

Perhaps Kastner's most daunting challenge has been that before he could combat the enemy without, he first had to grapple with the enemy within. The attitude of Nissan's own management was the most urgent issue which required addressing when he arrived:

"The biggest problem was that of winning the executives over to understanding that we had a tool here that they'd never used, that could be of great value," he admits. "At the same time as I arrived - and coincidence comes into play here - they had a survey done to see what was the image of Nissan in the US; it *had* no image.

"This is legitimate. People were asked but didn't know if Nissan was a new kind of record player, or a car, or a watch! So this kind of played into our hands because that's the business we're in in motorsport - the Image Business."

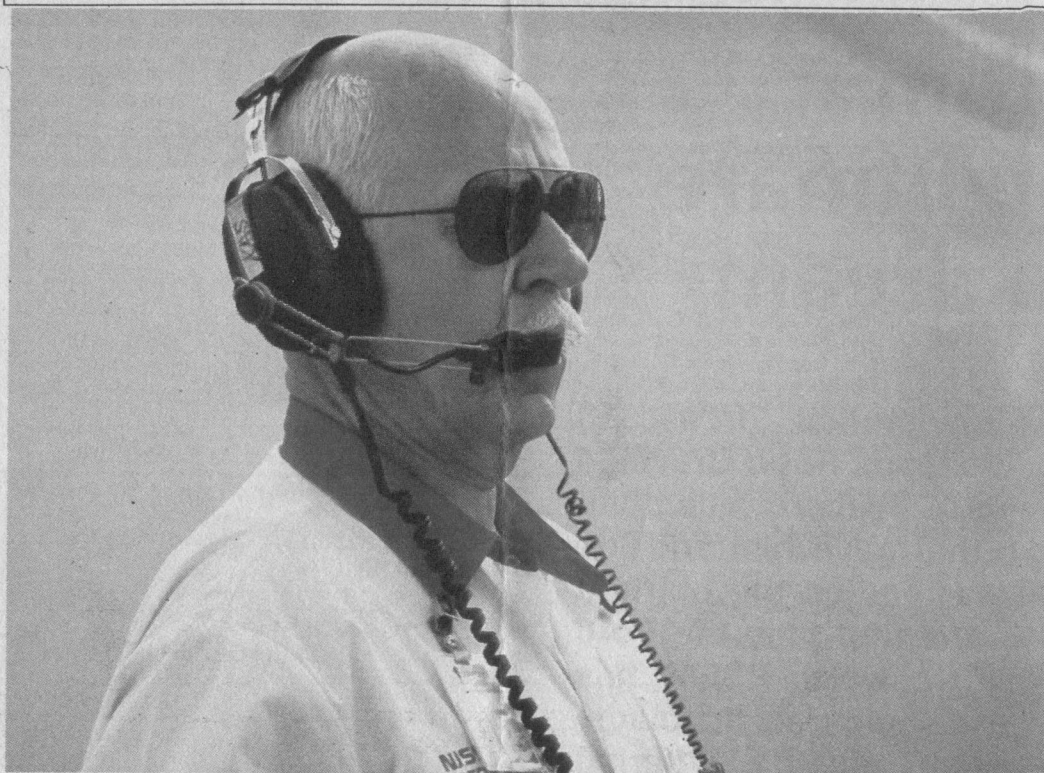
The change of values accompanied a wholesale change of management, and Kastner's efforts to wake the slumbering giant were, by his own admission, aided enormously by Thomas Mignanelli, executive vice president of operations within Nissan Motor Corp.

"He's one helluva guy," whistles Kastner. "He had an appreciation for the fact that what we could do in editorial space, the advertising department can't even remotely begin to touch because the front cover is *not* for sale, whether it be the New York Times, LA Times or whatever. We've got more than our share of coverage. At the same time, he's a young spirited guy and he said 'We can get some enthusiasm into this company. Let's go to work.'"

Go to work they did. The cold war between Senna and Prost may still dominate the headlines, but the politics of motorsport are hardly the latest in fashion to emerge from Paris. The turbulence that characterises some large corporations - traditionally worse in Japanese-based ones - would make Watergate look like a Boy Scouts' party. But the compatible styles of Kastner and Mignanelli have, it seems, cut a swathe through such problems within Nissan's US division.

