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FOUND IN TRANSLATION

GT LIVE SHOWS MOTORSPORTS IS FUN IN ANY LANGUAGE

BY MARK VAUGHN

HISTORY MAY record Dec. 18-19, 2004, as the weekend Japanese motorsports arrived in America. Or maybe it won't, since history is still to be writ on the subject, but the first U.S. swing of the Japan GT Championship looked promisingly historical, with tens of thousands of screaming fans showing up despite howling Santa Ana winds, a mild sense of disorientation among organizers, and not a single bikini contest in two days of motorsports action.

The JGTC is Japan's biggest racing series. It's not Formula One but it's not Trans-Am, either. The cars are somewhat recognizable as stock NSXs, 350Zs, Supras and the like,

but are made of carbon fiber laid over an aluminum monocoque. Team budgets are in the millions of dollars. In the homeland, the drivers are revered as action hero figures. Now the series is getting big here in America.

What's that, you say? Never heard of the JGTC? You might be outside the decidedly youth-

ful, coastal demographic. For U.S. fans of the series, and fans of all things JDM (Japanese Domestic Market), JGTC represents the ultimate expression of what is known in American chat rooms and bulletin boards as Import Culture. All those kids who put big exhaust tips and incongruous wings on their

Mitsubishi Eclipses also follow the JGTC on the Internet, watch it on Japanese-language videos and even track down Japanese racing and car magazines shipped trans-Pacific.

The fan base is similar to that following drifting, another sport well represented over the weekend. Both the feeder series Formula D and the pro ranks of DIGP performed throughout the weekend, sliding sideways in front of packed grandstands that would shout out more cheers than you hear "Amens" at a revival.

Before this weekend no one was ever sure exactly how many of those youth were out there. The previous attendance record for such an event was the DIGP's last stop in Irwindale, when an estimated 10,000 fans came to watch the best drifters in the world. But



by Sunday night at GT Live, the name of the weekend festival of motorsport, it was apparent there were somewhere in the neighborhood of 45,000 of them (our two-day estimate) who liked it enough to pay \$35 a day or \$65 for a weekend pass to the California Speedway in Fontana.

What did they see? The JGTC held two races, one on Saturday night and one on Sunday afternoon. This was a non-points, All-Star pair of races with 21 teams from Japan and even five cars from the United States competing. (Though the American teams made a valiant showing, with a couple of Porsches getting past qualifying to race, it was the Japanese teams that dominated the weekend.) And while the NBA and MLB might not take All-Star formats too seriously, the Japanese were banging and spinning one another all over the track, setting a series record for penalties due to rough racing.

There was even controversy: Saturday night winners Tsugio Matsuda and Andre Lotterer were bumped to second after being penalized for pulling their NSX into the pits a lap early. Toshihiro Kaneishi and Erik Comas' (yes, the ex-F1 driver) Nissan Z became the winner.

That race was held over the so-called AMA course, a 2.3-mile circuit that used the frontstraight of the oval and the infield road course.

The Sunday race, meanwhile, was a sprint event run on a 1.45-mile version of the infield road course. It was also Lotterer's vindication, as he won it driving solo and going away.

The drifting was a big crowd pleaser, too, and it's hard to say which was the bigger draw. But there were also plenty of participatory sports.

Ten dollars got you one session in a 9-hp go-kart on Cal Speed Karting's purpose-built track in one of California Speedway's huge parking lots.



U.S. race fans may not recognize cars like the Mach-Go GT 320R (above), but racers like Nissan's Z car are more familiar. The weekend included two races, drifting and even fan test drives.



Cal Speed estimated 1600 people took part in that over two days and, "Everyone had a ball."

For \$30 you could take four laps around a National Auto Sport Association autocross course set up in yet another XXXL Speedway parking lot. As of Sunday afternoon a red Miata had fast time there, at 52 seconds flat.

The AEM/DC Sports Dyno Comp was a little difficult to get going, so only a handful of cars got a turn on the rear-wheel dyno set up in the infield. But their owners walked away with a dyno spec sheet for free and the small crowds on hand enjoyed watching the rear axles spin the water troughs.

Nissan and Mazda provided 350Zs and RX-8s for another, shorter autocross course in an infield parking lot. It was free

of charge. About 1200 potential Nissan and Mazda owners took part in that one.

There was even inadvertent stock car participation when Driveteck Racing School held its long-scheduled Saturday and Sunday classes on the oval (when the JGTC cars weren't on it). Driveteck offered Nextel Cup-style rides for a fee to anyone who wanted one, but there wasn't too much interest from the kids.

"In the automotive world, there's not much crossover," said a Driveteck guy.

But there is apparently room for everyone.

The most amazing thing about the whole weekend was that it all went off. While there were snafus of the type you might expect for something this large and involved, almost everything organizers said

would happen did.

"The goal of GT Live is to become kind of like the X Games of motorsport," said Randy Grube, the main guy behind everything. "We want to take it mainstream but keep it core."

Next year Grube plans to hold the same event in the same location, but in 2006 he would like to add an East Coast event somewhere and maybe even take GT Live from Fontana to downtown Los Angeles, in and around Staples Center and the Convention Center, with some indoor events.

That's a long way off, though. Grube admits the first year might not have been a big moneymaker, or even a little moneymaker. While the books aren't done yet, he estimates he spent more than \$2 million, much of it on last-minute fixes to "make things right."

"All I know is, yesterday I was signing checks."

He sees a bigger picture in it all, though. "It's Trans-Am from the '60s," he said. "Remember? All those kids drove Mustangs and Camaros and then they started racing them. In a sense, this is kind of like the rebirth of road racing."

But, you say, we still have road racing in America. Well, we have Daytona Prototypes that look kind of goofy, and we have ALMS cars that are so expensive, all anyone can do is buy a five-year-old Audi to compete. JGTC is based on cars that look like cars you could maybe even afford, but are loaded with technology under the skin.

And another thing: Look around at the crowds at a Grand-Am or ALMS race here in the States. The demographic skews toward the middle-aged, middle-class engineer. The average age at GT Live had to have been under 25, the holy grail demographic for anyone selling anything in America, right?

We say, konichiwa, dawg. ■