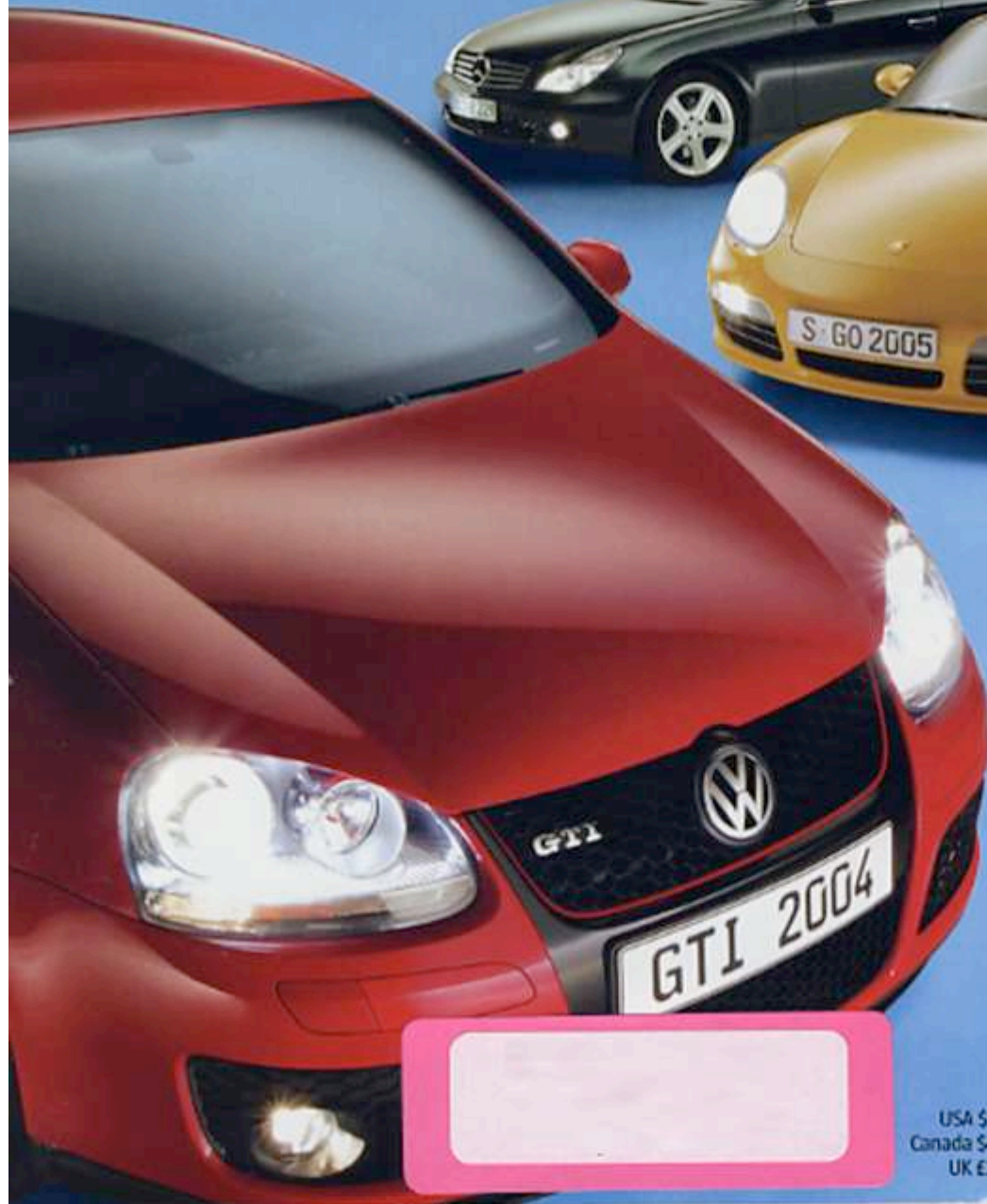


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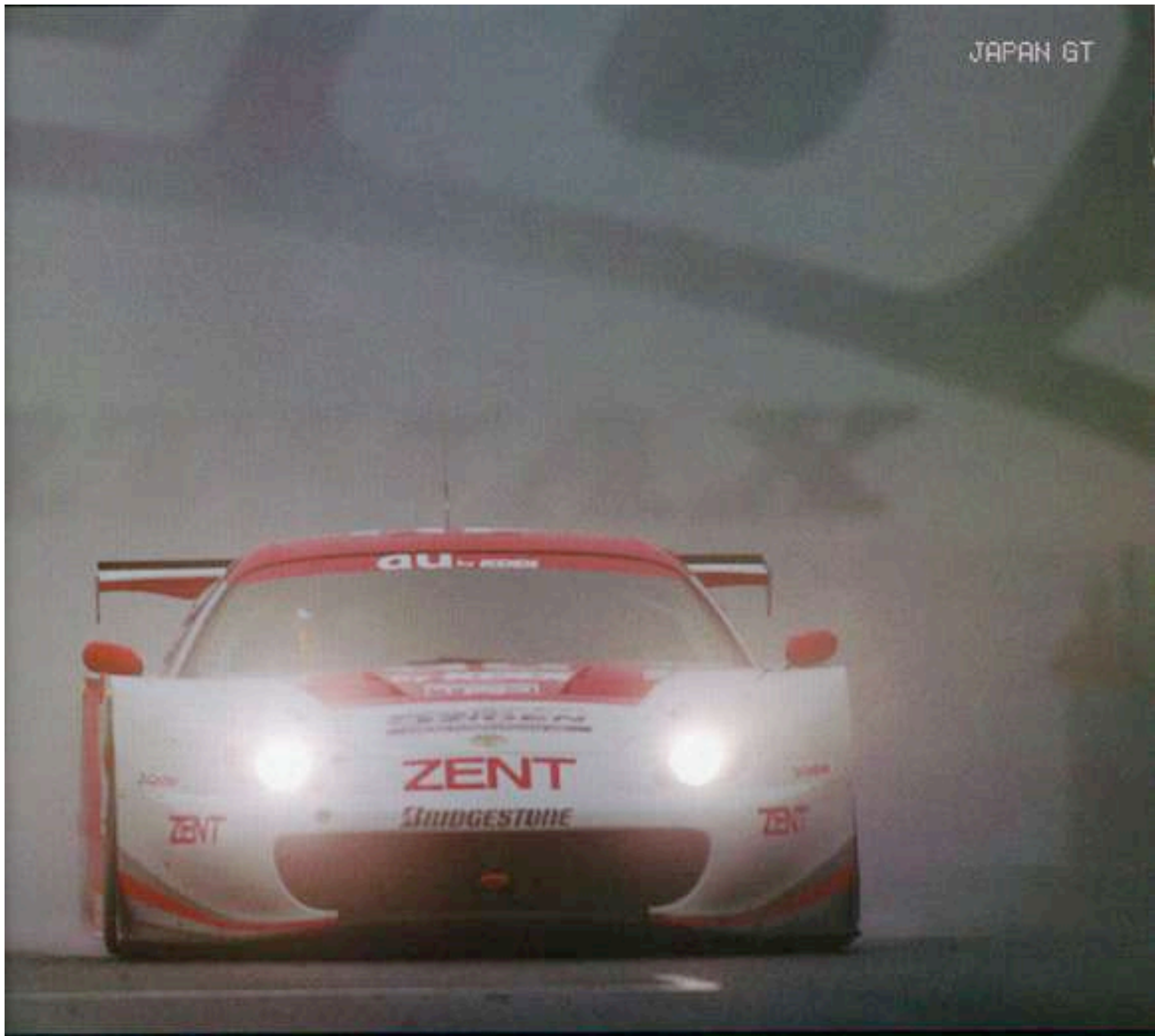


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# Hot like wasabi

The All Japan Grand Touring Championship is a huge fan favorite. And now it's coming to America.



BY PETER NUINN PHOTOGRAPHY ROBERT KERIAN

**T**he super-competitive All Japan Grand Touring Championship has what race fans crave: spectacular-looking cars that sound great and race hard, big forty-car-plus grids, and a great helping of unpredictability as factory-backed Nissan 350Zs, Toyota Supras, and Honda NSXs slug it out at the front of the field. No wonder it is now the biggest form of racing in Japan outside of Formula 1.

Americans will see why the JGTC is so appealing this winter when the series stages a late-season All-Star race at the California Speedway on December 18 and 19. The JGTC is shaping up to be the next big thing out of Japan after drifting, so Fontana should be a hot event. The organizers say they are also going with a major drifting challenge, plus an auto-

cross and rides with the JGTC pilots. To spice things up even further, it's rumored that a JGTC-spec Pontiac GTO will make the show. It'll be something to see how the Japanese cars and drivers cut it in the United States, but the smart money says the JGTC squad will deliver. After all, that's usually their style.

It's early Sunday morning at Sportsland Sugo, near the city of Sendai on Japan's east coast. With the JGTC in town, the crowds are already pouring into this attractive 2.3-mile circuit that's a kind of bucolic mix between Road America and Mid-Ohio, with a hint of England's classic Brands Hatch thrown in for good measure. This is one of the best venues on the JGTC's seven-race 2004 calendar, so it is little wonder that, despite murky weather, Sugo brings in a solid crowd of 51,500.



One of the prime reasons the JGTC draws crowds is that every Japanese gearhead knows and can relate to the cars. It's sort of a Japanese Trans-Am but with bigger grids and a more fervent, NASCAR-style fan base.

