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EVENT REPORT

THE JGTC POWERS ITS WAY TO THE U.S.

A DIFFERENT CROWD

The motors didn't exactly shake the paddock, but they did scream with enough exotic ferocity to ensure a rather impressive spot in the history books. California Speedway in Fontana, Calif., is very familiar with race cars, especially those of the loud variety, but Dec. 18, 2004, marked the introduction of the Japan Grand Touring Championship (JGTC) to U.S. soil.

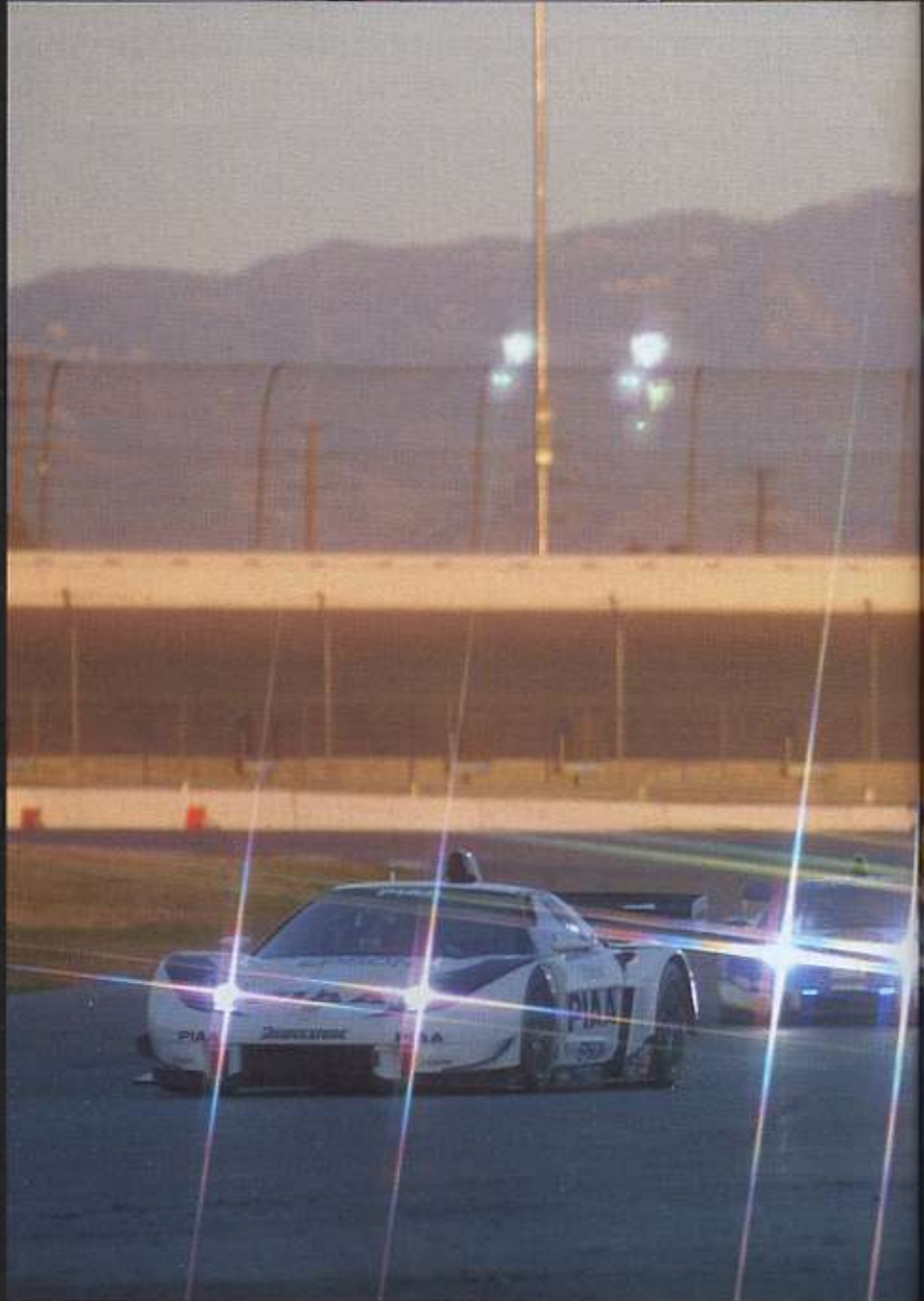
The JGTC is a Japan-based race series organized by the GT Association, and in Japan it has been gaining in popularity ever since the series' 1994 introduction. The series has also spawned a young and very loyal U.S. following, and that has ultimately resulted in the JGTC series coming Stateside for a single exhibition race known as GT Live. To do so, however, the GT Association needed a trusted, experienced and knowledgeable sanctioning body to ensure everything would run smoothly, safely and meet FIA requirements, and for that, SCCA Pro Racing's services were called upon, as well as Cal Club Region's team of expert officials.

