Team Toyota: The Rebelle Rally Rundown

November 21, 2023

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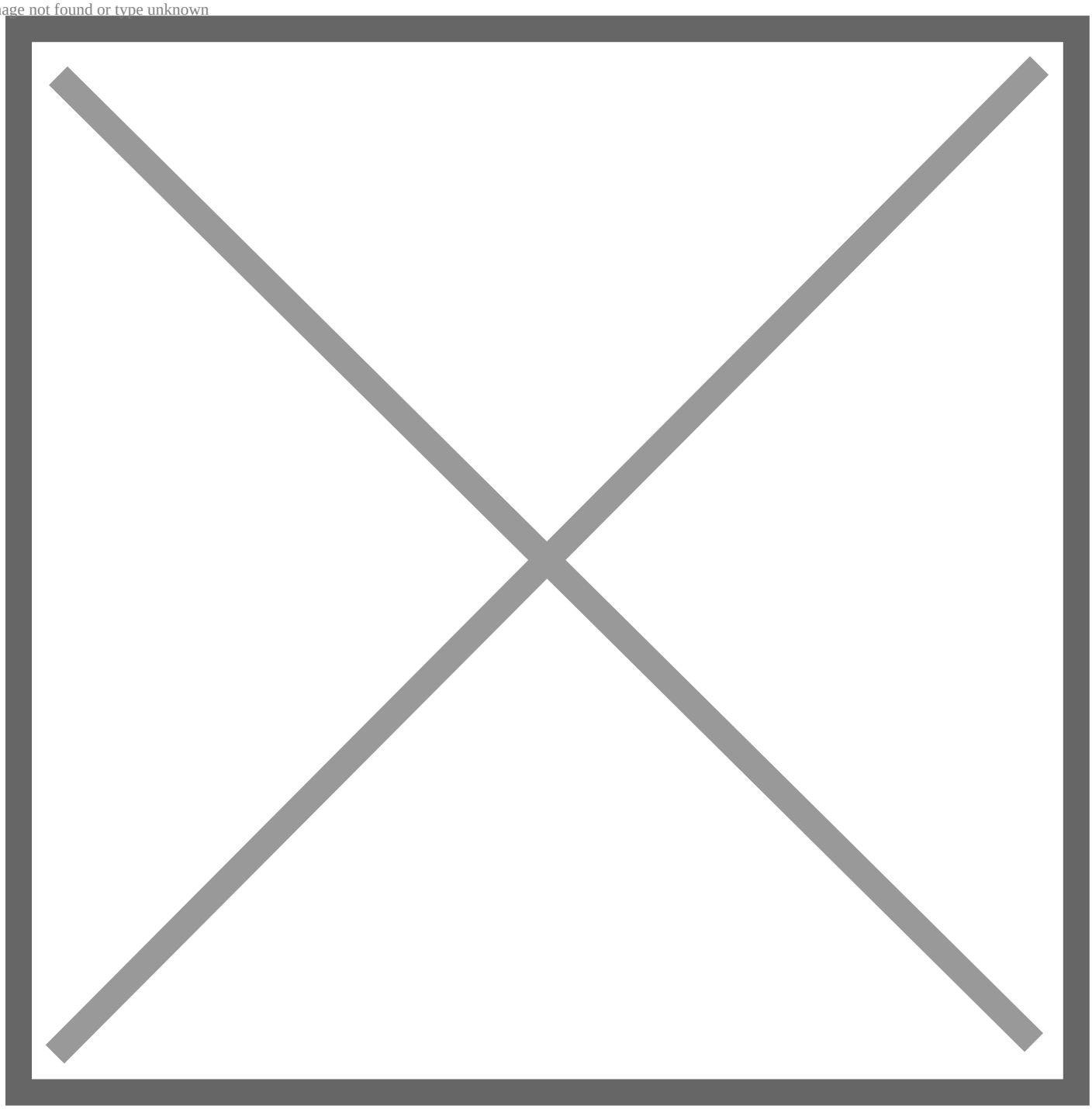
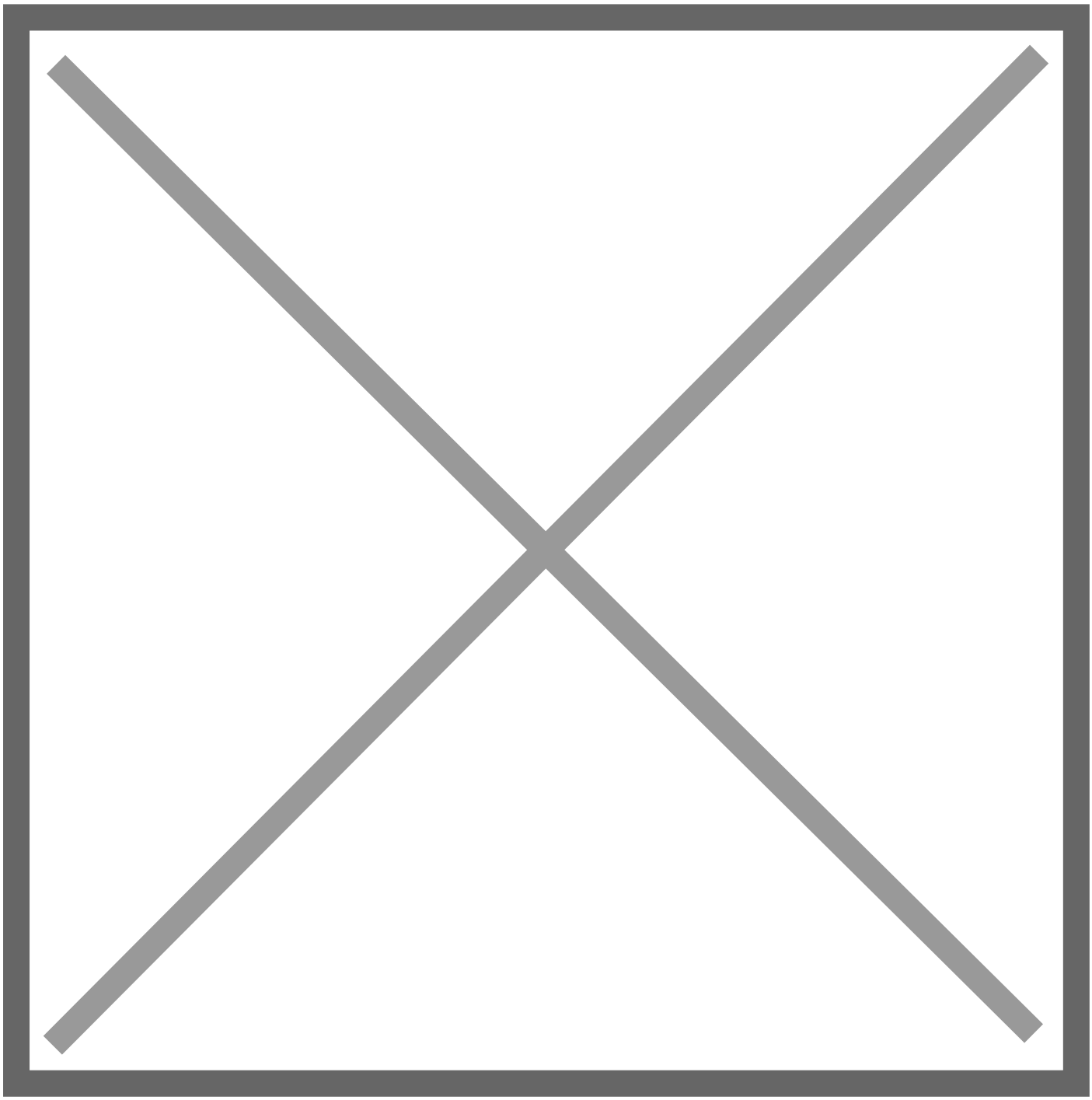


