

Would you lend your truck to a NASCAR racer?



**Brian Vickers takes Toyota fans for a spin, off-road**

Story and photos by Randall Bohl

The Toyota Drive Center—a ride-and-drive off-road course where race fans could drive Toyota trucks and SUVs—was created at Phoenix International Raceway during the Subway Fresh Fit 500 NASCAR race. That already had our interest, but they sweetened the deal by saying, “we can get a NASCAR driver to take you for a ride.” Brian Vickers—who drives the #83 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series Red Bull Toyota Camry—would take us for a ride in the 2011 Tundra, on Saturday at high noon.

This was one of two major Toyota presences at PIR that weekend. The other was a fan interactive display called PitPass, which they set up at key NASCAR, NHRA and Off-

Road races. This huge display, on the midway inside the track, included a simulator, vehicles, driver appearances and fan photo ops. Toyota race cars included Joey Logano’s #20 Home Depot NASCAR and Cruz Pedregon’s NHRA Fuel Funny Car. After a quick walk-through, we headed to the off-road course.

The Toyota Drive Center featured a custom-built off-road course, built off-track, where potential customers could view and drive the full lineup of Toyota trucks and SUVs: the Toyota Tundra, Tacoma, Sequoia, 4Runner and FJ Cruiser. The course included a hill climb, a couple of banked inside turns, wicked washboards and an off-camber circular hillside (this pile of dirt probably provided

the most entertainment value for Brian).

When Vickers arrived, there was a brief introduction to the public, then we quickly headed for the truck. We were ushered to the back seat, as a Toyota Drive Center employee was to ride shotgun.

This turns out to temper Brian’s driving experience. It seems that when Joey Logano took a little media drive like this on the same course, he had to be, in racing parlance, “black flagged.” Vickers got a kick out of hearing this, of course, and wondered aloud whether he could achieve the same.

Vickers had a two-item pilot’s checklist: [A] seatbelt, [B] traction control OFF. Then right foot down, and up the hill we went, the 5.7L

iForce V8 throwing dirt and dust.

Ripping down the other side of the hill and into a 180-degree banked left turn felt good to us, and our chaperone was happy. On to the off-camber round. Now this is where only a high school student—or race car driver—would think, “gee, let’s get the truck leaning way out, turn into the hillside, stand on the throttle and see what happens!” What happens is tire spin. The truck slides downhill until Vickers feathers the throttle, re-connects with earth and climbs back up. This maneuver was repeated until the chaperone suggested that Vickers not do things that the waiting public might wish to emulate when it’s their turn to drive. Read: you’re being a bad influence on your fans, our customers.

In fact, had Toyota’s Star Safety System been engaged, the truck would have stuck to this hillside, tight. Our personal note while sideways: we wouldn’t try this in a 1970s-era Jeep Golden Eagle.

The modern Toyota system includes Vehicle Stability Control, Traction Control, 4-Wheel ABS, Electronic Brake-Force Distribution and Brake Assist. Normal people will rely on and appreciate these features.

After a quick run through another high banked turn, we charge across the washboards to the start/finish line, where Brian caps things off with a nice smoky burnout. No doubt he had read Toyota’s literature: “To handle the massive torque loads of Tundra’s available 5.7L V8, our engineers matched it to a massive ring gear: 10.5 inches.” Yes, that was the point he was trying to make, we are certain.

Vickers then took time to sign autographs for people waiting their turn to drive. Fan questions mostly concerned his recovery from heart surgery he underwent last July to repair a hole between the right and left atriums. While signing hats, T-shirts and one young boy’s forehead, he said “the surgery went good, the doctor said I’m good, but it’s been a long year. I’m totally ready to be back in the car, very excited to be back in the car.”

We asked our favorite question: what’s your daily driver? “The Lexus GS450 Hybrid. You know, it’s funny, I’m not a...” he pauses and continues, “everybody expects race car drivers to have a fancy sports car. I love cars, I like older cars moreso than new”. But, of course, Toyota prefers him in their new vehicles these days.

As a Red Bull racing driver, also, we ask whether he’s had the opportunity to go to the Red Bull Air Races. “Yeah, and I’ve ridden in the planes! I was at the show in Detroit and the show in New York. The show in New York was excellent!” He was obviously excited about flying, so who knows: maybe next time we meet, he’ll be our pilot. ■

