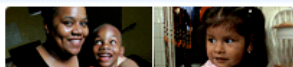


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# Soapbox Racers Built for Ridiculous Speeds



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

NO ENGINE The General Motors entry at the Extreme Gravity Race in Monterey, Calif.

By CHRIS DIXON

Published: October 26, 2005

HIGH atop the tallest hill in Monterey, Calif., Charlie Postins was having a nervous moment. Strapping on a helmet, he climbed shoeless - the better to steer - into a streamlined pod with all the outward appearances of a transparent futuristic coffin.

A set of thin wheels would carry this motorless rocket, dubbed the Flying Torpedo by its Nissan engineers, down a steep, winding half-mile road through Jack's Peak Regional Park near the Laguna Seca Raceway.

When asked if he was uneasy, he replied, "I have full faith in my engineers and designers." When questioned about his driving ability, he smiled. "That I'm very scared about."

With that, a teammate, Robert Bauer, an automotive design chief for Nissan, closed the roof hatch of the Flying Torpedo and Mr. Postins disappeared down the foggy hill on a chilly August morning. Mr. Bauer said the car would accelerate rapidly because its aerodynamics lay somewhere between "a

bar of soap and a teardrop." Mr. Postins tore down the asphalt at more than 50 miles an hour

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and, by all accounts, negotiated a breathtaking sliding arc through the course's intense final turn. This was a practice run.

The Nissan team was preceded and followed by a host of eye-popping racers produced by design teams from nine automakers. The competition, known as the Extreme Gravity Series, is in its infancy, and the founder and organizer, Don MacAllister, has big plans. "My end vision," he said, "is to race the most beautiful gravity racers in history down the most spectacular hills in the world."

In August, with perhaps 200 participants and spectators, he blew away any comparisons to old-school soapbox derbies through a competition that included spinouts, crashes, blown tires, overheated brakes, broken suspensions and slack-jawed (and occasionally fleeing) spectators - but thankfully, no broken bones. The cars weigh just over 300 pounds, including the driver.

Mr. MacAllister started the event two years ago. In his first race, he invited automotive-design teams to build their best soapbox racers, and put them to the test in an event that he promoted as a corporate team-building exercise and a way to benefit and provide temporary employment to foster children in California, a cause the series still supports.

"It's the only racing series in the world where you can hear yourself talk when the cars go by," Mr. MacAllister said.

His first race drew only two automotive design teams: Porsche and Mazda. Last year, however, he also lured Volvo, Mazda, Bentley, Nissan and General Motors for a short, straight 200-yard head-to-head race down a steep wooden ramp and onto a road. For that contest, Porsche and Volvo built open-air racers where drivers lay prone, while others encased competitors in wheeled fiberglass, steel and carbon fiber cocoons.

Though speeds for that race did not exceed 30 miles an hour, the teams evidently found something they liked, because in 2005, Mr. MacAllister signed nine design teams that included Volkswagen, Audi, Chrysler, a hot-rod inspired machine commissioned by the sunglass maker Oakley and six "corporate challenge" teams that drove nearly identical \$30,000 downhillers conceived by the Ferrari designer Maurizio Corbi for Pininfarina of Italy, which plans to put the motorless cars into limited production.

Part of the allure, no doubt, was the promised challenge of a high-speed run down the Laguna Seca Raceway's legendary descent known as the Corkscrew, and a race called the Challenge at Shady Canyon on a long, swooping hill in Irvine, Calif. The problem with the first race, it turned out, was that it coincided with the other scheduled events. When he was told he would have only an hour of available track time to run his event, Mr. MacAllister scrambled to get permits for a full day on the narrow road on Jack's Peak nearby.

"We just had the county inspector come up here mouth open," he said of the day's race, "Like: 'What are you doing? This is so unusual.' This is extreme gravity racing, it's not just a slogan - that's an extreme hill and that's a very short, aggressive stop. We put the challenge on these teams and said, 'You meet the challenge or you hit a hay bale.' "

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