In the rugged landscape of the Mojave Desert, teams of drivers get the chance to experience a one-of-a-kind women's off-roading challenge: the Rebelle Rally. For eight days in October, six formidable pairs of Toyota drivers took on the unique journey — one that goes well beyond the finish line.

The Rebelle Rally spans over 1,400 miles of off-road terrain, pushing the limits of skill, navigation and endurance by challenging competitors to rely solely on traditional methods of navigation, with no modern technology like GPS or electronic devices.

This year, 12 Toyota employees showcased driving and navigational prowess while providing real-world insights into how Toyota truck customers truly use their vehicles. With a wide range of professional backgrounds and skills, the teams operated a fleet of six Toyota vehicles — in varying grades — from some of the company's most popular off-road options.

Ahead, learn more about the Toyota teams that conquered the 2023 Rebelle Rally.

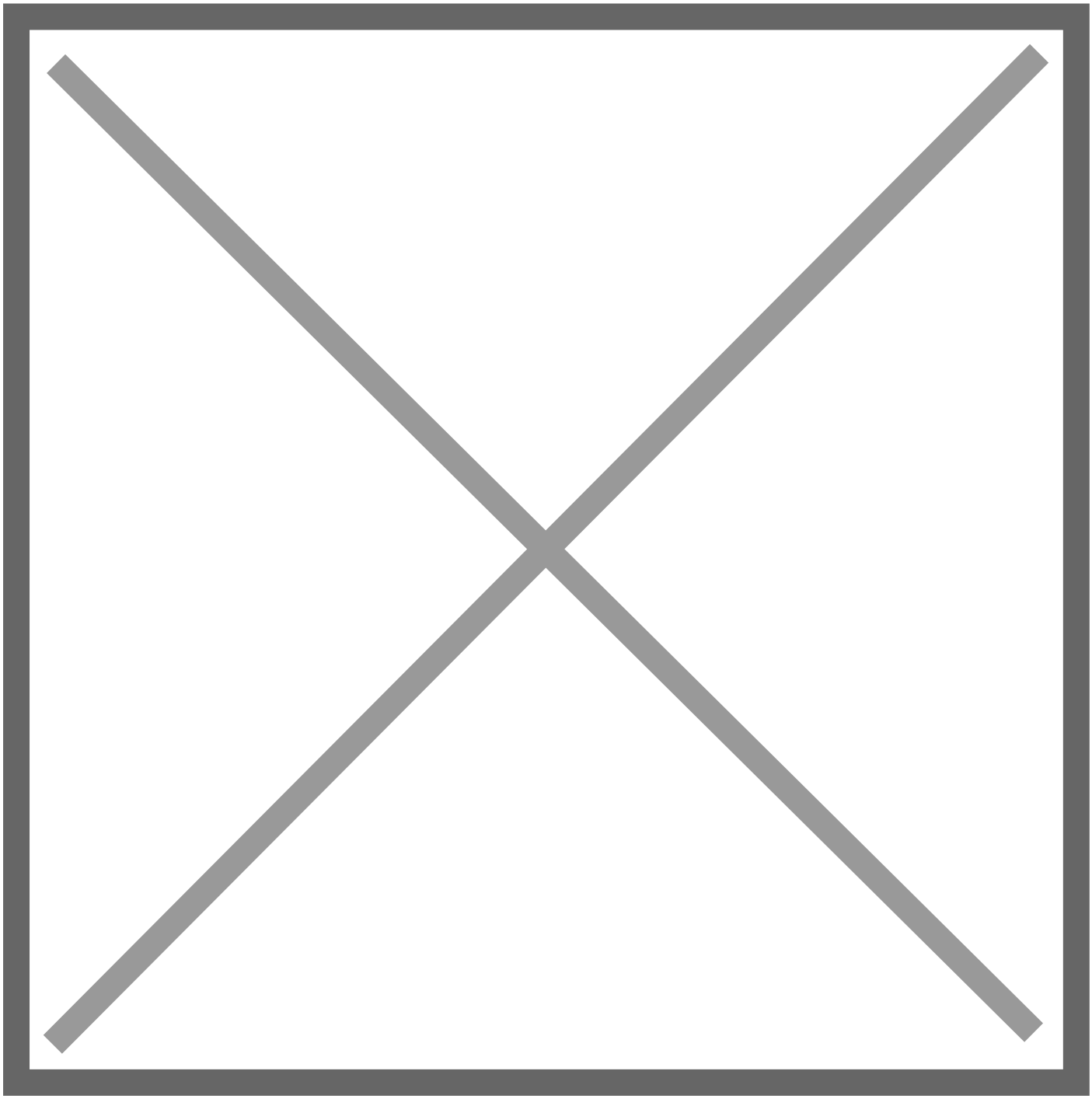


Heather Eich and Allison McGowan
Runner-up Rookie of the Year went to Team 183, made up of Allison McGowan and Heather Eich, who took on the Rebelle Rally in the 2023 Sequoia TRD Pro Hybrid. Inspired by previous Toyota teams, McGowan, a battery engineer with Toyota Motor North America R&D in Michigan (TMNA R&D), expressed an eagerness for the challenges, teamwork and community that are emblematic of the eight-day event.

The pair's Sequoia TRD Pro Hybrid was customized by various Toyota departments, including Service Parts and Accessory Development, Product Engineering Tilt Lab, and CALTY Design Research, among others. Eich, a

senior materials engineer with the Materials Engineering Department at TMNA R&D, polished her vehicle maintenance skills in preparation for her chance to compete. Though the engineer had some experience off-roading on her local Michigan lakefront sand dunes, she also participated in RebelleU trainings and Toyota's internal driving courses over the past year to improve her skills.