The JGTC also has hints of Germany's hugely popular DTM series, because it's run to a silhouette formula that pushes the tech barrier and lets you do anything you want in certain areas. Engine capacity and suspension are free, for instance, but the car's body structure must be standard. Air restrictors are used to keep power down to 500 hp for the top GT500 machines, with the GT300 class reined in to around 300 hp.

Lateral thinking abounds. This year's factory-supported GT500 Honda NSXs run with a longitudinal 3.0-liter twin-turbo V-6 in place of the stock car's transverse, normally aspirated engine. The NSX's clever transaxle has never been seen in any Honda showroom. The mighty Toyota Supras had Lexus-based 5.2-liter V-8s last year, but capacity has been reduced to 4.5 liters to try to avoid the air restrictors this season. A deeply sexy Nissan 350Z coupe is one of the new attractions this

year, built up around an improved version of the 3.0-liter twin-turbo V-6 that powered the championship-winning Skyline GT-Rs.

The GT300 cars are generally two seconds a lap down compared with the GT500 class. What they lack in outright speed they make up for in variety. Toyota Celicas, Mazda RX-7s, Porsche 911s, Ferrari 360 Modenas, Nissan 350Zs, and Honda NSXs are run by enthusiastic small teams, while there are some enigmatic homegrown specials such as the Honda-powered Vemac.

The JGTC rule makers have played the game well, keeping the series stable and building it up carefully over the past ten years. TV coverage is also right on the money. JGTC action is packaged for prime-time TV in Japan on Sundays, and the races are also shown live on satellite. Speed Channel in the United States now carries the races. On ESPN, the JGTC is shown across thirty-three Asian regions, which might help explain why the JGTC is going into China this year and why Malaysia, Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Korea are lining up for races. JGTC cars are also big with the Gran Turismo/PlayStation crowd, so the buzz is definitely building.

Manufacturers like the JGTC because it's well marshaled and solid, makes for strong racing, and, even better, won't break the bank. Nissan is spending about \$50 million to have NISMO—its highly motivated in-house tuner group—run a JGTC program, which is peanuts versus most other top-line motorsport.

It's misty, and the track is damp when practice starts on Saturday morning, but the cars are soon out. Earplugs are the order of the day as the NSXs, in particular, roar past, flames kicking out their exhausts as the drivers flick down through the gears before turns. Still, what looks right usually is right. This year's GT500 NSX, with its ungainly '70s F1-style air scoop, started out as something of a dog but has since come around.

The Supras, by contrast, are both menacing and quick, setting the pace and eventually filling the first three places on the grid. Given that the Supra hasn't been on sale for a while now, it seems a bit incongruous that Toyota is running it in the JGTC. This is thought to be the Supra's last year, however, and a new car—maybe the edgy new Lexus IS coupe—will get the call for 2005.

To level the playing field, cars are carefully handicapped, and this varies depending on the



The JGTC attracts huge crowds, forty-car grids, and armies of pretty, umbrella-wielding race queens. Engines are air-restricted to 500 hp in the GT500 class, 300 hp for the GT300 class.



THE JGTC RULE MAKERS HAVE **PLAYED THE GAME WELL**, KEEPING THE SERIES STABLE AND **BUILDING IT UP CAREFULLY** OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS.

## THE DRIVERS



**Erik Comas**  
Forty-one-year-old French veteran. Raced F1 with Ligier and Larrousse in the early '90s, came to JGTC in 1995. Won JGTC twice (1998–99) in a Nissan Skyline GT-R. Now races a Nissan 350Z run by Japanese racing legend Masahiro Hasemi. Oldest driver in GT500 but still quick.



**James Courtney**  
Twenty-four-year-old hotshot Aussie from Sydney. His first year in JGTC. Drives for the Dynacity TOMs team. Although he has extensive F3 experience and has tested for Jaguar in F1 during 2001–02, paddock rumor says Courtney is now being watched over by Toyota.



**Juichi Wakisaka**  
Thirty-two years old and one of the drivers to beat in JGTC today. Runs with Team Le Mans and also races in Formula Nippon, Japan's top single-seater championship. Fearless style and good TV manner make him popular with the JGTC crowd. Was 2002 JGTC champion in his Esso Uniflo Supra.

With the cars evenly matched by the organizers, JGTC races are big on dogfight battles (top). The '04 series drew seventeen models from eleven manufacturers, including Honda's NSX (top left) and Nissan 350Zs fielded by Team Daishin (above) and others. European cars such as the Ferrari 360 and the Porsche 911 (middle left) also appear.



A Celica leads a Supra (above). Supras went 1-2-3 in GT500. Celicas were 1-2 in GT300; hence a podium party for Toyota. Richard Lyons races for NISMO, a team fielding the new 350Z (below right).



