

Dirito Brothers' Dealerships Step up to Support Nissan 350Z T2 Race Program

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If you've been following this column, you'll remember a very flattering article last month about the Mitsubishi EVO VIII MR, with an evaluation of its potential for racing action with the SCCA. Well, we've taken a step further into this racing discussion, and – this time – we got hooked. Last February, we began a discussion with Don Dirito of Dirito Brothers Nissan, VW, and Saab in Walnut Creek and Concord about the possibility of racing a Track model 350Z with support from their dealership. While we have a very high degree of respect for the EVO, when it comes to racing, there is just something about a traditional, normally aspirated, rear wheel drive two-seater sports car. And this appeal grew as we did more homework and discovered that the 350Z had shown well in the SCCA national racing program. Don Dirito was not familiar with SCCA racing. While no one in the dealership was shocked that the 350Z was “race-able,” no staff member really knew how and where to race the car. But in doing my homework for our discussions, I centered on the Touring 2 class of the SCCA amateur road racing series and was pleasantly surprised by a budget that, if shared, could be palatable and considered a reasonable investment in dealership promotion – especially considering the cost of metropolitan market advertising. An additional attraction to this partnership was the fact that the 350Z race car would serve double duty – racing in the San Francisco Region, and serving as the pace car and lead and follow instructional car for Hooked On Driving Track driving programs. This sponsorship took several months to bring to fruition. Several factors were to be reviewed: First, what was the budget for SCCA safety requirements such as roll bar, driver's seat and steering wheel, window net, fire system, transponder, tow hooks? This all adds up if one really does an honest total. Then

a full review of the T2 spec book revealed the allowed mechanical modifications. What was the budget, not only for the parts, but the labor to install all these toys? A huge key to the program clicking was Aaron Larkin, the service advisor at Dirito Nissan Walnut Creek, with race team management experience, plus four experienced technicians all volunteering to pitch in with their time and expertise after hours to install the go-fast goodies and help maintain the car. This was a win/win, as the dealership team became, and remains today very motivated and proud of the car, and willing to work late to help out. With the cost factor of a dealer buying parts at wholesale, the Dirito Brothers Collision Center available for emergencies, and an investment by myself as well, we finalized a sharing of expenses going forward and committed to building and campaigning the car. Today, the car is sitting on the showroom floor in the Walnut Creek dealership, generating excitement for the sales force, pride on the part of the shop, sales of high performance parts by the parts department, and good will to the enthusiast community – netting sales down the line. As a good partner gesture, I decided it was time to trade our overworked Yukon for a Titan 4 door pickup as the tow vehicle. The Titan is simply awesome and, paired with the Z on an open trailer, makes quite a Nissan statement heading down the road.



While promoting T2 may at some point cost me by creating more competition, I must admit my enthusiasm for the T2 class, see it as undersubscribed, and am anxious to see more entrants (just don't be TOO fast!!). Here's a brief run down of the before and after with the Z track model as it transitioned into a full on T2 race car. As of this date, there are several things still to be done, but the car was fast out of the box, so this driver has no complaints about the way the car runs today....its just fun to think that there are a few more legal things that can be done to tweak a couple more tenths out of the #77.

The 350Z, (ours is a 2003 trade in), as it comes from the factory is a great sports car, with good handling, a very competent, 287 hp V6 engine that has good if not great pull, and

Brembo brake calipers as the primary “track” upgrade. Actually, one advantage to this track model is that they trade in heavy luxury items like leather power seats for performance enhancements like the Brembo’s. But, as any stock sports car, street driving compromises immediately creep in when you take the Z to the track. Certainly, for a beginner, these would not be apparent. But as one picks up the pace on the track, the first limitation that surfaces is the hard compound of the Michelin Sports. These are good for sporty street driving, but howl like a banshee when pushed around the off-camber turn three at Thunderhill. And without shaving them (just wouldn’t be worth it), the tread will start to chunk fairly quickly. From a handling perspective, we give the Z an A- from the factory – the car has some “plow” or understeer, but with a soft touch entering a turn, the Z will come around for a skilled driver, even in its stock configuration. Once planted and headed across the apex, the V6 virtually barks as it revs to the upper 6000 range, with a solid pull that you can feel in your backside. Oh...and one other thing – the Brembo calipers are gorgeous, but the pad compound selected for the street use simply start to go away in heavy race-like driving. So....enter the T2 equipment and Dr. Jekyll becomes Mr. Hyde.



