

# GT Live Borrows Page From X Games

Weekend festival at California Speedway draws an estimated 45,000 who find plenty of things to do and little opportunity for boredom.

By MARTIN HENDERSON  
Times Staff Writer

Randy Grube stopped short of calling himself giddy. "Too tired," he said Sunday after three days of signing checks, putting out brush fires and accepting congratulations during the frantic first weekend of the GT Live event at California Speedway.

"The general concept," said event organizer Grube, "is X Games for cars."

Southern California car culture — and that in the U.S. in general — is being influenced more and more by imports such as Toyota, Honda and Nissan.

For an event that primarily revolved around Japanese racers and Japanese cars, an estimated 45,000 showed up over the weekend to watch, making it the third-largest attended this year at the speedway, trailing two NASCAR races and at least matching if not exceeding an Indy Racing League event. The most impressive sight came Sunday night when about 15,000 jammed the grandstands — and beyond — near Turn 3 to watch a drifting exhibition pitting Japanese vs. American drivers.

With things to do at every turn during the weekend festival — drive go-karts, R/C cars, auto-cross, lifestyle expo — and most on-track events lasting about an hour, there was plenty to do and little opportunity for boredom.

Top billing was shared by the Japan GT Championship series, which had all-star events Saturday and Sunday, and the D1 Grand Prix U.S. vs. Japan drifting exhibition.

La Jolla kidney transplant doctor Rodolfo Batarse, 31, was among those watching

"What a great idea to do a major event all at once instead of just a car show," said Carl Corbett, of Las Vegas. "Pretty smart."

The racing? Logistic problems dogged the JGTC from the moment it arrived Wednesday. The two-man team that took the checkered flag Saturday, Andre Lotterer and Tsugio Matsuda, were assessed a 60-second penalty about two hours after their apparent GT 500 victory, which gave the win to Nissan Z drivers Toshihiro Aneishi and Erik Comas.

After that fiasco, the JGTC changed the format of Sunday's two sprint races at the last minute. Instead of starting position based on the previous night's result, the first sprint became a qualifying session. Lotterer qualified first and then won the 24-minute sprint.

Despite problems, drivers believed in the event's merit.

"It has the potential to be huge," said Irishman Richard Lyons, who was fastest in every practice and qualifying session in his Nismo for Saturday's 87-lap race, only to watch his teammate get spun and T-boned on Lap 11. "Coming over here, it's an eye-opener for the Japanese teams."

Grube, who worked with the Japan-based GT Assn. to bring



CARLOS CHAVEZ Los Angeles Times

**UP IN SMOKE:** Akinori Utsumi of Japan spins out of control during qualifying in a drifting exhibition at GT Live.

the series to America, acknowledged there were plenty of glitches. "The concept was right, the execution had issues," he said. Crowding in the garage area, parking and shuttle problems, about 500 too few competitor passes — he printed 1,000 — were the major problems.

"We had more cars, more peo-

ple than we were able to handle," he said, "but it's easy to fix."

A return next year to California Speedway, and possibly a change of venue in 2006 — think downtown L.A. street race around Staples Center, *a la* X Games, Grube said — could come after that.

The potential is here. Japa-

nese imports continue to show increases in sales far surpassing that of the Big Three automakers. GM, Ford and Chrysler Group had November sales that were down 59.5% from a year ago, while Asian brands increased 32.3%. The last time General Motors, the largest U.S. automaker, showed a sales in-

crease was 1999.

Masaki Vance of Gardena, a weekend go-fer for NSX chassis-maker and race team Dome because he speaks English and Japanese, was like many who gave the event a thumbs-up.

"These cars at least resemble the cars you drive on the 405," he said.



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"I love the cars, the action, the setting, the smells, the sounds," said Batarse, who drives a Honda Prelude with aftermarket wheels, suspension, exhaust and radio. "I drove 90 minutes to be here at 9:30 a.m., and I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

Grube, a Santa Monica marketer, spent more than \$2 million on a gamble, renting the track and putting together the event infrastructure. He just wanted to be around racing and cars. Turned out he's not the only one.

"It's hot-rodding all over again, except it's Asian kids with Asian cars," Grube said. "Our target audience was 50% import tuner, 25% road racing fan, 25% everything else."

Brothers Dan and Jeff Parker drove from Fremont, Calif., and arrived at the track at 7:30 a.m. Saturday to watch the Japan GT Championship because it was the series' first venture onto American soil.

"They sound fantastic," said Dan, 25, a draftsman who drives a Honda CRX. "You've got different makes and models. NASCAR, they all look and sound the same."

Two other brothers, one from Westchester, the other from Las Vegas, were still in temporary grandstands at 9 p.m. Saturday night to watch drifting practice.

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