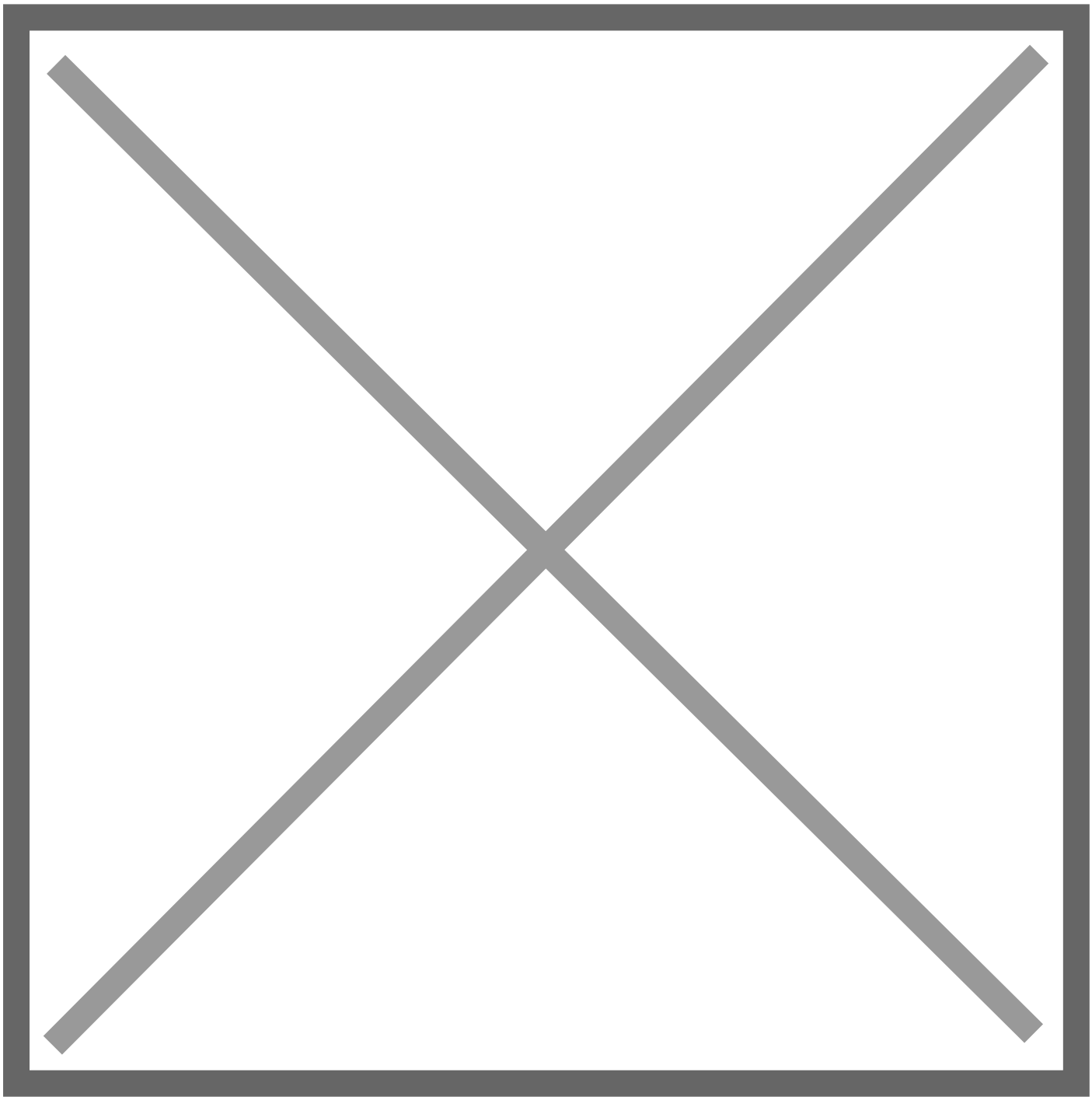
"When you break it down, there are a lot of skills learned from the Rebelle Rally that can transfer to our work at Toyota and vice versa," Eich said. "Problem-solving, team building, effective communication, owning and moving past mistakes and getting more familiar with our vehicles, to name a few."



Kara Yde and Susann Kazunas
When Susann Kazunas, vice president of Manufacturing for Toyota Texas, attended the final day of the Rebelle Rally in 2022 to watch her colleagues cross the finish line, she was inspired to join the challenge. This year, Kazunas teamed up with Kara Yde, a senior program manager with TMNA R&D Product Development Office in Michigan, to form the Toyota Tundra Team.

Both Yde, who competed in the rally last year, and Kazunas, a rookie, see the rally as a valuable learning experience that will inform their future work at Toyota. The rally helped both competitors gain insights into the off-roading capabilities and functionality of Toyota trucks, enhancing their understanding of customer interests.

“I have a newfound understanding of how our trucks are used in the off-roading space,” said Kazunas. “After just a few times in the driver’s seat, dealing with the vehicle alarms or going over a sand dune and wanting to see exactly when you crest with the front cameras, you have an entirely new perspective on those customer issues.”

