

Celebrating 40 Years of Z Heritage

by Chris Karl, Executive Director for the Z Car Club Association (www.zcca.org)

It is rare for any automobile manufacturer to be able to celebrate four decades of heritage for a sports car brand. The Z car is celebrating just that here in 2010. Part of that heritage lies in the vehicle's engineering and sales success. Another contribution is the Z's unique racing heritage. The reality is that the Z is a reflection of all these elements along with one else – the enthusiasts that fuel the excitement around a great sports car.



The quest for an affordable sports car...

Nissan's start with the Z began more than 40 years ago as the figure many know as "The Father of the Z", Yutaka Katayama, began work with engineers to create an inexpensive sports car to take on the likes of the Corvette and Porsche vehicles of the day. Yutaka Katayama, affectionately known as "Mr. K" in the Z enthusiast community celebrated his own centennial birthday in 2009 as he turned 100 years in age. Mr. Katayama grew the Datsun brand here in the U.S. since arriving to the U.S. in March, 1960 and served as the president of Nissan Motors Corporation from 1965 and continued his post for nearly ten years. The Datsun brand name originated from the early Japanese vehicle manufacturer in the 1930's known as DAT Motor Vehicle Manufacturing. Mr. K's quest and passion for cars drove his desire to bring an affordable sports car platform to market for Nissan.

Mr. K is not only credited with shepherding the Z car into existence, but also the highly successful Datsun 510 which was targeted to compete with BMW. His vision of delivering real sports-car value is realized as over 700 people gathered for this year's 23rd Annual International Z Car Convention in Nashville TN to celebrate the Z's 40th Anniversary. Mr. K still is active in the Z community, participating in Japanese Z enthusiast events and here in the U.S. virtually (via web conference) at Z Car Club Association (ZCCA) conventions. In fact, Mr. K personally attended many ZCCA conventions here in the U.S. with his last in-person appearance at the Syracuse, NY convention in 2005.

1970 to 2010: Six generations of Z heritage

1st Generation: the Datsun "S30" Z cars - 240z (1970-73), 260z (1974) and 280z (1975-78)

The initial Z car was known as the Datsun 240z and came to the U.S. as a 1970 model year. The vehicle stunned the automotive world with a two-seat coupe design, 6-cylinder engine, front disc brakes and independent suspension. The debut of the 240z, and its success, was heavily contributed to the honest focus to deliver world-class sports car performance at a modest price for the everyday driving enthusiast. The Datsun 240Z hit the market with stellar success and the Datsun brand grew heavily in the U.S. 40 years later, the love for the Z car stems from the simplicity in approach that started with the 240z. Deliver a reliable and strong performing sports car that the average citizen could afford and enjoy.

Nissan, the parent company for Datsun, sold the 240z from 1970 to 1973 with modest updates and in all, approximately 135,000 Datsun 240z's were sold in the U.S. The new Z's lightweight design, independent suspension coupled with the 2.4L's strong engine performance boasting 151hp provided a platform well suited for tuning and racing. Racing teams emerged again and again putting Datsun on the winner's podium.

From 1970-72, John Morton was one such driver of repute that drove for the (Peter) Brock Racing team with the famous #46 BRE (Brock Racing Enterprises) Datsun 240z.

As 1974 approached, the new Datsun Z car was released as the 260z that offered a few cosmetic and interior updates along with higher displacement to a larger inline 2.6L 6-cylinder engine. However, due to emissions regulations, power was actually reduced to 139hp. The 260z was unique in a few different ways with its release. Firstly, the 260z would only be offered for the 1974 model year, and secondly, it was the first Z car to be offered with a longer wheelbase and a “2+2” seating configuration (seating for four).

For 1975, a new Datsun Z emerged with a larger 2.8L power-plant. The Datsun 280z boasted higher performance and several additional technology advancements such as a 5-speed transmission option, fuel-injection, and four-wheel disc brakes. Nissan also released a special “Black Pearl” edition of the Datsun 280z. As the mid 1970’s passed, stronger emissions controls and gas-mileage standards restricted the horsepower a bit. The marketing tag-line of “Datsun Saves” spoke to the Z’s ability to continue delivering performance while increasing value to the owner through higher fuel-efficiency. The Datsun 280z also delivered on resale value as well. The Datsun 280z was the first vehicle (not just Z, but first car...) to be worth more used than what a new one cost to buy from your local dealer!

