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BIG

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PACIFIC, THE JAPANESE GT CHAMPIONSHIP RULES. ON THE EVE OF ITS FIRST VISIT TO U.S. SHORES, HERE'S A PORTAL INTO THE WORLD'S FASTEST GT RACING SERIES



DIRMAN/AT



Seeing a white person at Round 5 of the 2006 Japan GT Championships at Twin Ring Motegi is a strange thing. There's just no shaking it. It's not something I dwell on, but every time I pass a European—they're nearly all European—the slight conks me on the head. It's like spying someone who's wandered in from a space-time vortex. It's a lucid refresher that Japan is very, very Japanese. And surrounded by the circus of smiley, happy Japanese fans and colorful umbrella girls, interlopers seem superimposed.

Mostly, the Euro contingent consists of the drivers. Hired guns, as Eddie Irvine, Ralf Schumacher and Jacques Villeneuve once were, looking for a return ticket home. They bear the serious faces of men doing serious work. Their smiles are tight-lipped and rare sights. Then again, you also get the sense that they simply could be feeling out of the loop on the same joke.

Height might have something to do with the discordance, as well. The European drivers, on the whole, are much taller than their Japanese

counterparts and the masses who adore them. But taller than all of them is Ricardo Divia, currently a senior engineer for Nismo—Nissan's Japanese motorsport arm—and overseer of its factory JGTC program.

Divia is lanky like a Dickens character. He has a narrow face with silver hair that hangs from his head like linsel. He wears glasses and, though Brazilian, speaks with a near-British accent. He was Emerson Fittipaldi's engineer during the good years, when they won Formula 1 titles. And he was there during

(ABOVE) High-tech GT cars, bright colors, high speeds, grid girls and close racing is what the JGTC is all about. (LEFT) Car giants Toyota, Nissan and Honda rule the roost, but have to mix it up with home-made exotica like the Garaiya (No. 43).

IN JAPAN



WORDS RICHARD CHANG PHOTOS TOSHIKAZU MURAYAMA

the bad ones at Copersucar. Since then, he's been involved in every form of racing, from Nissan's British Touring Car Championship effort in the mid-'90s to Prost in F1. In 1996, he moved to Japan, when Nismo decided to get serious about the JGTC.

The last time I witnessed the JGTC first hand was at Fuji Speedway in 1999. As I sat in the empty stands during a practice session five years ago, I attempted to identify each car purely by sound. The chunky fits and spasms of the Supras, the full NSX chord, the deep drone

of the GT3s. That's not possible anymore. Something has happened to the cars and engines. Now, they all sound the same. I turned to Divia to find out why.

"It was in 2003 that things really opened up," he explains shortly after Saturday qualifying, in which Nismo's two 350Zs took two-three on the grid. Squeezed into a small chair inside Nismo hospitality, Divia is all elbows and kneecaps, strangely symmetrical, like an origami swan. "You no longer have to carry the chassis parts and all the sheet metal

along the engine bay. Now you can just-front firewall, rear firewall-take everything else out. That's it, if you look at the whole thing, it really has nothing to do with the production car."

Divia is talking about the GT500 class. In fact, the cars have gained a second a lap for the past 20 years. "This year, they've restricted aerodynamics," he elaborates. "They styled down aerodynamics. They reduced our restrictors, from 30.2 mm to 29.8 mm. They tightened all the rules to slow down the cars, but they're still getting faster." >>

WHO'S WHO IN JGTC

The Japanese GT Championship is the biggest series in Japan, drawing big crowds and TV audiences eager to see the battle royal fought out by the nation's three largest car manufacturers—Toyota, Honda and Nissan—along with their driving roster of local Japanese stars and European mercenaries.

Each manufacturer has factory-backed teams in the primary class, GT500 (which means power is restricted to 500hp), in a seven-race series of endurance events between 150 and 600 miles. And all three are bringing their big guns over for the post-season non-points race at California Speedway. The JGTC All-Star 200-miler will alter the usual format in making the teams carry out two mandatory pit stops for fuel and tires, while third drivers are also allowed to add spice with some "guest" drivers.

The rulebook allows the GT500s to be the most sophisticated GTs in the world, with exotic carbon fiber bodywork and manufacturers choosing any engine from their range. Toyota has a normally aspirated 4.5-liter unit in its Supra racer to combat the 3-liter turbos used in Nissan's 350Z and Honda's NSX.

Thirteen of the 17 regular GT500s are set to make the trip to California. Nissan is bringing four of its cars, including its star duo: Japan's leading domestic open-wheel and GT racer, Satoshi Motoyama, partnered with Northern Ireland's Richard Lyons. Its lineup also includes former Formula 1 driver Erik Comas from France, his protégé Benoît Tréluyer, and ex-Champ Car driver Michael Krumm. Honda also has all of its four teams in Fontana, with former Jaguar F1 test driver Andre Luttwiler heading a lineup that also includes ex-F1 and Champ Car regular Shinji Nakano.