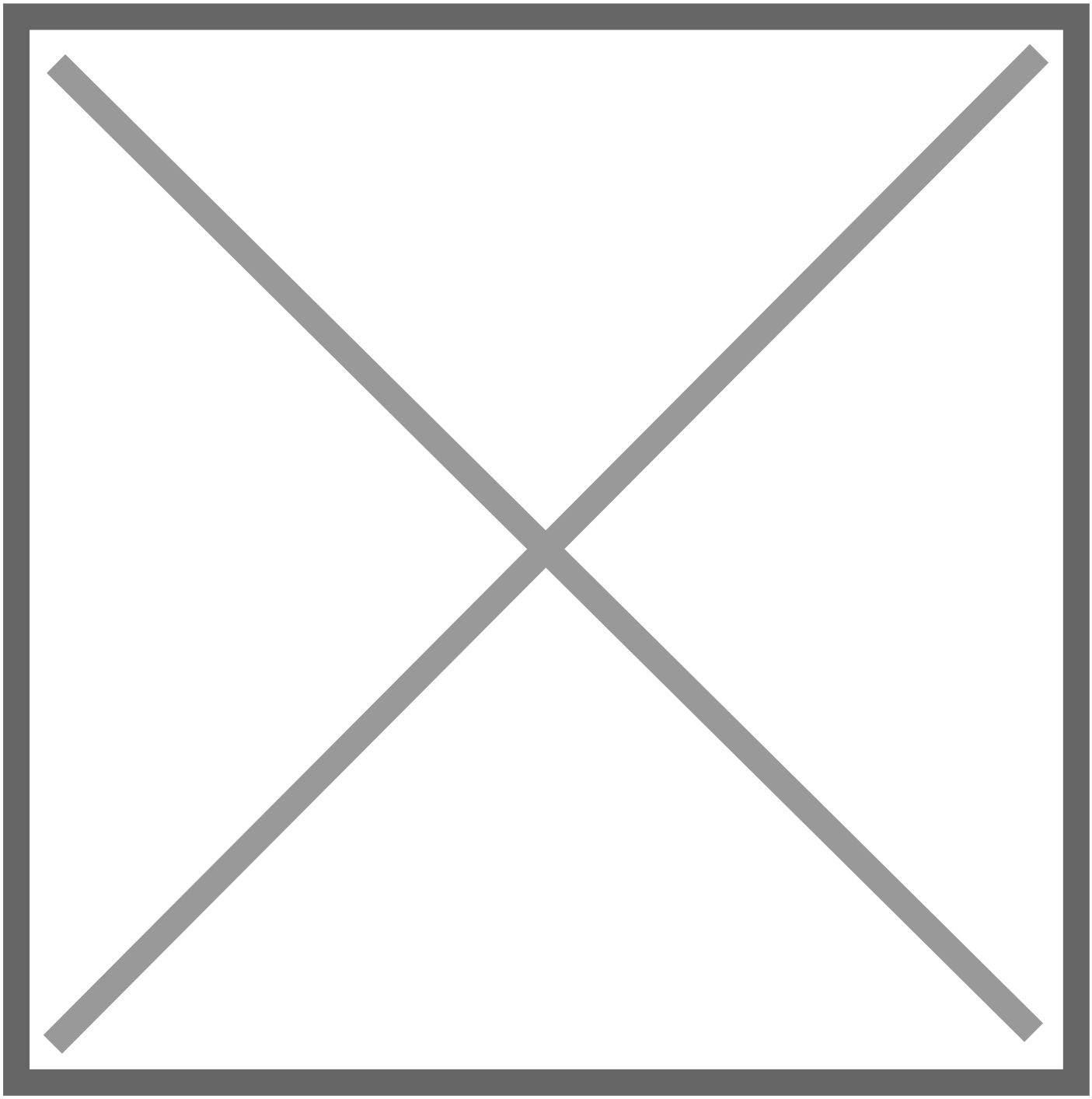


Rie Iida and Silve’a Perelta
Rie Iida and Silve’a Perelta are no longer Rebelle rookies after hitting the course this year in a 2022 Tundra TRD Pro that the pair named “Hei Hei.”

While working with the TMNA R&D business partnering group chapter of Women Influencing and Impacting Toyota (WIIT), Iida had the chance to work on an off-road roundtable discussion in 2021 and 2022 with organizers of the Rebelle. Iida, a powertrain analyst at TMNA R&D Gardena in California, was inspired to participate, and shared the idea with Perelta, a fuel cell division supervisor, who had no off-roading experience

prior to training for the rally.

“Before this, I had just driven for fun,” said Iida. “I joined a couple of Toyota R&D California 4×4 teams’ off-roading and overlanding trips in Sierra, Nevada and Arizona in 2021 and 2022.”



Samantha Barber and Becky Brophy
Becky Brophy, senior engineer in Production Engineering (PE), Final Assembly Engineering, and Samantha Barber, senior manager in PE Paint, Toyota Kentucky competed as Team 152. The pair are considered Rebelle