"I don't bullshit; I don't lie," cites Kas matter-of-factly. "So we saved a lot of time right away, because we saw eye to eye. He swears; I swear. So we had a meeting and the steam blew but we understood where the other guy stood right off the

INTERVIEW: KAS KASTNER - NPTI



Behind the mask

IMAGINE a hybrid combining the best of Dick Bennetts, king of Formula Three statistics, and Eddie Jordan - undisputed heavyweight blarney champion of the world - and you have RW (Kas) Kastner, the motivating force behind Nissan Performance Technology Inc.

Make no mistake, it's a scary combination: someone who doesn't tolerate fools gladly, who loves a verbal scrap, and who can back his argument with a statistical knowledge that would have put Einstein to shame. But, like both Bennetts and Jordan - and Einstein for that matter - Kastner has a track record that also does its fair share of the talking. Since his arrival in February 1986 as national motorsports manager for its US corporation, Nissan has won three consecutive Drivers titles - the

something like that. He allows you to talk and make a point. All he wants is to have you do, as far as you can, what you say you're gonna do. That's all I ask. If you come here to do something, do it. I'm really not that interested in how, as much as that you do what you say you're going to do. Let's do it!"

One of the things they did was attempt to lift the veil of secrecy that surrounded the fledgling motorsport programme. That's not to say that rivals were exactly handing out technical secrets at the bottom of each cereal packet. Jaguar in particular - although now very much part of the US scene - was initially given a frosty reception for continuing a policy of isolation that had its roots in Europe.

"Everything was always done on a secretive basis," he admits of Nissan's old regime. "Security always bothers me - I don't like to see things out and lying around - but I'm not sort of like Tony Dowe.

"I'm not blaming Tony," he adds hastily of TWR's American team manager, "but whoever decided the attitude that Jaguar would adopt when they came over here. That's stupid. That's absolutely rank amateur programming. You know, like keeping a cover over the car. Get outta here with that. If I wanna see it, I'll have somebody break into your building! If that doesn't work, we'll burn the building! You understand I talk in jest, but if you're gonna go after something, at least have some enthusiasm for it."

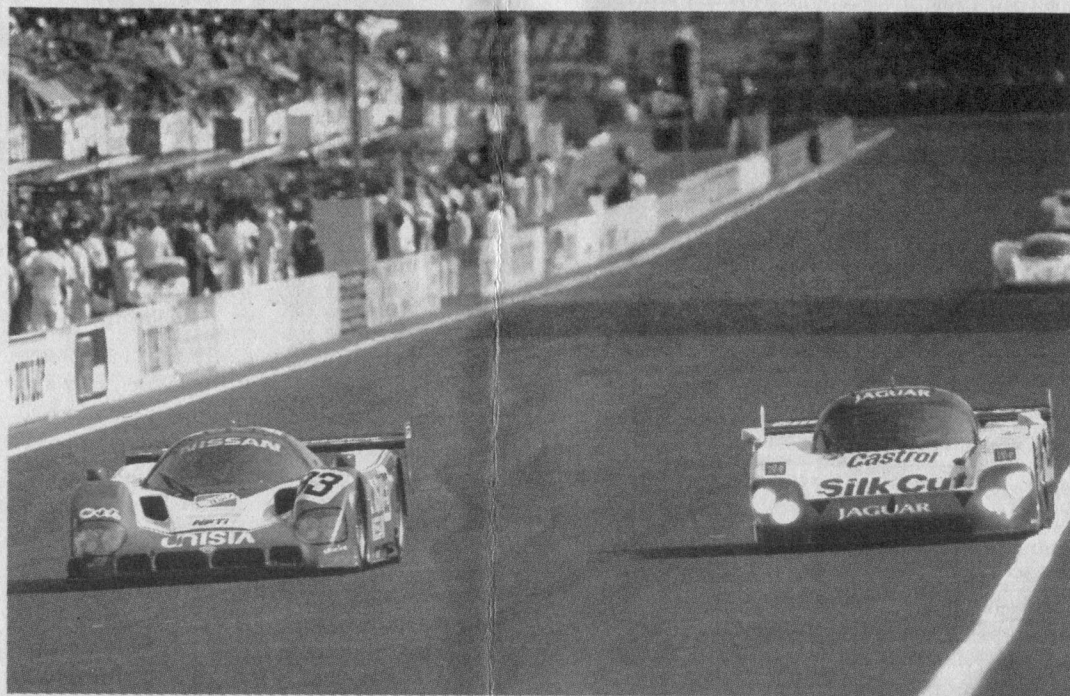
Enthusiasm is exactly what he has succeeded in injecting into Nissan's racing department. And with it, a much greater degree of openness.

