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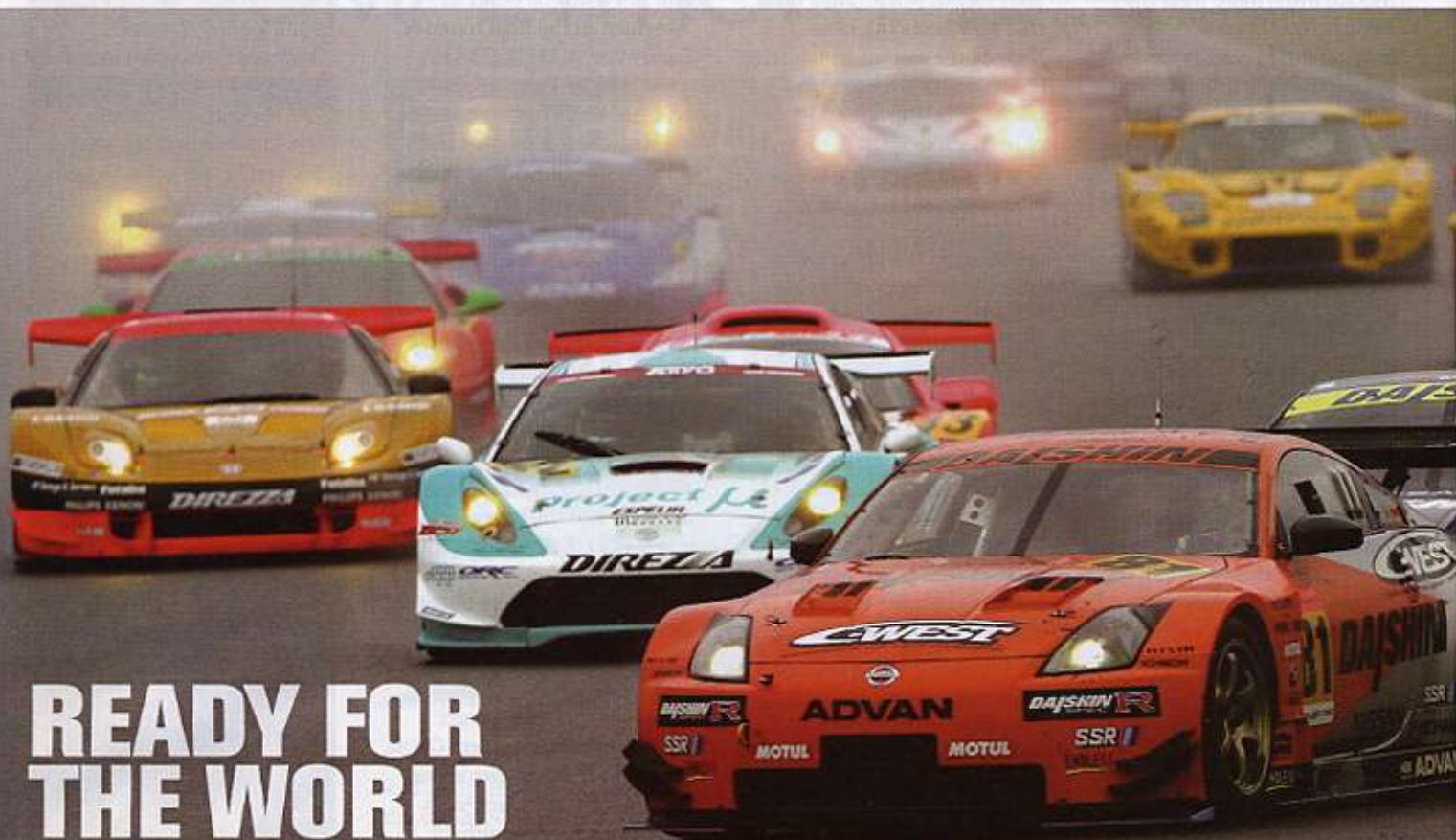
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READY FOR THE WORLD

THE JAPAN GT CHAMPIONSHIP PLANS TO GO GLOBAL. FIRST STOP: CALIFORNIA

BY RICHARD S. CHANG

» FUELED BY A HEAVYWEIGHT smackdown among Japan's Big Three, the Japan Grand Touring Championship grid is filled with 40-plus cars split into two horsepower-defined classes (GT300 and GT500). Technically, they are the fastest GT cars on the planet, out-clocking FIA-spec GT Lamborghinis and Ferraris by more than six seconds a lap at Twin Ring Motegi. DTM cars are a close second, or so says NISMO's senior engineer, Richard Divila, who submits, "Japan probably has the bigger budget," in reference to motorsports SOP: money equals speed.

Visually, the cars are stunning. They are wide, long and low. They incorporate swooping aerodynamics into the sexiest platforms from Japan, including the Toyota Supra, Acura NSX and Nissan 350Z. They are radioactively bright, with a palette of neon lilac, Day-Glo orange, Cayman blue, metallic gold. It's racing by Willy Wonka—fast, spectacular, pretty. And it is out to take over the world.

Kunimitsu Takahashi, the chairperson of Japan's GT Association, spells it out bluntly in the media guide: "Why is the JGTC race being introduced to foreign countries? Because it is the JGTC dream to grow! It goes without saying that merely holding a race in another country is not logical unless it is successfully nurtured into a successful event." You can paraphrase that in two words: Manifest Destiny.