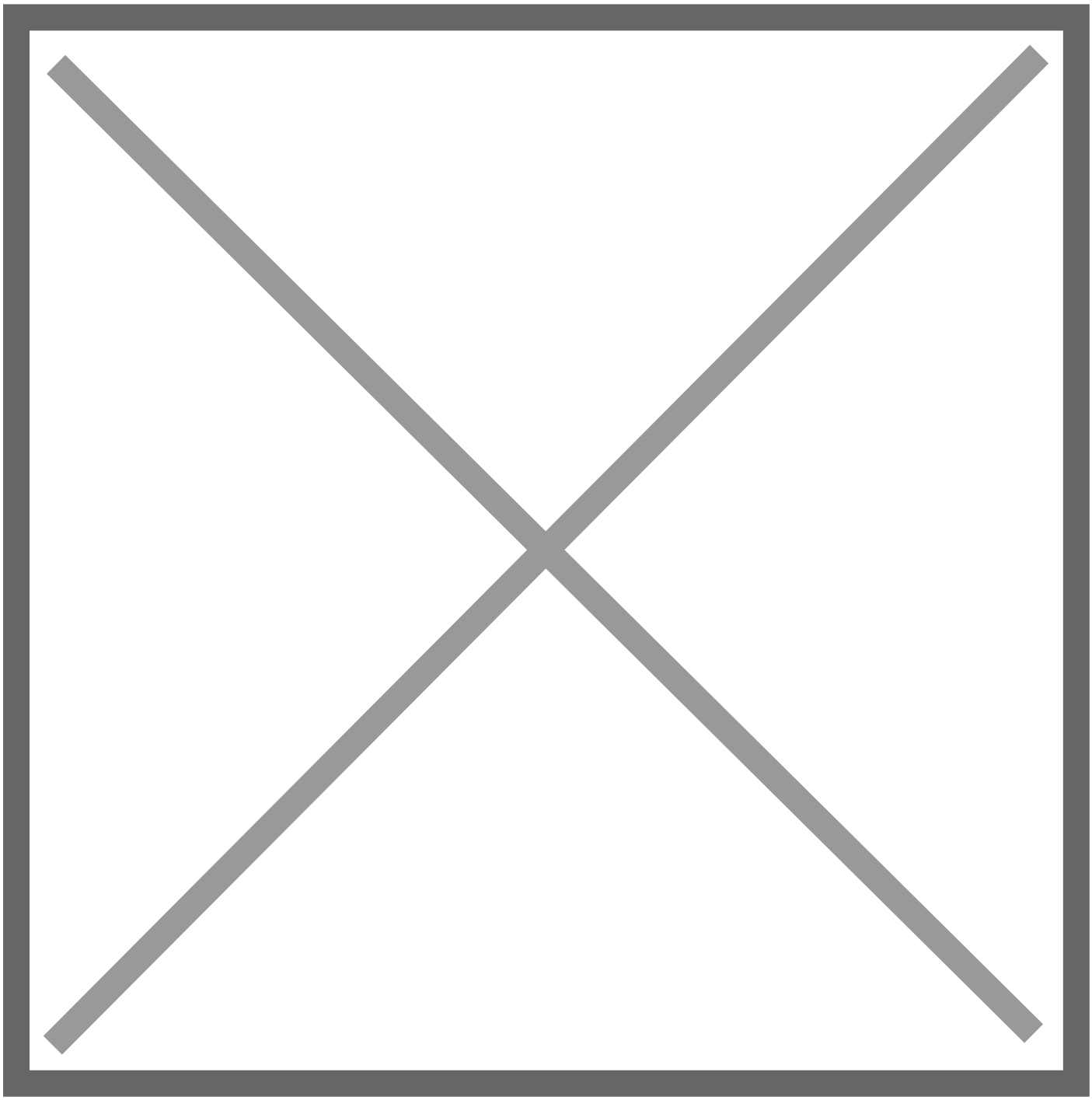
Rally veterans, having competed together since 2021. This year, the team was Toyota's best, taking home a stage win and a top-five placement.

Brophy, who was the first female driver on the PE Motorsports team, has a background in endurance racing and won the team's first-ever first-place trophy in an event at the One Lap of America. While Barber had no off-road experience until training at RebelleU before the 2021 Rally, the two have had strong performances as a team, winning the 2021 Rookie of the Year and a top-10 finish and third place overall in 2022.

"The Rebelle Rally this year had new challenges that really put our skills to the test," said Barber. "The experience was like a roller coaster this year; some really high highs and low lows. I'm grateful that Toyota invests in team member development in this way, and I get to be a part of the journey."

This year, the pair were behind the wheel of the 2020 4Runner TRD Off-Road Premium. In addition to personal growth, both team members highlighted the importance of sharing knowledge about vehicles and customer usage across Toyota, contributing to the continuous improvement of company products.

"Rebelle Rally has been the most challenging, eye-opening, and humbling experience I've ever had," said Brophy. "I've learned so much about myself, our beautiful public lands, and our vehicles. All this makes me a better engineer, friend, wife, teammate and better human."



