Students build cars, race them against Porsches, fami

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BEDFORD - The Pennington Field parking lot was filled with dreams Sunday.

Drivers lined up for their shot to race the clock through a course of ego-eating orange cones. Many of the contestants brought Porsches, and BMWs to ordinary family sedans. Their racing skills seemed to vary as much as their budgets.

The contestants included college engineering students, all of whom built their own cars. The field also included anyone who paid how fast their car could go.

They all came to North Texas for the 10th annual Texas Autocross Weekend and a real-world test of their cars. The students' racing skills seemed to vary as much as their budgets.

While jobs on professional racing teams are far and few between, the allure is great.

"They usually don't pay much because there are enough people out there that will do it for almost nothing," said Adam Wittha, an engineering student. "But it's basically like living like a rock star.

"It's long hours and not much pay, but it's almost like getting paid to play."

Teams from 14 universities brought 35 cars to the weekend of racing. Two autocrosses were Saturday at the University of Texas undergraduate Automotive Engineers competition. Teams with cars surviving the Saturday meet continued the fun Sunday at the Equipe Rap half-mile track, full of twists and turns, was set up on a football field parking lot.

Bob Woods, a UTA mechanical engineering professor, has helped students design and drive race cars for contests for about the past three years.

Several UTA students have gone on to racing careers, including one who does aerodynamics for a Formula One team in Austin for all of Honda Racing, Woods said.

The race-car design exercise teaches students things they can only learn through real-world experience.

"What they learn applies to any industry," Woods said. "Working as a team, working on a schedule and a budget applies to an industry."

The cars weren't all that were hot Sunday as the sun beat down on concrete parking lot, which was just fine for UTA driver and engineering student.

"It's definitely hot today, but that's good for race tires," he said.