confidence in myself for having competed in two Rebelles,” Barber says.



Finding Their Way – Libby Perego and Caroline Koenig, who competed in a 2018 Sequoia, orient themselves amid the desert with nothing more than a compass and sightings of landmarks.

Sweers has no doubt that the return in team member development more than justifies the company's investment in these women in terms of money, vehicles, equipment and time to train and compete. As such, plans are already in motion to enter four teams in the 2023 Rebelle Rally.

“I know Marketing loves a spot on the podium, but that’s not my expectation for these teams,” Sweers says. “At the end of the day, did they finish? Did they solve problems? Do they still have a smile on their face? Are they still friends? I think Rebelle is a wonderful event and I’d like to see Toyota expand on its presence in the future.”