2nd Generation: the Datsun 280zx “S130” (1979-83)

In 1979, the 2nd generation of Z car was born as the Datsun 280zx. This new Z car utilized a longer chassis with a stronger focus on driver comfort while the inline 6-cylinder engine (still a L28 series with 2.8L displacement) was still a strong performer. Though heavier than its previous generation of Z’s (1st Generation Z’s include the 240z, 260z and 280z with the “S30” chassis designation), the “S130” chassis Z car offered new features as the car evolved from 1979 to 1983. The Datsun 280zx was the first Z car to offer removable glass (t-)tops and also a turbocharged engine which boosted the L28ET engine to 180bhp (the normally-aspirated version provided 135hp). Special editions for the 280zx were released as well for the 2nd generation Z car. The 1979 Datsun 280ZX-R was outfitted with special body badging, body decals and a large rear wing while the 1980 Datsun 280zx “10th Anniversary” was offered with special gold emblems, automatic climate control, gold-colored alloy wheels, leather seats and headlight-washers. The 10th Anniversary 280zx’s were painted either two-tone gold and black or the more rare red & black. The turbo-model cars were also delivered with special wheels and badging. Additional features of note for the 2nd generation included an optional digital dash (another first for the Z car at this point during its history), electronic systems “check” function and audible voice-warning system that alerted you if a door was ajar or perhaps you had left your headlights on. The 280zx’s platform also performed well on the track as the Bob Sharp 280zx, driven by the late Paul Newman, claimed multiple victories.

3rd Generation: the Nissan 300zx “Z31” (1979-83)

The 1984 Nissan 300zx was a transition for the Z car to the third generation of Z car. The 300zx was produced in two different formats, the first generation known as the “Z31” chassis.” It was also the transition from Nissan’s use of the Datsun brand name here in the U.S. The new Z car was completely revised with both normally aspirated and turbo-charged versions of a SOHC V6 3.0L engine (160hp in non-turbo form and 200hp for turbos). The car’s shape was also a departure from the classic Z car styling cues. Flatter body lines that were common for the era were chosen over the round inset headlight style of the earlier Z’s. Additionally, 2-seat and 2+2 seating configurations of the new 300zx were made available. Again, the digital

dash and other creature comforts emerged to make this “Z31” chassis Z car a bit more comfortable at cruising speeds. Additionally, the Z31 300zx was the first Z to have an optional in-car adjustable suspension with two settings (Sport and Touring).

A special edition was produced, known as the 50th Anniversary Edition which came with special wheels, body element changes including rear fender flares and a silver & black paint scheme. The interior was appointed with special leather Recaro seats. The 1984-89 series also included the first Z to come with an in-car lateral gravity(g)-force gauge and the optional “Body Sonic” stereo feature (a component integrated under the seats) which let occupants physically feel the music while enjoying their drive. The Z31 300zx series also achieved fame by winning in the 1986 Trans Am racing circuit. In 1988, a special “SS” (Shiro Special) was released with stiffer (albeit non-adjustable) suspension, special seats a viscous limited slip differential and special front lower lip spoiler. The Shiro 300zx’s were only offered in one color (white) and had virtually no options available.

4th Generation: the Nissan 300zx “Z32” (1990-96)

The next generation of 300zx is designated as a “Z32” chassis Z car and it was produced in the U.S. from 1990-96 (although abroad it was still offered through 1999 with updates to front and rear lighting, rear wing and front spoiler). The 300zx Z32 was unlike any other Z car with a low and wide stance with powerful dual over-head cam 222bhp normally-aspirated and 300bhp twin-turbocharged powered models available. The new Z incorporated dual intercoolers to help cool the two turbochargers and also included an unique active suspension system with Touring and Sport modes (adjusted on the fly from the cabin of the car). Additionally, the Z32 300zx twin-turbo models were equipped with a 4-wheel steering technology called Super HICAS (High Capacity Actively Controlled Steering). As with the previous 300zx, a 2+2 model was also available – but not in twin-turbo form here in the U.S.