"We don't have anything to hide. I think we've always been very open with our cars. At Kansas, Topeka, this year, there were some of the top Japanese Toyota engineers there. We were the guys to beat, we were on the front of the grid and all that. They couldn't believe it - we gave them all a tour of the car. They were absolutely dumbfounded by this. And when the race was over (Dan Gurney's Toyota operation won) the first people over to congratulate them were Nissan guys. Not ready for that either... Some guys don't pick up cans and boxes if they're there in front of them; they'll just kick them out of the way to look for the

secret behind them.

Then again, IMSA is hardly world class competition is it? European sportscar teams rested safe in that knowledge until June, at which point NPTI arrived for its first crack at the Le Mans 24 Hours and promptly led for much of the night. The contrasting fortune of the American team and its European counterpart is reflected in the fact that when Nissan returns to the World Championship arena in '92, it will be with an NPTI-designed chassis.

In the meantime the Europeans might still snipe at IMSA's standards, and Americans mumble about "Nissan Luck", but the juggernaut continues to roll. Kastner is the man behind the corporate mask, and he's pulling no punches...



I HAVE A DREAM: Kastner (top) all wired for sound. Above, the NPTI Nissan traded positions with the eventual winner throughout the the evening and night at Le Mans. The dream was finally ended by a fuel leak.

secret behind them.

"It is still a game; I question whether it is really a sport. Get yourself a bowling ball if you want to be a sport," he chides, mimicking what the Americans perceive to be the great British tradition of sports-

manship.

So is it, perhaps, a blood sport? "It's a very tough game," he muses. "It's more like an art of war, without people dying. But it is an art of war, because all of the same things apply to it. Subter-

fuge, whatever you can do... I don't claim sides you know," he trails off with an impish grin.

If, on the surface, NPTI makes a great show of magnanimity, then Kastner is also well aware that it is easy to be gracious when you're winning.

"You can be charming if you're a winner. People can say 'How did you do?'. 'We won,' then you can say 'What happened to you?' and listen quite happily to their long story. It's the same in sailboat racing. You can be the most charming man in the yacht club by pulling terrible tactics on your best friend. He'll say 'Boy, you really smoked me off on the line,' or whatever. 'Yes, but you put up a great rebound,' you can reply. You pull these rotten tricks but they love you for it, they think you're a princely fellow."

So too, he is aware that with the corporate image of Nissan USA at stake, you can afford to pull rotten tricks in sailboat racing, but not on the racetrack.

"When you have the management of a big corporation involved, there's responsibility that most people in small companies aren't ever aware of. You have the Nissan name and you're in the image business, so you have to be careful about a lot of things that you wouldn't normally bat an eye at; like jumping over the fence and saying 'Oh yeah, it's pretty nice over here.' That's okay if you're a team running out of the back of a Shell gas station. But when you're representing a large corporation, you have to be more than honest all the time. It makes things a little difficult, but not impossible by any means. It bothers me a lot because I can't find an edge..."

Nevertheless, it is clear from the record books that NPTI *does* have the edge somewhere. 27 victories from the last 41 IMSA races testifies that much. Many of those wins have been attributed to a phenomenon that has been christened 'Nissan Luck', though the trend owes more to the cars' reliability than it does to the fickle nature of fortune.

Certainly Mark Raffauf, IMSA's President and the man ultimately responsible for ensuring that the weight handicapping system works, makes it clear where he feels the advantage lies: "Nissan's had very few DNFs in three years, which says something. I don't care what kind of rules you've

got, if the thing runs the whole race you're 80 per cent there. Their pit work is incredible - they very rarely make mistakes. That's something that technology can't really address... You can't legislate against that."

Kastner also emphasises that there is no one magic ingredient.

"There really is nothing like 'Hey, if we do that, we too can be successful,'" he says in a parody of an advertising slogan. "That's like 'To make a successful race car, all you need is a dark secret.' There really isn't a secret like that. I race sailboats the same way. There's no one secret. You have to take all the parameters - every little thing - and make it exist itself; get an edge on every little bit of it. If there's something you don't understand, find someone who does and make him realise that you have confidence in what he's doing."