## THE CARS

### ENGINE

**Size is free;** engines from other models can be fitted if they come from homologated or registered cars of the same maker. **Mounting and location** are free as long as the engine sits in the original bay.

**Modifications** to heads, block, crankshaft, and connecting rods are unrestricted. With few exceptions, cars must have one or two air restrictors to limit power to 500 hp (GT500 class) or 300 hp (GT300 class).

### BODY

**Body structure,** overall dimensions, and shape must be standard.

**Composite materials** and lighter metals can be used for bumpers, fenders, doors, hood, rear hatch, and trunk lid. **Main front** and rear sections are free, letting

teams fit single-seat Formula car-style roll cages and suspension. **A flat bottom** is mandatory. **You can fit** either a rear spoiler or a wing. The device on the original vehicle may be changed or moved.

### SUSPENSION

**Design is free,** but driver-variable springs and dampers are banned.

### DRIVETRAIN AND TRANSMISSION

**Maximum** of six gears, plus reverse. Automatics are banned, as are automated clutches. Four-wheel steering and traction control are banned.

### BRAKES

**ABS** is banned.

### WHEELS AND TIRES

**Maximum wheel width** 14 inches for GT500, 12 inches for GT300.

design of the car, where it finishes in practice, the race, and the circuit in question.

No race in Japan would be complete without an army of young, slim, leggy race queens in miniskirts and thigh-high boots. Holding sponsors' umbrellas and cooing for the camera—hence the “broly dolly” nickname—they pose and post for quite a different kind of race day army. Japan's *camera kozo* is a ragtag gang of guys wielding cameras with long lenses who feverishly follow the girls' every movement. So that's another reason fans go to the races: to check out the babes.

The JGTC also knows how to treat its audience well, and open access, as in NASCAR, is a given. The drivers come out during pit-lane sessions to sign autographs and pose for photos with smiling fans and their children. In things like this, the contrast with, say, Formula 1, could not be greater.

While there are no Americans driving in the JGTC, that could well change, especially if the Fontana race is a success. JGTC secretary general Jiro Kaji says he's expecting twenty-five cars plus some American drivers to run in December.

The JGTC is not without driving talent, however. Satoshi Motoyama and Juichi Wakisaka are two local hotshots. (Wakisaka put his Supra on pole at Sugo and was 2003 JGTC champion.) Naoki Hattori used to race Indy Lights, and Shinji Nakano raced in both F1 and CART. Richard Lyons is an up-and-coming twenty-five-year-old Brit ensconced in one of the quick new factory-supported 350Zs. Frenchman Erik Comas drove for the Ligier F1 team in the '90s. Young Australian James Courtney has been a Jaguar F1 test driver, and it's rumored his JGTC drive is but a holding station until Toyota can get him into F1 in 2006.

It's race day. The talk of the weekend has been the Nissan Zs. The NISMO Z of Motoyama/Lyons scored an upset victory in the new Z's very first race at the season opener at the TI circuit. Can they do it again?

The omens aren't good. “We don't have a good wet setup for this track,” confides the NISMO team manager, Hiroshi Degawa. And in fact, the Zs will struggle all weekend, and this time around, the star Motoyama/Lyons Z won't even complete the formation lap, retiring with a broken transmission. The best the Zs can do is fifth, lapped. Not that this has deterred the Nissan fans camped out directly across from the NISMO pit. A couple of them have huge Nissan flags which they proceed to wave each and every time one of the Zs roars past.

The Supras have their way at Sugo, growling through the eighty-one-lap race. They are so dominant that it really comes down to the question of which one will win, although there are some great dices. Wakisaka, having threaded his way through the field, attacks race leader Yuji Tachikawa, racing side-by-side with him all the way down the long Sugo pit straight. Tachikawa blinks first, and Wakisaka is through. Moments later, Wakisaka goes to one side of a GT300

Porsche back marker but also drops two wheels in the grass. Seizing the moment, Tachikawa, on the other side, is past and gone.

There's always lots of traffic in the JGTC, which can turn any race into a lottery, but the onset of rain immediately complicates things. Some drivers decide to gamble and stay out on slicks. With no traction control or ABS in the JGTC, this is the call for some judicious throttle work, but in the end, Tachikawa in the Cerumo Supra, having pitted for rain tires, manages to catch up and pass the Supra of German driver Dominik Schwager, still running on slicks, to win. With the Celicas finishing 1-2 in GT300, this one is all Toyota.

The cars that make up the 2004 All Japan Grand Touring Championship are a blast, and the racing is some of the very best around. And we mean anywhere. Still, it would be pushing it, perhaps, to expect the December race date at Fontana to serve up the full-fat JGTC experience. Then again, the race takes place in Southern California, the heartland of the sport compact and import tuner, where they have already taken Japan's drifting craze to heart. If Japan's latest and hottest automotive export is going to stick, this will be the place.