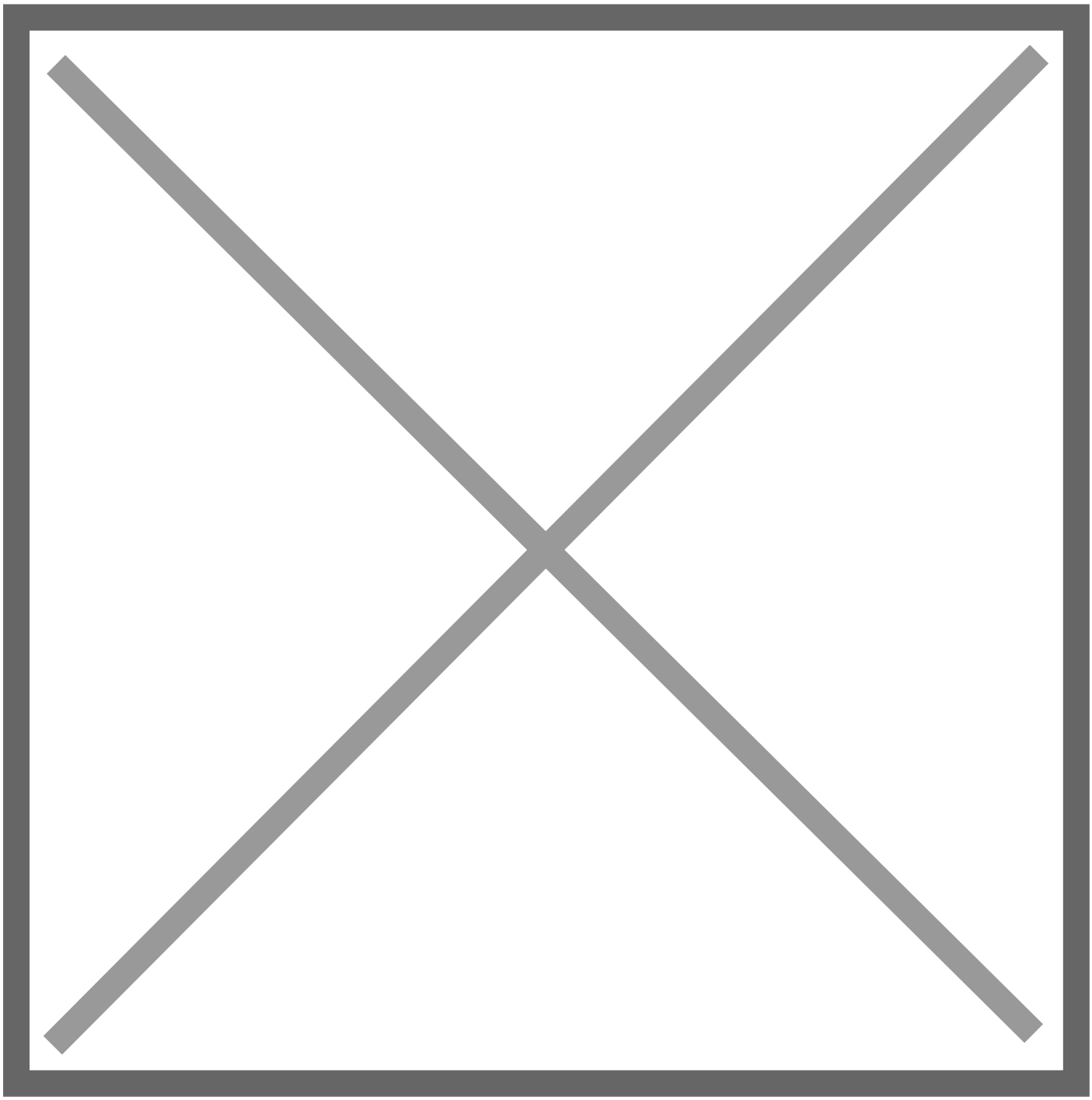
Sandra Li and Myra Padda
Inspired by fellow Team Toyota drivers Barber and Brophy, engineers Sandra Li and Myra Padda took on the desert for the first time in the 2023 Sequoia TRD Pro and secured themselves the honor of Rookie of the Year.

Li, an engineer from Product Engineering at the Manufacturing Project Innovation Center, learned to off-road as part of the RIT Baja SAE team during college. While she and her fiancé often practice off-roading in her 2003 Tacoma, navigation was new for Li, who tried it for the first time at RebelleU.

Her partner, Padda, did not have off-roading experience prior to the Rally; her background has been in designing and fabricating chassis and roll cages for various college motorsports teams up until this year. Her driving experience has centered around driving different types of vehicle body styles, shifter karts and transmissions, and driving in different terrains, so she was excited to learn a different driving style.

Padda was eager to learn new skills, which can be applied later to her work at Toyota. And she said “the Rebelle Rally pushes participants to get out their comfort zones.”.

“The rally this year was definitely challenging with a lot of curveballs, enduros and technical trail,” said Padda. “As a driver, I really focused on Emily’s reminder about ‘Take care of your third teammate – AKA the vehicle.’ That led me to really have that in the back of my mind throughout the days and really focus on throttle control and tire placement. It is something that really pushes you to find the balance between challenging and taking care of your vehicle.”