The two-day event entailed a smorgasbord of motorsports. The idea of GT Live was to introduce America to JGTC cars, testing the waters for expansion of the already international race series. To ensure an enormous crowd, the GT Association piggybacked events like Formula D drifting, an Xtreme Drifting League exhibition, D1, a Tuner Time Attack event, an autocross and a car show, dyno challenge, karting event and r/c car demo. The result was a markedly different demographic than that usually found at road races, a much younger crowd introduced to a new form of motorsport.

"GT Live was designed as a lifestyle event to bring the mainstream exposure to the world of tuner cars and motorsports in the same way the X Games brought extreme sports into the spotlight," says Randy Grube, GT Association event organizer.

The cars

The JGTC is composed of two distinct classes, GT300 and GT500. To minimize confusion, the classes are descriptive of the cars that compose them: GT300 cars cannot exceed 300hp and GT500 cars can't exceed 500hp (whether or not



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To keep things even more interesting, JGTC cars were required to make two pit stops and swap drivers at least once during the All-Star 200 main race. Also, for the first time in JGTC history, the main event was held at night, adding excitement for not only the fans but also the drivers.

With a Nissan 350Z convertible pace car—SCCA starter Phil Binks at the wheel—leading the pack, the GT500 and GT300 cars completed two full laps before the pace car pulled to one side and let all hell break loose. Within a few laps it became obvious which cars were going to dominate, or so it would seem. When the GT500 Direzza Dunlop Supra, with Naoki Hattori at the wheel, started spewing smoke within the first few laps, it was not obvious that Hattori, who had qualified 10th out of 10 in the GT500 class, would even make it through enough of the race to let Shigeekazu Wakisaka jump into the driver's seat, let alone have the car finish.

As a surprise to many onlookers, The Direzza Dunlop Supra managed to work through the pack and pull off a third-place finish. What was even more impressive is that the four front-running GT500 cars managed to lap the fifth-place GT500 competitor twice, and the sixth place



(TOP) Brakes illuminate on the Project 8-1 Mach-Go GT320R as it slows for Turn 12. (MIDDLE) The WedsSport Celica pulled off a GT300 fifth-place finish. (ABOVE) Although the JGTC was designed to utilize cars that are familiar to the fans, there are exceptions, like this GT300 ASL Garaiga, built by Autobacs.

finisher four times. No other GT500 car finished the event.

The GT300 category was equally as nail biting. In fact, the battle for eighth place was as amazing as the battle between second, third and fourth.

During the wheel-to-wheel racing, the sun set over the raceway. As the light dissipated, the glow of the brake rotors illuminated the innards of the wheels. For many of the young fans, this was probably the first time they'd ever experienced firsthand the awesome heat that brake rotors have to cope with lap after lap.

By the end of the 200.1-mile race and after a little confusion caused by a rules misunderstanding, the G'Zox SSR Hasemi Z Nissan won the GT500 class, and the M-Tec NSX finished first in GT300.

JGTC's future in the U.S.

"[The] JGTC and the GT Association came to [SCCA Pro Racing] looking for help organizing the racing portion of the event. They also needed the race to be FIA listed," Wright says. As for the potential language barrier being a problem while running the event, Wright tells us "the GT Association brought a number of translators and most of the Japanese [teams] speak or understand English.

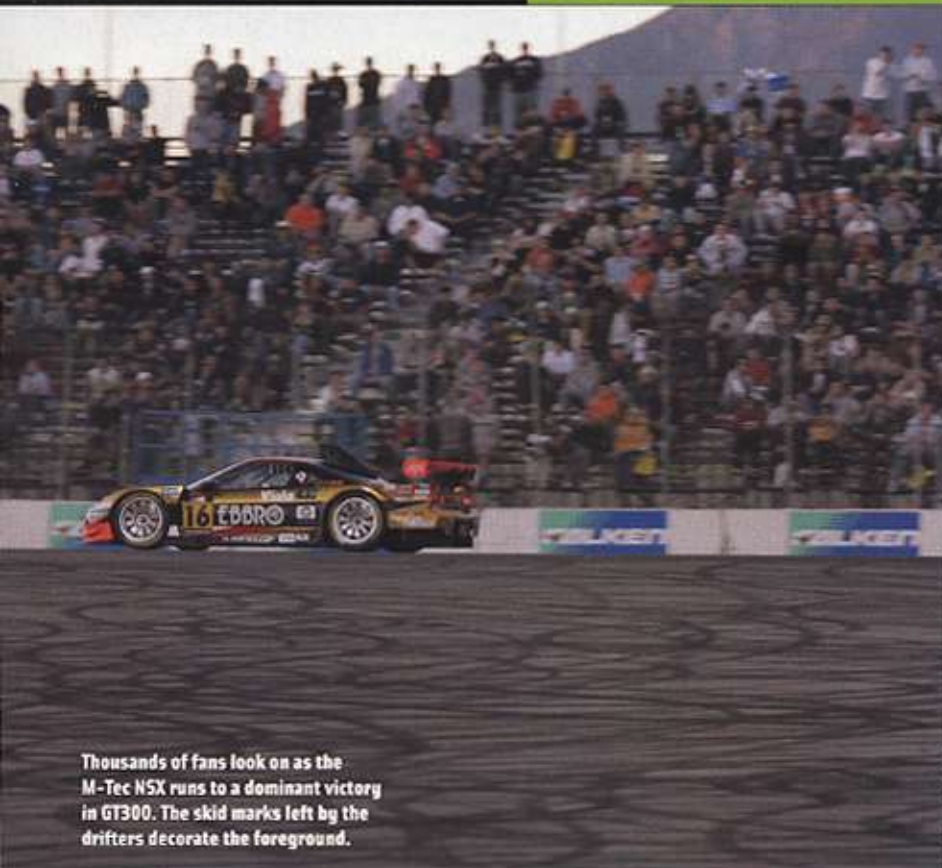
"Working with the California Speedway, Cal Club and GT Association staff made the event come off without a glitch in the spectator's eyes," Wright continues. "[The SCCA has] a great relationship with the JGTC management and staff. We are looking forward to the 2005 event."