Toyota has five of its seven regular Supras



making the trip across the Pacific, headed by 2002 JGTC champion Juichi Wakisaka and this year's Le Mans 24 Hours winner Sébastien Bourdais.

The JGTC's secondary GT300 class (for cars restricted to 300hp) provides additional variety to the grid, and so will come to the U.S. More Nissan 350Zs and Honda NSXs will take on a Toyota Celica piloted by drifting ace Manabu Orido and Nobuteru Taniguchi, a Porsche GT3RS as well as homegrown, low-volume exotics such as the Vermac and the Autobacs Garaiya.



(ABOVE) Toyota fields the most cars in the series, with seven Supras including this Kraft team car. (LEFT) Nismo has a brace of factory 350Zs. (BELOW) The four Honda NSXs out there complete the "Three King" setup.

Good information. But I need something more tangible, something to compare it to. I tell him, "Compare it to DTM."

He says, "DTM cars are too small and not up to the power that we have. Basically, those cars aren't as good as the cars we run now. The JGTC has probably got a bigger budget than DTM, because it's more important to the Japanese manufacturers. It's their internal championship. Honda, Toyota, Nissan in their home market."

"Honestly speaking," he continues, and after a quick glance away, he turns to me. You can't script pauses like this. "It is too much money for what it is."

"I didn't really want to come here [from Europe to Japan], but it's a good living," says Richard Lyons, less than 50 feet from where I spoke to Divita a day earlier. It's 9:30 a.m. on Sunday. Thirty Nissan March Cup cars are buzzing around the track, qualifying for one of the JGTC's support races. Not the best background to break down Lyons' Ulster brogue.

At 25, Lyons is Nismo's current stud works driver and the latest name to be linked to a



move from Japan over to F1, which can be considered the unspoken ambition of the top talent in the JGTC. Lyons, who's had links with Jordan, prefers not to talk about it. "I've got the credentials. The next step is the tricky one," he says, and leaves it at that.

For now, Lyons drives the No. 1 Nissan 350Z in the top GT500 class. He is paired with Satoshi Motoyama, a 31-year-old idol in Japan, a Masahiro Haseemi in waiting. A triple champion in the Formula Nippon open-wheel series, he also won the JGTC title for the second time last year with Nismo, though not with Lyons.

"When I came here for the first time I wasn't nervous, because everyone's very professional," says Lyons, who is also a front runner in F1Nippon. "I was very excited about it, getting to work with manufacturers."

That's the allure of the JGTC, even for guys whose priority is impressing F1 team bosses in F1Nippon—it enables drivers to work directly with major car manufacturers in a high-profile, competitive series. By all accounts, Nissan puts in the most money. No one says how much, but considering the JGTC is the company's only motorsports program outside of desert raids, it's more than a handful of magic beans.

Nismo fronts two works entries in GT500 and supports two others—the teams of Japanese legends Hasemi and Kazuyoshi Hoshino both field one of the new-for-2005 350Zs. Nismo also supports two teams in the GT300 class.

But it's not just Nismo that's raising the stakes. Honda and Toyota may be duking it out in F1, but a lot's at stake in the JGTC, too. Not to mention the fact that it's a direct link to selling cars. So, they're both in it to win it, as well.

(BELOW) An easy face to identify in the crowded JGTC garage area is respected veteran engineer Ricardo Divita—he loves the sophistication of the Nissan 350Zs, but is wary of increasing costs.



COMING TO AMERICA

GT Live, California Speedway's event that is bringing Japan's biggest racing series to U.S. soil for the first time, is offering a weekend of ground-breaking features and attractions.

There is a mixture of Japanese GT Championship and top-line drifting action on both days at the Fontana event, which runs on Dec. 28-29. The feature race, the JGTC All-Star 200-mile event, is on the Saturday, beginning at 5 p.m. and running for two hours in the darkness. The grid for the 25-car field will be set by a one-hour qualifying session on California Speedway's oval/infield course, starting three hours before the main race.

The flame-belching Japanese cars will be back in action again on Sunday afternoon for the two-log All-Star Sprint, a brace of 25-minute, single-driver events on the interior road course.

Woven into all this action is a mixture of drifting events, which run on four lanes around the interior road course. Saturday features the Formula Drift Main Event at 10 p.m., while the top stars of drifting will all be in attendance for the two feature events on Sunday, too. Between the JGTC sprints on Sunday afternoon there's

the XOL Main Event, and then from 5 p.m. there's four hours of non-stop power balancing from the headline Di Grand Prix crowd.

The finishing touch to this unique weekend of tuner-head heaven is the Tuner Time Attack, which pits the nation's 20 best tuner machines against each other in a 30-minute on-track session competing for the fastest single lap.

