

Datsun's sleek 240Z 'halo car' still sizzles

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A halo car is one that a manufacturer produces to excite enthusiasts and the public, hoping that some of the excitement generated will be reflected on the rest of the brand's products. The Datsun 240Z of 1970-73 might be the most successful halo car of all time.

Nobody under the age of 40 or so remembers it now, but there was time when Japanese cars were junk.

For most of the '60s, Japanese-built cars were fragile, unreliable rustbuckets.

By the end of the decade, however, the American and European carmakers were about to discover that the Japanese were ready to go toe-to-toe with them — and win.

At the time Nissan Motor Corporation marketed its vehicles under the brand name Datsun.

Their American operations were headed up by a sports car enthusiast who lobbied for years for the company to produce a serious sporting machine.

For the 1970 model year, the company introduced the 240Z.

Following the basic layout of the Austin-Healey 3000 and the Jaguar XKE — both two-seater front-engined coupes with in-line six cylinder engines — the 240Z was pretty, fast and inexpensive.

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Enthusiasts loved it. Drivers in 240Zs won four consecutive SCCA National titles. Datsun sales went up and up.

In 1981, Bob Alexander was ready to make a change from the little sedan that was his first car.

“I wanted a sports car,” he recalls. “I evaluated the 240Z and the Triumph TR6. I didn't have a lot of money. I couldn't afford to have the car in the mechanic's bay all the time.”

For reliability, he says, “the 240Z trounced the TR6.”

By chance, when Alexander asked his mechanic if he knew of any good Z-cars for sale, he got a tip that there was a car just up from California that was being prepared for its first Canadian winter.

Fortunately for the 1972 240Z in question, it was sold to Alexander before it had to go through such an ordeal.

Like any Japanese car of its era, the 240Z had some rust issues. Fortunately, parts were still available from the manufacturer and Alexander was able to replace the front frame rails and some body panels.

Eventually, he says, the 2.4-litre engine got a little tired.

What he discovered was that he could buy a 2.8-litre engine from Japan for less than the cost of rebuilding the 2.4 and get more power in the bargain.

There was a time when there were lots of Zs on the road, but those days are long gone.

Alexander says that his car gets lots of attention now.

"I get people on Crowchild giving me the thumbs-up," he says.

"I'll be at a traffic light and roll down the window and they'll tell me their stories about a Z.

"The Z, to me, is in-your-face sports car driving," he says.

"You know when you hit a bump. You know when you go around a corner. The clutch is heavy.

"It's raw, basic driving. Modern sports cars have almost isolated you, the driver, from the driving experience — unless you're doing 150 miles per hour."

"It's one of the few cars that you get out of and pat it on the roof and say, 'thanks,' " he continues.

"That's the kind of driving experience I get out of it today. It's the kind of car that gets under your skin. That's why I still have it after all of these years.

"I'm married. I have a family.

"It's not a practical car for a family, but there's no way I'm ever getting rid of it."