



Dirty business

World's largest Baja challenge comes to RIT



Dave Hallbach believes that student Baja competitions are about much more than a race.

The competitions offer Hallbach and his RIT teammates the opportunity to put their education into action – and to do so among hundreds of other students from around the world. Sponsored by the Society of Automotive Engineers, Baja SAE challenges students to build off-road vehicles for competition in design and endurance categories. Events take place all over the world.

“Not only are we there to race, but it’s also just a great time and a great atmosphere,” says Hallbach, a fifth-year mechanical engineering technology student. “We get the opportunity to meet kids from all over the world. It’s just an awesome experience.”

Although RIT’s Baja teams have traveled as far as South Africa to compete, this year Hallbach and his teammates won’t have to go far to participate in a major event. RIT is hosting the 2007 Baja SAE Rochester World Challenge June 7-10, with lead sponsorship from Toyota. More than 140 colleges and universities from the United States, Canada, Mexico, India, South Korea, South Africa and from countries all over South America are scheduled to participate.

“This is going to be the largest Society of Automotive Engineers student design competition ever held anywhere in the world,” says Marty Gordon, mechanical engineering technology professor and the RIT Baja (previously called Mini-Baja) team adviser. “It’s going to be a phenomenal event. You’ll never know what you’re going to see next.”

The competition is divided into two components: static and dynamic events. The static events take place during the first two days of the competition as judges evaluate

the design of each team’s vehicle.

In the dynamic events, each vehicle will undergo a series of tests, including acceleration, traction, maneuverability and, ultimately, the endurance competition – which assesses each vehicle’s ability to operate continuously over a four-hour stretch through rugged terrain. The team that completes the most laps in the four-hour period wins.

“The excitement level at the event will be extremely high,” says Justin Stabb, a fifth-year mechanical engineering technology student and an RIT Baja team member. “Not only are you going to see a competitive design competition, but you’re also going to see cars flipping, cars crashing, cars running into trees – complete carnage.”

Gordon sees the competition as a way to take learning to another level.

“Baja SAE really ties into the RIT philosophy of experiential learning,” he says. “It gives students the opportunity to apply the knowledge they’ve been gaining out of a textbook or out of a lab or out of a lecture hall, and apply it to something very real.”

In fact, Baja experience has taken some graduates directly into careers.

“Baja was about 80 percent of me getting my job,” says Jason Rounds ’02 (mechanical engineering technology), who currently works in Columbus, Ohio, on the quality engineering and exterior test group for Honda’s Odyssey and Pilot vehicles. “Honda sends recruiters to every competition. They knew of me because of my involvement with Baja.”

Rounds, a native of Townshend, Vt., was instrumental in reviving RIT’s Baja organization in 1996. Originally founded in 1978, Mini-Baja dissolved in the early 1990s as other SAE projects, notably solar car and Formula SAE, came into prominence.

“When we started Baja, I had no idea where it would go,” Rounds says. “It definitely paid dividends for me. One of the biggest aspects is learning how to work on a team with many different personalities and very diverse backgrounds. That’s what you do out on the job.”

He continues his involvement with Baja; Rounds is a co-organizer for the June event, and his volunteer role as a national safety inspector takes him to every competition. Honda supports this work by giving him time off

If you go . . .

What: 2007 Baja SAE Rochester World Challenge sponsored by Toyota

When: June 7-10

Static events: 10 a.m.-5 p.m., June 7-8, RIT’s Gordon Field House and Activities Center. Judges evaluate design components.

Dynamic events: 8 a.m.-6 p.m. June 9; 10 a.m. -2 p.m. (endurance race) June 10; Hogback Hill Motocross Track, Hogback Hill Road, Palmyra, N.Y.

More information: www.rit.edu/news/baja

Volunteers needed: Dozens of opportunities are available in positions ranging from greeters to safety inspectors and design judges. Contact Marty Gordon at megite@rit.edu.

to travel to events, where he may do some recruiting.

“Companies like Honda see Baja as a great opportunity to find students who actually know how to build something,” says Rounds.

Polaris Industries, a leading manufacturer of all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, motorcycles and light tactical vehicles for the military, also keeps close connections to Baja SAE and its participants. Through Baja, Joel Notaro ’01 (electrical engineering) made contacts that led to his current position as a project engineer for Polaris, in Wyoming, Minn., where his work on performance ATVs includes some test driving and racing.

“It’s my dream job,” he says. “There’s a fine line between work and play.”

Notaro grew up on a dairy farm in Mayville, N.Y., where he began riding motorcycles at about age 6 – pursuing a love of motor sports shared by his whole family. He joined the Baja team in his second year at RIT.

“I was taught by fellow team members the machining, drafting and analysis skills needed to design the suspension system and I performed those duties for the next four years,” he says. “The ‘real world’ knowledge acquired in that club was beyond my wildest expectations.”

Notaro also drove in some events, and won the endurance event at the 2001 competition in Brazil.

A Mini-Baja car didn’t take Pete Romocki ’80 (mechanical engineering) quite that far. When he was president of RIT’s student SAE chapter, the national organization sent information about the 1979 Mini-Baja East competition to be held at the University of South Florida.



RIT Baja team adviser Marty Gordon, left, and team members Dave Hallbach, center, and Justin Stabb.

“It looked like a great opportunity for our chapter to get involved with something and maybe get a trip to Florida,” he says.

Raising funds delayed the project, so RIT first competed at the University of Delaware in spring of 1980. “We came in second overall,” says Romocki, “but we won the endurance race.

“RIT was not well known at the time,” he continues, “so we caught a lot of people by surprise. When we won that endurance race I had an unbelievable feeling of pride for being from RIT. Here it was my senior year and I had not participated in any RIT team sports, so I had not felt that way about RIT before. It was an incredible feeling I will never forget.”

Romocki now lives in Atlanta and works as a sales engineer for American Excelsior Co., a producer of soil erosion products. He recalls Baja as a highlight of his college experience.

“It was a tremendous amount of fun. It also took a lot of time, raising the money and building the car. But the hands-on experience and working with a team was really valuable. Plus it was a great subject to talk about in a job interview.”

Besides the learning experience, there’s



Jason Rounds '02 (at laptop) evaluates a cost report at the 2006 Midwest competition in Lake Geneva, Wis.

an important social component of Baja, participants say.

One notable example: Joel Notaro’s brother, Cody Notaro '04 (mechanical engineering) transferred to RIT because of Baja and met his wife, Alison Lamb Notaro '01 (accounting), through a team connection.

“More important than the skills I learned

were the life-long friendships that I have made,” says Joel Notaro. “I still keep in touch with everyone from my core Baja team and I’m quite certain I always will.”

John Follaco and Kathy Lindsley

W Web extra:

To see a photo gallery and video of RIT’s Baja team, visit www.rit.edu/news.

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