Operated initially under the guise of Don Devendorf's Electramotive concern, the ZX-Turbo was very much the scourge of the IMSA field. Its successor, dubbed the NPT90, has further cluttered the trophy cabinet. But Kastner subscribes to the theory of evolution rather than revolution:

"We haven't had this exercise but I think that some of the teams - not necessarily in IMSA, but maybe in the world championship and maybe in Formula One - have too much information, too many choices to make. If you need three tenths of a second, you can tune the car. But if you need a second and a half, you'd better tune the driver a little at the same time. Take him out to a hot dog stand and talk to him a little bit!"

The American rules place a much higher premium on strategy than does the engineering exercise that has traditionally been the hallmark of Group C in Europe. In this area too, Nissan's motorsports manager made his presence felt:

"The first thing I did with the race car was insist we run fast and run up front. I didn't want any cruising around just to say we could finish. I would rather go fast and break. Then we'd fix the problem and go faster the next time. We kept doing that until one day we were going fast and finishing too. That's when I knew we had accomplished something."

He goes on to acknowledge: "The basic elements for a competitive programme have always seemed to be around. What we needed most were key organisational elements and, of course, the financial backing from upper management." In this area, he has worked tirelessly:

"Okay, you say the company was always at the back of the racing programme. But the company wasn't even aware that we *had* a programme! The company had a bad image and a bad programme, and didn't much care about either of them... I think the attitude has changed a lot. I was quite successful in searching around in the company and finding other departments that we could help, be it sales, programmes, whatever. The technique was 'Let us come and help you. We in the motorsport department will do this programme for you. By the same token, why don't you use the racing as part of your promotion programme?'

"They had some old cars that Paul Newman had driven, and that was about the only thing they had for promotion. Now we have a T car GTP, GTU, GTO and a Group C car for display, plus we have the games, toys, trinkets and all that kind of thing that we can use to expose the cars we have on the production line. We're doing something for the sales of automobiles."

"So you get the guy interested in what you're doing, plus it opens up another budget. You think, 'Well, now we can go to this race.' For example, we had never had a place to race in Texas and there was a decision that we wanted to go to that area. San Antonio came up. It was a surprise race for IMSA, it was not in our schedule, so suddenly 'We're not going!'. I said 'What do you mean we're not going? We have to race there.'"

"Uh huh. Then we had to talk about money. So as it was, we went to the sales people, we got together with the promotion people and the marketing people and said that it was important for our image there, so let's get the dealers at the back of us as well and we'll all put some money in. Racing goes to Texas. We did a helluva promotion and took the image of Nissan in San Antonio from close to zero to way up the scale."

"So that's kinda how it started and evolved and I used to roam the corridors looking for someone I could talk to about 'Can we help you do your job?' Not just say 'Alright, you can transfer your money

to me, but "You've got this marketing plan, but what if we held a drivers school? We've got some drivers, we've got racetracks, maybe you could be part of it?"

"The whole company's now on the back of the racing and they're using it. That's the big thing - they use it. Even in the corporate report from head office in Japan there are pictures of our GTP car and they mention that we won the manufacturers championship. It was a big deal that a Japanese company had done it."

Huge progress has been made not just in terms of results, but in the attitude required to get those results. Along the way Devendorf - who has won championships at every level of IMSA as a driver or a team manager - saw his Electramotive outfit taken under the NPTI umbrella.

The link between Dan Gurney's All American Racers and Toyota has moved in a similar direction and, insists Kastner, the tie-up with the parent company was an obvious one. He and Devendorf have been friends for years in an association that

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BLUE SKIES: Nissan has dominated IMSA both with the ZX-T and the NPT90 (above). Earl, Daly and Brabham (bottom), like the company itself, have enjoyed good exposure.

dates back to the time when, as head of Triumph's sportscar efforts in the '60s, Kas had Don as one of his drivers:

"It was a logical step because we wanted to do more things. They (Electramotive) were always underfinanced - they had a closed-in contract with me. It was a business deal with me. I'm working for the company to do my best; at the same time I didn't want to drive such a good bargain with Don that he can't get the job done, which is what had happened before because the company definitely had no commitment to it.

"He explained what had to be done and as we went on with the contract I found some more money to do it and made the explanations when it got to budget time. I went into a room and sat with all the other managers and fought for the money

foundations had actually been laid a long time before:

"Don, I and Trevor (Harris) went over to watch in '89. It had been mentioned that we might have some involvement because we'd just won a championship and done very well with the cars. A lot of Japanese engineers and executives had seen what we'd done and how we'd done it, and it was totally different. I'm not knocking anybody else, but our attitude is totally different. I've seen our car 15th at Sebring after an hour and a half with a broken radiator. The guys have had boiling water running on their hands but they've changed the radiator and we've gone back and won the race.

