

01 Grand Prix Professional Drift

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Story and Photos  
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God rested on the seventh day. He obviously had plenty of sleep preparing for His next project. Enter the messiah of Motorsports and the fastest-growing spectacle in auto racing, drifting. He saw it was good and so do we. Pardon me for a moment while I dust tire particles from my t-shirt. Ok where were we? Oh yeah. And if you are still unfamiliar with drifting by now it's time to tune out "Jesse's Garage" and get with the program.





came down from the mountains and urban racers embraced their art of controlled chaos. What was once just a pastime, competitors organized and took their skills to the track. Drifting became far more competitive and sophisticated, spawning into regional drift competitions. In 2001, *Option Magazine* founder Daijiro Inada and top drifter Keiichi Tsuchiya launched the D1 Grand Prix Professional Drift Series and brought the Driver Search to the USA, and several U.S. drivers were recognized for their skill and were pulled into the fold.



**A**LTHOUGH NO ONE CAN PINPOINT the actual birth-date of drifting, it evolved from a form of illegal street racing held on winding Japanese mountain roads and called touge (pronounced “toe-gay”). Hard-core fans of touge, known as rolling zoku (“zo-koo”) began adopting techniques used by rally drivers to shave time off their banzai runs through controlled power-slides and off-angle sliding. Still considered illegal street racing however, word spread as they

On a 75-degree sunny and breezy California Saturday, the reigning elite 26 drifting teams worldwide converged on Irwindale Raceway and competed for the first time in round one of the D1 Grand Prix Professional Drift Series. Unlike the wildly-popular and sold-out Falken Tire Drift Showoff held Oct. 12, 2003, this event counted for coveted points, and the drivers made that fact known to all. With the box office sold out, parking lots filled to capacity, and the raceway filled with 10,000-plus fans by late morning, something truly unique was in the making. After early morning practice sessions the pros took to the oval and infield track with a vengeance for Round 1 of overall elimination. The action was non-stop as AE86s, Silvias, Skylines, RX-7s, 350Zs, Supras and even a 2004 Pontiac GTO competed for





slots in the Best 16.

The Pit Party fired up after the first round was completed, and there was no doubt it lives up to its name. Indeed, the number of vendors is far too large to list, but it's safe to say that everyone in the import tuner industry had a presence. Someone on the RX7club forum had the best advice anyone could want, and that is to bring a backpack, because you will go home loaded with posters, shirts, stickers, brochures, etc. I made three trips to the car just to off-load my booty and go back for more.

During the scheduled one-hour break-in activities the pits were opened to all spectators to meet and greet the competing teams and drivers, who were enthusiastically signing t-shirts, posters and chatting with anyone who wanted to know anything and everything about drifting. Umbrella girls were thankfully in abundance, from the Falken ladies to the D1GP girls from Japan. Stepping away from the party in the vendor and car show alley, I sought out several opportunities to speak with the teams. I managed to corner Ken Nomura from Team Blitz at a quiet moment. Known as "Monkey Man" for his trackside antics both in and out of his Skyline, he was elated at the enthusiasm in the stands and infield. "Coming to Irwindale for Round 1, I didn't know what to expect because I feed off the excitement of the crowd," said Namura. "I am extremely happy and surprised at the support the fans here



are giving us, and I will give my all today to take home the first round from America." Judging by the number of monkey-man autographed shirts being worn, he has quite the fan base. The U.S. drivers, mainly consisting of California residents, impressed the Japanese judges with their own drift styles, but they were still unable to compete with the experienced Far East drivers.





## Rotary car/pics/drivers

Representing the rotary was the wildly popular Youichi Imamura in his A'Pex-sponsored FD. Imamura-San is the reigning ace of tandem drifting, winning five of the seven D1GP rounds in 2003, and no one left disappointed. Unfortunately he was eliminated in the early afternoon Best 16 round. The MotoRex-sponsored C-West-kitted night-zone blue FD piloted by Akinori Utsumi had an impressive outing until side-lined during Friday practice in an encounter with the wall. Team Orange Masatoshi "Rocket Man" Asamoto in his PanPspeed FD also was eliminated in the early rounds.



## Winner

The day may not have belonged to the rotary this time around. Walking away with the inaugural D1GP season win and the first outside of Japan was Yasuyuki Kazama in the Kei Office S-15 to the roar of the sellout crowd. Following the awards ceremony all drivers showcased drifting bedlam when they took to the track in a smoky final tribute to American hospitality.

## Summary

When the smoke cleared, the aluminum grandstands emptied and the last light flickered out, there was little doubt left in anyone's mind that drifting is muscling its way into the mainstream and earning a berth in the motorsports community. The only easily-answered question that remains is, will there be more events? With sponsors being added at an alarming rate, drifting is going nowhere in a hurry, only sideways. **RX**

