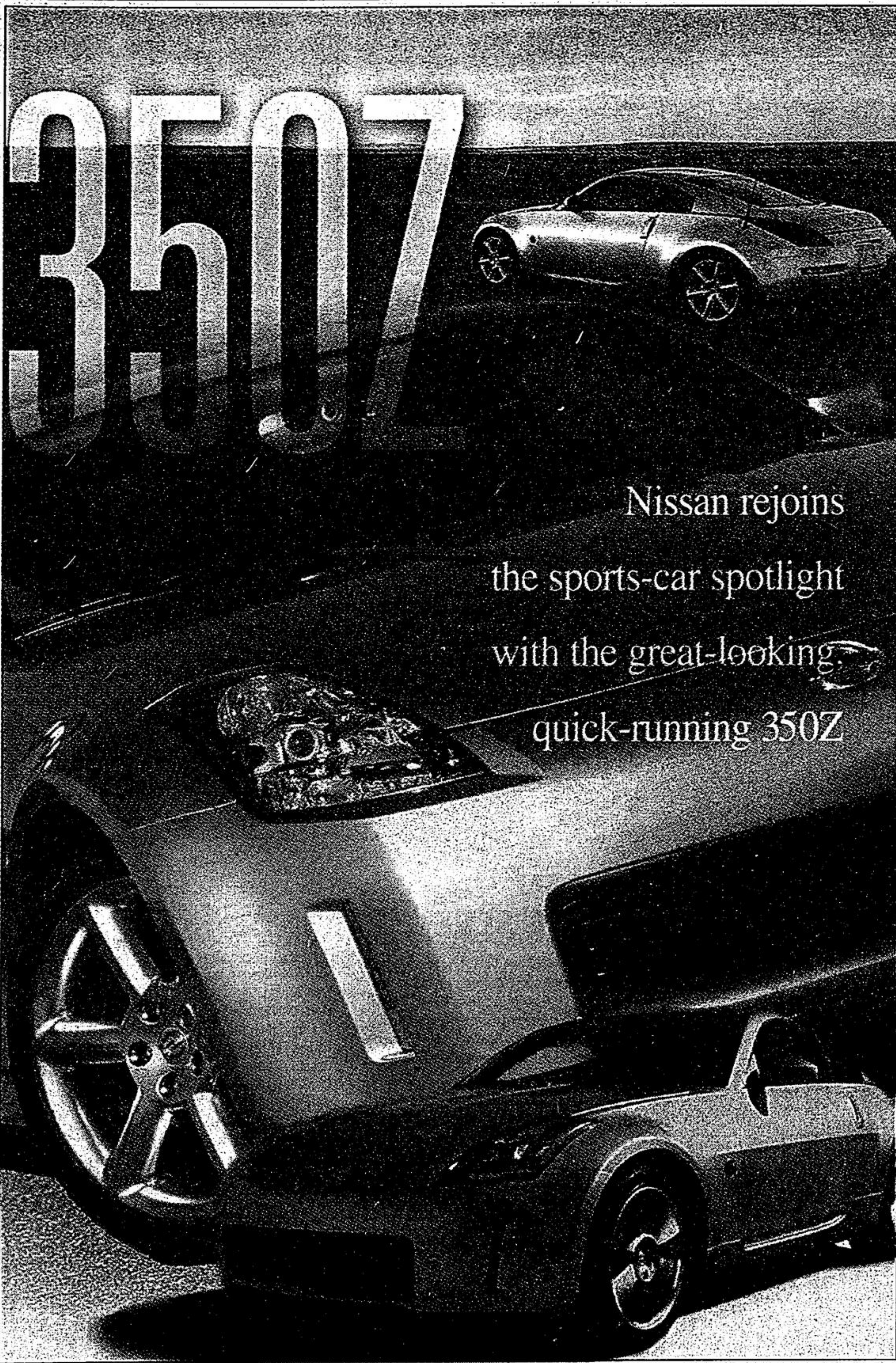


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Nissan rejoins  
 the sports-car spotlight  
 with the great-looking,  
 quick-running 350Z

By **MALCOLM GUNN**  
 WHEELBASE COMMUNICATIONS

In 1969, Datsun's 240Z knocked the socks off the automotive world.

Now, a new company name and 33-years later (and after a seven-year gap since the 300ZX, the last Z-series car was killed off), Nissan is poised to strike again with its equally bedazzling 350Z.

The new 'Z' is, in many ways, similar in spirit to the original. Both are rear-wheel-drive two-seater sport coupes of the long-hood/short-tail variety and both use a rear hatch to gain access to the payload compartment. Also, as in days of old, both the 240Z and 350Z employ six-cylinder engines.

From a design perspective, the 240 and the newcomer Z-car have borrowed liberally and unabashedly from existing designs. Just as the 240Z contained elements of Ferrari and Maserati in its sheetmetal, traces of Porsche 911 and Audi TT can be spotted when ogling the more teutonic-looking 350Z. The result of this most recent effort is nothing short of sculpture on wheels. The 350Z has a broad-shouldered, hunched-down racer appearance, accentuated by its bulging flanks straining to contain wheels that are positioned as far outward as possible. The jewel-like headlight housings are seamlessly blended into each fender and the grille gives the car that hungry shark look. Just sitting still, this machine looks like it means business.

Inside the 350Z, all of its key features — seats, instrument panel, foot pedals and assorted knobs and switches — look thoroughly modern without the slightest hint of retro design. There's plenty of industrial-strength aluminum trim, a welcome alternative to wood — fake or otherwise — that for years served as the dress-up material of choice on most vehicles.

One unique feature concerning the 350Z's interior is its massive shock-tower brace that extends behind the seats like a U-shaped rib, connecting both flanks of the rear suspension.

Filling the space between the 350Z's front fenders is the most

potent version (to date, anyway) of the corporate 3.5-litre DOHC V6. Although final numbers have yet to be revealed, Nissan claims the 350Z will produce 'in excess' of 280 horsepower, at least 25 more than the advertised rating of the similar 3.5 found in the Nissan Maxima or Infiniti I35 (and 40 more than the 3.5-equipped Altima). That should be good enough to reach 100 km-h in six-seconds flat, or slightly less, a feat that will easily keep most of its competitors at bay.

Connected to this engine is a choice of two transmissions: a close-ratio six-speed manual; or optional five-speed automatic that includes a manual-shift mode for drivers who prefer to take the gear-selection process into their own hands.

To maximize content selection, the attractively priced 350Z (less than \$45,000 to start) is available in three purposeful trim levels: Performance; Touring; and Track Pack.

In Performance form, you get the six-speed manual transmission, air conditioning, power windows and door locks, tilt steering, cruise control, six-way manually adjusted driver's seat, 18-inch alloy wheels, Xenon headlights, tire-pressure monitoring system and a seven-speaker Bose audio system with in-dash CD changer.

The Touring version (which stickers for the same money as the Performance), includes the automatic transmission along with the rest of the Performance model's goodies.

The top-of-the-line Track Pack model adds stability and traction control, limited-slip differential, 18-inch lightweight forged alloy wheels (different from the Performance model), big Brembo high-performance disc brakes plus front and rear spoilers. Of course, it comes with the six-speed manual.

The 350Z, which returns Nissan to its performance roots, is a welcome addition to the company's growing list of sedans, trucks and SUVs. For sports-car fanatics eager to get in on some Z-car action, expect long lineups of customers frantic for one of these beauties when they finally begin arriving this August.

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