GT Live is designed to be a fan-friendly event that gets you up-close-and-personal with the JGTC cars and drivers in the open garage area. There also will be a 300-strong car show for the crowd to show off their own street rides, while an "ultimate fan experience" will provide two hours of demo runs in which the JGTC stars give on-track passenger rides in street cars, offering the ultimate insight into the talent needed to race the world's fastest, coolest GTs.

(ABOVE) The full JGTC pack will be in action on both the Saturday and Sunday, running its first-ever night race and also experimenting with two 25-minute all-out sprints. (BELOW) California will use its full oval/infield course for the 200-mile GT race, then use the interior circuit for the sprints and drifts,



In 2003, Toyota revamped its engine program, scrapping the high-pressure turbo 4-cylinder for a race-prepped version of its naturally aspirated 4.5-liter 32-valve V8. This year, Honda launched a new turbocharged 3.0-liter, built by M-Tec, formerly Mugen. Add in a tire war between Bridgestone, Dunlop and Yokohama, and in a very short time the JGTC game has changed beyond belief.

"The feel is getting closer to formula cars all the time," says Lyons. "We've got an awful lot

(BELOW) Courtesy of their second win of the 2004 season at Kyushu, the factory Nismo team's lead duo Richard Lyons and Satoshi Motoyama headed to the season finale at Suzuka with a healthy points lead.

of downforce and grip. Beyond F1 and F1Nippon, there's little else as quick."

Michael Krumm, who co-pilots the second Nismo car and won the title with Motoyama last year, tells about taking on the fearsome 130R corner at Suzuka: "Five years ago, we shifted from sixth to fifth gear to take it. Now we come in flat in sixth, it's absolutely amazing. It's about 155 mph. We measured it one time—it pulled 3G on the car, which is unbelievable for a GT car."

One thing that hasn't changed in the JGTC is its color palette. It's an anime battle come to life. The M-Tec NSX is painted metallic gold. The ARTA NSX is fluorescent orange, the Wondone Supra pastel green, the Impul 350Z a bright blue. If F1 is glamour and NASCAR blue collar, then JGTC is their radioactive spawn—racing with the production value of a Dolce & Gabbana runway show. Race queens—often four to a team—surround the cars and garage. Mobs of camera-wielding men clamor for a clear line of fire, others hover with Sharpies and fan guides at the ready. The Japanese may be known for their decorum, but

everything they've learned culturally seems to get a bypass under the humid sky as they crush closer to their idols.

Both classes of the JGTC race together, though by lap 12 at Motegi the race breaks down into two cliques and storylines: the fight for the GT500 lead followed by 15 seconds or so of stragglers, and then the GT300 leaders and stragglers. An EKG graph of the bottle drone.

When the JGTC was established 11 years ago, there were 28 cars on the grid. This year there's a total of 42. A mix of Japanese makes and Euro exotics. Races are two hours with a mandatory driver change. Each driver is limited to seat time of two-thirds the total distance, though most teams switch at the halfway mark.

On the No. 1 Nissan team, Lyons goes in second in the car—the closest. Rain showers at Motegi have made things difficult for everyone. And Motoyama has a nightmare of a first stint. Also, Twin Ring's slow corners give the torquier Supras the edge on exit speed. The NSXs just handle better in the wet.

By the time Lyons gets into the car, he's down seven places. But he is steady and quick. As the circuit dries, he edges closer to the lead pack. Laps droop and the gap gets slimmer. With less than 10 laps to go, he's up to third position. And this is where his true pace emerges.

With the leader, the Nakajima NSX, within eyeshot, Lyons knocks out a series of laps half a second quicker than the two cars ahead. The lead diminishes to less than three seconds, and then Lyons runs out of time. After two hours, the 350Z crosses the line in third, nose to bumper from the second-placed Esso Supra. The NSX finishes first. Three podium positions, three manufacturers, three seconds between them.

That's another facet of the series' appeal—the competition, which has been shaped and honed by a clever system of handling and success weight penalties that promote equality. All three manufacturers won races in the first five of the seven points events. "No matter how much money you throw at it, you're not going to break away from the pack," says Divla. "It's the best racing I've seen in a long time. You won't see anything like it." And the interest this raises is ever-increasing. For the first time this year the "demonstration" race at Sepang in Malaysia counted for points, and plans are advanced for a return to the U.S. and a visit to Shanghai in China in 2005. There's also talk of adding South Korea for '06.

For the drivers, the impact of its growth is more immediate. "I'm trying to stay here as long as I can," says Krumm, a 20-year veteran of the series. "It is a challenge every year just to not lose the job. We have young drivers coming in and, as a foreigner, it's a big deal to stay in the series. They say Lyons is going to F1 next year. Maybe. He's good, but there'd be another quick, young guy come in."

That's the thing with the JGTC—it's exciting, vibrant and right now is riding the crest of a wave. It's never standing still. **B**