The GT Association is planning to bring the JGTC back to U.S. shores, possibly as soon as December 2005. "The great thing about this event is the fact that for the majority of spectators, it was the first time they had gone to a road race. Many of the folks I talked to are hooked, which is what the event was intended to do," said Wright.

The event was an eye opener for the JGTC drivers, as well. Lotterer, whose PIAA team finished second in Saturday's All-Star 200 and won the sprint race on Sunday, revealed that he "just found out that America was interested in our cars and our championship. I just heard about it when we were organizing this race and I found out there was a lot of enthusiasm."

"I thought nobody would be here. I was surprised," mirrored Tetsuya Yamano, driver for the winning GT300 M-Tec NSX.

With the success of GT Live, and the enthusiasm of the spectators, it almost seems foolish not to bring the JGTC back to the States. With SCCA Pro Racing sanctioning the event and providing operations support, it helps expose SCCA to a new generation of race fans. Whether those who were excited by the JGTC will attend a SPEED World Challenge or other SCCA event has yet to be seen, but this is definitely a good step at introducing a younger crowd to the exciting world of road racing. ■



Thousands of fans look on as the M-Tec NSX runs to a dominant victory in GT300. The skid marks left by the drifters decorate the foreground.

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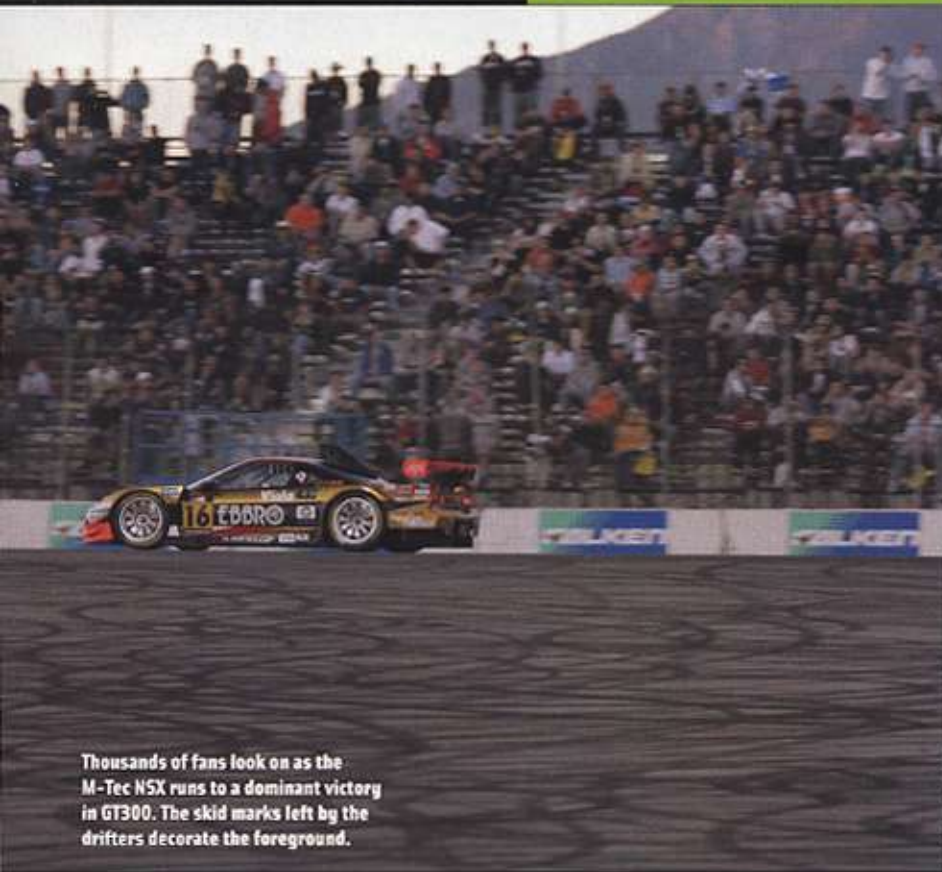
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