The accolades for the new Z car were numerous and the car became an instant success.

Just a few of the 300zx’s awards, included:

- Car and Driver magazine placed it on its “Top Ten” list for all the years the car was produced.
- Motor Trend magazine awarded it “Import Car of the Year” in 1990.
- Automobile Magazine awarded it, “Design of the Year.”

1990 was also a historic point in time for Nissan with the Z as the sales of the sports car hit the one-million mark!

It should also be noted that the Z32’s lifecycle, Nissan’s marketing slogan “Enjoy the Ride” would become a well-known slogan that is still used by enthusiasts globally in email signatures. Many creative commercials such the 300zx commercials such as a spoof of Mattel’s Barbie & Ken with a remote control 300zx ripping around or the “So, I Was Having this Dream...” commercial reinvigorated the desire to own a Z. Many of these commercials also incorporated an actor portrayal of Mr. K and succeeded to build strong loyalty to the Z product line for Nissan.

In 1993, a convertible 300zx was added to the line-up in non-aspirated format. The 300zx convertible was directly targeted as an alternative to domestic and European convertible sports cars. The Japanese Yen vs.

US Dollar imbalance caused the 300zx's price to inflate (with prices nearing \$50k), sales dropped sharply with only ~80,000 cars sold in 1996. As the 300zx Z32 sales slowed, the car was slated for retirement in the U.S. Nissan released a Commemorative Edition for the last three hundred 1996 300zx's that were produced. Each of the Commemorative Edition 300zx's received a special numbered plate.

In the late 90's, Nissan struggled in the U.S. and ultimately was purchased by the French automaker, Renault. The president of Renault, Carlos Ghosn, took on a position as Nissan's new Chief Operating Officer. Mr. K and other key figures within the Z enthusiast community, such as "Mad" Mike Taylor, plead the case to Mr. Ghosn that the Z car was crucial to Nissan's success in the U.S. The plight apparently worked as in 2001, Mr. Ghosn announced to the media that Nissan would design and bring a new Z car to market in a profitable fashion.

Nissan began work toward the design for the new generation of Z car, which would become the 350z, with a bit of internal competition. Nissan had its Japanese, European and American design studios prepare design concepts and the American design won out and the 2001 release of the "240z Concept" was the initial design shared with the public. Ultimately, Z enthusiasts along with the general public's input at events such as the North American International Auto Show provided input helped to massage the concept into the Nissan 350z. This fifth generation of Z car initially boasted 287hp (with the VQ35DE engine), a wider stance and design cues that hinted back to the early 240z. The 350z would see updates to its engine through its latter production years to raise output to 306hp. The "come-back" Z model for Nissan offered a heavily revised suspension model with only 2-seater options available. The 350z also was released with a multitude of different models through its lifecycle; Base, Enthusiast, Performance, Touring, Grand Touring, Track, convertible Roadster and ultimately a Nismo version. Nissan's motorsports division and manufacturing partner, Autech, produced the stiffer Nismo 350z along with aggressive body styling for the Z driving enthusiast. The Nismo was marketed as, "The Best Handling Z" ever produced by Nissan. Additionally, in 2005, a 35th Anniversary Edition was produced to honor 35 years since the initial 240z. The 350z was a performer for the enthusiast tuners as well as on the track. The 350z also was the first Z car to receive a Brembo brake upgrade package (standard on Grand Touring, Track and Nismo models) and Vehicle Dynamic Control (traction control). The coupe style Z's were replaced for the 2009 model year by the new 370z, however, the 350z Roadster was last sold as a 2009 model.

Nissan hit a home run with the 350z. The enthusiast community's feedback also provided Nissan with input to incorporate into the 6th generation of Z. A richer cabin with upgraded materials and design, stronger engine, styling updates... A flood of input from consumers helped influence the new 370z design. The 350z managed to outperform its predecessor in handling but there wasn't a strong improvement in horsepower (306hp for 2007+ 350z versus 300hp for the 300zx Twin Turbo that debuted as a 1990 model).