While there are competitors who attack the build of a car like this with reckless abandon and an unlimited budget, we had to be judicious and select high priority modifications that would maximize the potential of the car. Having said that, we could have gone with a bolt in roll cage, but chose the option of a custom welded T2 cage. Tony from TC DesignFab in Milpitas was highly recommended and he worked us into the mid-season madness and we could not be more pleased. The cage is a work of art, with a minimum of intrusion on driver mobility, and we’re certain that this cage has legally stiffened the Z substantially – a very good thing. In went a Sparco EVO L seat and a Momo steering wheel. The techs at Dirito had to work their magic here, as the traction control and ABS share some components, and disabling the air bags took some expertise – suffice it to say that the correct stuff got turned off so it didn’t slow us down and nothing is about to blow

up. Wheels and tires were next. Without getting too detailed, we were pleased to discover that the same 8.5 by 17, or 8.5 X 18's could be used on all four corners. I had heard in the past that E46 M3 tuners made that car turn much better by putting the same size tires and wheels (the larger ones from the rear) on all four corners – so that's where we headed with the Z. After some research we decided that forged wheels would be both light and durable so BBS 8.5 X 18's were selected. Hearing what other competitors were running, we selected the Hoosier DOT legal race tire, although we've since heard that both Goodyear and Kumho make a competitive tire for this car as well. Next – the brake fluid was flushed and replaced with ATE Blue racing fluid. Stainless brake lines were installed. And – again from competitors' referrals, we went with Hawk brake pads. Moving down the list of allowed mods in T2, we went with the Nismo exhaust (a custom exhaust behind the cat is an option here, but we just didn't want ANY issues with sound), Nismo spec springs and sway bar kit, and Koni adjustable shocks. Put in a K&N air filter element, and you have the Dirito Brothers 350Z T2. Oh, and the graphics to make the car look as fast as it is.

OK, this is where some of you will accuse me of losing my senses. I should say everything to discourage you from wanting to do this. But I'll let you in on a secret – the 350Z in T2 trim hauls!! The steering is quick, with NO understeer, the power is linear and we could definitely feel the 16 horses that came with the exhaust upgrade, the Hoosiers hang on for dear life, but can be tossed at the same time, and the gearbox handles the rigor of a race run without any issues whatsoever – not one missed shift yet. The 350Z T2 is exactly what I'd hoped it would be – a delight to drive, and to say the least, competitive. Arriving late for a Regional/National at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, we immediately qualified right with the fast EVO and M3 that have an excellent reputation on the West Coast.

The SCCA should get a lot of credit here. When I heard about the creation of the Touring classes a few years ago, the natural fear of cost escalation set in. But what one can do to run the Z complying with the touring rules simply finishes the car, and makes it much more safe. I encourage you to have a chat with your local (fill in the blank) dealer about T1, T2, T3 or Showroom Stock racing. If thought out as a true business partnership and ongoing promotion, a dealership sponsor package can make good business sense. Finally – I'd like to thank Don & Ron Dirito, Rick Weibel, Aaron Larkin, Terry, Chris, Dave, Jon and Rich at the Dirito Brothers Nissan dealership in Walnut Creek for their contribution to the program. And by the way – HANDS OFF!! They have no intention of sponsoring a second car!! So - let's go racing Sunday – then sell some cars (and trucks) on Monday!!