Come Dec. 18-19, the JGTC will venture out of Asia for the first time in its 11-year existence. Renovations on Fuji Speedway have given the series an excuse to hold a non-points race at California Speedway. Yes, *this* California. As the economy in Japan continues to sлаг, the JGTC is looking to expand outside its borders. Next year it has races planned for Malaysia, Shanghai and the United States. This all may sound like crazy talk, but in a very short time the JGTC has gone from a small internal series to a genuine international event.

At least that's what it looked like at

round five at Twin Ring Motegi in September.

The higher-powered GT500 cars don't slither like formula cars or split the air like prototypes. They whack away at it. They are capable of nearing 200 mph on the back-straight of Motegi, a downhill that slopes gradually at first then dives down before ending abruptly in a 90-degree right-hander. As a rule, the drivers don't like the slow Twin Ring corners all that much, but their race cars, we're told, couldn't care less. The latest aero developments and a fierce tire war between Bridgestone, Yokohama and Dunlop have increased downforce and grip to a new level.

According to 10-year JGTC veteran Michael Krumm, last year's GT500 champion with Nismo, the top cars have gained a second a lap every year for the past decade. This year, even with the new intake restrictions and limits in aerodynamics, designed to take a second off lap times, the cars have actually gained time.

Konichiwa, Bro!

» EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT IN the demographic that craves JDM taillights, and even if you don't know what JDM stands for, if you are a race fan, there will probably be something at GT Live you'll like.

Organizers are calling GT Live "a theme park for car fans," and after a downright thrilling day at the media preview for the upcoming festival in Fontana, that description sounds about right.

With what has to be the racing world's most diverse lineup crowded onto the JGTC grids—11 car and five tire manufacturers—the main race itself would be more than enough of a draw. Throw in the fact that entrants from ALMS, Grand-Am and other racing series are welcome to participate on the Speedway's oval and infield road course and you have the possibility of a battle royale of colliding cultures. Imagine a Corvette C5R fending off a Skyline GT-R passing a Viper trailing a 360 Modena.

"If a non-JGTC car wins the event, we don't have any problem with that," said organizer Randy Grube. The cars will be "equalized" using weight and restrictor plate adjustments to make the playing field as even as possible; if that doesn't work out, hey, it's a non-points all-star format anyway so everyone just might have fun.

But Grube also knows there has to be more than just a big feature race to make a successful event. Spread over two days, with the main 200-mile JGTC race running Saturday night, GT Live will host "17 or 18 attractions, I've lost count," said Grube, who grew up in Germany, went to college in California and speaks Japanese.

So there will be more than

just one race happening at California Speedway. There will be drifting; something called Tuner Time Attack, where tuning houses run their fastest and most furious creations in timed laps; "demo runs," where fans chosen by lottery get to ride around the track in various tuner and JGTC race cars; autocross; go-karts; RC cars for anyone who wants to pilot one; a dyno challenge; and an audio challenge.

We got to ride along in two cars that will be entered in the main event, a Porsche 911 driven by veteran ALMS and Grand-Am pilot Craig Stanton and a GT500 Nissan Skyline GT-R driven by 2003

Porsche's tires could squeeze onto the pavement. We figured that was as quick as you could go around here, but then we rode with Yanagida, in the bigger, more powerful GT500 car. At first the car understeered into corners and oversteered out of them on cold tires. Then, after a little more than half a lap of sliding around, Yanagida nailed the throttle, banging the gears through the box like he was pimp-slapping a very naughty crewman, and suddenly there was no more understeer or oversteer, just power wailing through corners. Lateral *gs*, longitudinal *gs*, every *g* our squishy brains could register felt like it rose



TOSHIKAZU MORIKAWA

These cars are fast: Nissans, Hondas and Toyotas that compete in the Japan Grand Touring Championship can lap a place such as Motegi faster than FIA-spec GT Ferraris and Lambos.

"Like at Suzuka, 130R," Krumm explained, "it's a very famous corner. About six years ago or five years ago, we shifted from sixth to fifth gear, one gear down, to take it. Now, we come in flat in sixth. It's absolutely amazing. It's about 250 km/h [155 mph]. We measured one time, and it pulled 3.0 *gs* on the car, which is unbelievable for a sports car."

Credit Nismo for the breakneck pace. Since the JGTC is the only series the company participates in, it is giving it the Ferrari-Formula One treatment. Nissan campaigns two works teams and supplies twin-turbocharged 350Zs to two others in the GT500 class. To keep up, Honda and Toyota have made recent developments to their cars. Last year Toyota turned to its powerful 4.3-liter V8 to grind out a beefier 480 hp. Honda went the other way this year—adding a turbo to its 3.0-liter V6. Neither company has put up the expense for full works teams, but they do supply cars to more than half the teams on the grid. All three companies also support



GT300 champion Masataka Yanagida. It was a good exposure to the field that will assemble for the Saturday night main event.

The Porsche was thrilling good fun, as well as instructive, since we'd driven a GT3 around this course ourselves only a few months before. That car was impressive, but riding in Stanton's car showed just how fast a Porsche could go around here, particularly in the right-angle chicane at the end of the short straight. Stanton was smooth in choosing the best line and unafraid to lay down as much power as the

about 50 percent. We began to regret the huge helpings of pasta we had scarfed down only a short while ago, but with only two laps in each car, we left happy.

If you like road racing, you will like the equalized, diverse and highly competitive JGTC—and GT Live.

If you're anywhere near Southern California in December, it will be worth the trip. See jgtcusa.net for more information.

By the way, JDM stands for Japanese Domestic Market, but you already knew that, didn't you?

—MARK VAUGHN