"The team has brought a tremendous enthusiasm to it and we won't be beaten. You know, you might win the race, but you're not going to beat us.

drivers who were capable of driving the cars very fast; nobody had any appreciation of how good the cars were at all. Also we were able to work as a team, and understood what the point was. The point was not to get another job, not to show up for another team but the idea was to win the race and we were going to do it as a team."

Although a fuel leak finally led to the lead car's retirement on the Sunday morning, the team had been in contention throughout and looked quite capable of fulfilling its ambition. It will be back next season and, as Kastner muses: "If the whole thing fades into the sunset, nobody's really wounded. The time and money spent will be nothing compared to the results we're trying to get. We still have the cars and whether they go to a museum or we sell them to a private collector."

and said 'NO, I can't give up and here's why'. That's what you have to do. Somebody has to do it and I kind of enjoy that anyway. It's a game of wits, like any other game, and you have to pay attention. You have to listen well and be very careful. 'How did you say that again?'"

As a result of its absorption, Devendorf's project can now benefit from Nissan's state-of-the-art 55,000 square foot technical facility at Vista, some 40 miles north of San Diego. Included in the layout are a wind tunnel, electrical and engineering labs, composite, fabrication and engine shops. All the different race projects have now been brought in-house, and benefited accordingly. As Kastner reflects with pride: "It sure is a long way from being in the back of a Shell gas station with a leaky fire somewhere out the back of nowhere..."

As the competition department has flourished, so has its programme. The most impressive foray of all had to be the Le Mans project, which was undertaken with a brace of R90CK Group C cars which NPTI prepared especially for the event. The

it's the enthusiasm that you've got to get from more than one person, and it kinda prevails in the team right now.

"Ours was a two-year programme. We went over and watched and said: 'Oh boy what a dumb thing; I'd never do that.' It's like being the youngest kid in the family, watching your older brother and thinking 'I'm never going to do *that*'. So the three of us sat up there and watched for the entire 24 hours. I hadn't been there since '64 with Triumph, you know. It was better in '64 as a matter of fact!"

The preparation was single-minded and NPTI notably got its own way when it came to drivers, crew and choice of tyres. At times you sensed an element of friction between the Europeans and their American counterparts. It was a result partly of the amount of honour at stake, partly, no doubt, because of the latter team's approach:

"We were always in Attack Mode," says Kas candidly. "We got off the airplane and everyone was friendly, but we were in attack mode without being stuffy about it. We fully intended to win the race, and saw no reason why we shouldn't. We had

they're never seen again, the investment was made for last year."

In the last few weeks it is another investment, the purchase of an ex-Andretti Lola T90/00, which has fanned the fire of speculation. Despite the fact that number one driver Geoff Brabham has ambitions to return to Indy, the car has ostensibly been bought as a lightweight mobile testbed for the 3.5 litre V12 engine. "The Lola's perfect for testing the driveline and engine. That it gives us experience of another formula is a secondary benefit," stresses Kastner. But while you sense that he holds an abiding mistrust in the stability of CART's rules, the test data could conceivably form a useful platform for the team to launch itself into IndyCar when the current rules package expires, probably at the end of '92.

In the meantime, the destination of that V12 engine has also become the matter of some debate. Certainly it seems that NPTI designer Trevor Harris will be involved with the car with which Nissan will return to the Sportscar World Championship in '92. But would the Americans run the project?

The very suggestion is enough to see the usually ebullient Kastner lapse obdurately into silence. Only after an almost intimidating pause does he stress:

"It would be a very hard thing to do because we've got a brand new company. We've got an obligation to IMSA with what we're doing here because this programme means a lot to the company. Once you've won the championship - we've done it two years on the trot - you have everybody shooting at you, so you have to pay more and more attention to it."

In its immediate quest to retain its manufacturers title in the face of increased competition, Nissan is keen to supply select customer teams. To date, only the Busby/Seabrooke/Goodrich outfit has found the wherewithal to take the plunge. "They're not cheap by any means," allows Kastner with a wry smile. "But we'd like to see some people out there to help us in the manufacturers title. This is the goal we have to allow us to do some other things in the long term."

Quite what that long term may hold, remains a moot point...

M.S.