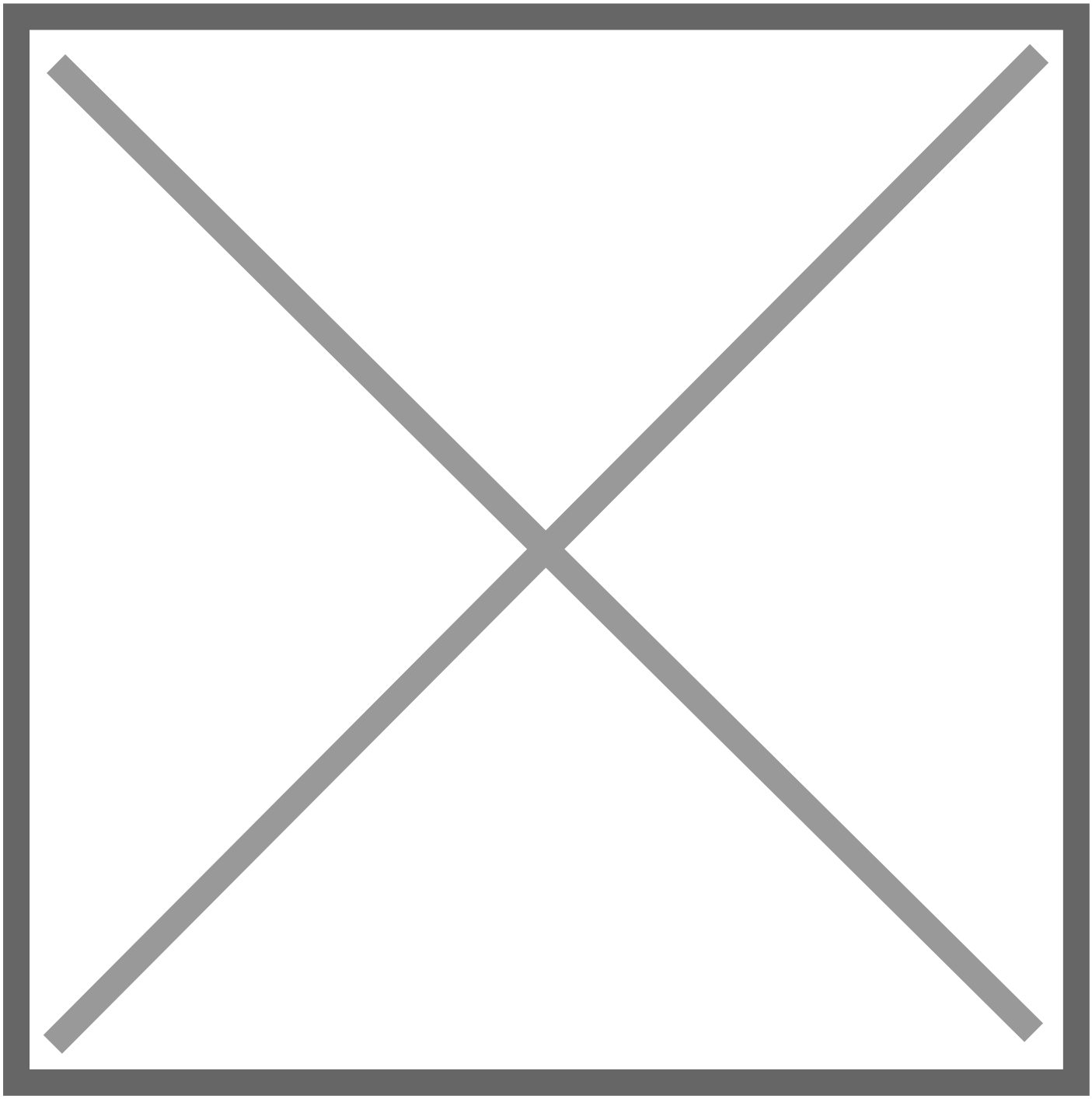


Ai Keskeny and Karli Raimondo
Though the Rally is a navigational challenge, that doesn't mean the Rebelle is an exclusive environment. Prepped with a little training and the right equipment, teams of rookies like Ai Keskeny and Karlie Raimondo are welcomed into the Rebelle community.

"I've only had one off-road driving experience as a team-building activity in the past," said Keskeny. "And although I don't have any experience in navigation at all, I do love maps."

While neither Keskeny, a lead designer at CALTY Design Research (Calty), nor Raimondo, a clay modeler, have off-roading experience, their backgrounds in vehicle design made them excited to put the trucks they see every day to the test. After a few different trainings and working together with Calty and Toyota to prepare the truck, the pair hit the course in the 2019 Tacoma TRD ORP (Off-Road Package) as Team 195.

“My experience with Rebelle Rally will help me in my thinking and responding quickly in critical situations when facing issues in CMF (Color, Material, Finish) design,” said Keskeny.



The 2023 Rebelle Rally was an exciting, challenging rally for all Toyota teams. There were no mechanical issues, and thanks to the Toyota Arizona Proving Grounds (TAPG) training, all teams excelled with tire placement and had no flats. With another successful rally in the books, some drivers are already looking ahead to next year.

“Rebelle Rally is an opportunity for personal growth and independence, to connect with a supportive and genuine group of women, to appreciate nature and the world around us, and so much more,” said Brophy. “It has given me the confidence that I can achieve anything, and that’s why I keep coming back.”