The sixth generation on Z car was released in 2009 with 332HP and 272 ft-lbs. of torque from a 3.7L DOHC engine. The new Z was introduced with progressive styling (longer swept hood, smaller quarter windows, more pronounced rear quarter arches) and all the while weighing in lighter than the 350z. Additionally, improvements in interior materials were also introduced in the 370z that helped address some of the creature comforts concern. Drive-train additions included a seven-speed automatic transmission with paddle-shifters and six-speed manual-transmissions. A new feature called "Synchro Rev Match" was made available which simulates the rev-matching previously performed manually through heel-toe shifting on downshifts. As with the 350z, Nissan launched special limited editions for the 370z. In 2009, the Nismo 370z launched with 350bhp, additional chassis bracing, Nismo suspension and exhaust, Akebono brakes (as opposed to

Brembo in the 350z), unique aero kit, special badging and red-stitched interior. The Nismo edition was also continued into 2010 with special series designations “starting over” for the new model year.

To commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Z, Nissan announced a special anniversary edition of the 370z. Based on the 370z Touring model with a manual transmission, the 40th Anniversary Z received a special “40th Quartz” paint color, red-colored brakes with 19-inch Rays Engineering wheels in a smoke finish. Additionally, for the interior of the limited edition Z, the seats were covered in red leather seats and interior panels edged in red stitching.

***Commemorating and Celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Z
– Datsun / Nissan Z Car Enthusiasts gather in Nashville, TN***

This entire heritage was revived with this year’s annual Z Car Convention in Nashville, TN – held July 28 to August 1. The Z Car Club Association (zcca.org) hosted this year’s event in cooperation with Nissan who offered the use their North American headquarters for the car show.

The theme of the 40th Anniversary was present throughout the convention including a variety of Datsun/Nissan dignitaries. Yoshihiko Matsuo, Chief of Design for the Datsun 240z and Randy Rodriguez who designed the exterior for the 370z were in attendance along with several Nissan / Datsun race car drivers such as Steve Millen, Peter Brock and John Morton. All of whom mingled and signed autographs for over 700 Z car enthusiasts who attended. Unlike past ZCCA conventions, the heritage focus also rang through with the involvement from Nissan. Nissan helped to arrange unique vehicles to be pulled out of their private collection at the Lane Auto Museum to attend the Car Show in a special display alongside the ZCCA Gold Cup and Gold Medallion cars.

Winning race cars were also enlisted to make a special appearance. Noteworthy race cars included the Steve Millen IMSA #75 300zx car, the John Morton (Brock Racing Enterprises) #46 240z (a tribute car) and the Paul Newman 1000+HP 280zx (twin-turbocharged 8-cylinder). Tribute cars included a Datsun 240z Safari car along with a Datsun 280zx “Camel” themed car.

The week’s activities were focused to allow enthusiasts to soak in the heritage of the Z car. Z car enthusiasts participated in motorsports activities, a car show on the Nissan North America front lawn and toasted to the 40th Anniversary with Mr. K live from his home in Japan.

In order to understand the unique Z car enthusiasm you must also come to the realization very quickly that the excitement starts with the cars but is driven by the community of die-hard enthusiasts. It is after all, the enthusiasts that distinguish the Z car year after year at gatherings, regional events and Z conventions here in the United States. It is ultimately the Z enthusiasts who will continue to embody the love for the Z car here in the year of the 40th Anniversary and into future years.

Enjoy your Z car...Enjoy the Ride and be sure to “SHIFT_” some excitement into your lives with other enthusiasts!

The author and his family are a true Z enthusiast family with four Z’s in his personal garage (’91 “Zinistr” 300zx TT, ’93 300zx Convertible TT, ’94 300zx Convertible and a Nismo Edition 370z). Even Chris’ parents have a Z car – a 1987 300zx Turbo that started as a Christmas present four years ago and is now a family project.