



Top to bottom: A Nissan 370Z races during the Sony/Nissan GT Academy competition at Silverstone; Bryan Heitkotter hoists his trophy; Formula Silverstone single-seaters.

GET REAL

Nissan, Sony give *Gran Turismo 5* gamers a chance at true racing

BY JAN TEGLER

Q BRYAN HEITKOTTER BRAKED HIS Nissan 370Z hard and turned into the Brooklands corner at the famous Silverstone circuit in Towcester, England, one final time. He then rounded the Luffield and Woodcote corners to take the checkered flag ahead of three other finalists at the 2011 Sony/Nissan GT Academy.

The win gave him a shot at a career as a professional racing driver, a dream he shared with more than 53,000 *Gran Turismo 5* video-game players who entered the inaugural U.S. round of the GT Academy competition last December. Now in its third year, the academy has produced two European winners, including Spaniard Lucas Ordóñez, who was second in LMP2 with Signatech Racing at the 2011 24 Hours of Le Mans.

"I can't believe all the hours training with the realistic *Gran Turismo 5* driving simulator have led me to this amazing opportunity," Heitkotter said.

That's the way Nissan and Sony promote it, and Heitkotter has played a lot of *GT5* and other racing games since the early 1990s. But don't get the mistaken impression that you are likely to go from the Barcalounger to the Mulsanne Straight in one fell swoop.

Heitkotter is a multiple SCCA Pro Solo national autocross champion. Other academy contestants had experience in everything from na-

tional-championship-level karting and late-model dirt racing. Only one of the final four had insignificant track experience. Online PlayStation 3/*GT5* time trials slashed the field to 32 hopefuls, who competed at the national finals in Orlando, Fla., in March. Sixteen competitors got the opportunity to vie for a Nissan/Sony-supported back door into international sports-car racing.

In June, the group was flown to Silverstone for a weeklong competition pitting the gamers against one another on-track in real 370Zs, GTRs, Leafs, go-karts and Formula Silverstone single-seaters. They also faced physical and media tests.

Housed in a "Race Camp" feet from Silverstone's Stowe circuit, the would-be pros were clustered in a dormitory with cots side-by-side, zero privacy and cameras documenting their every move for a reality TV show set to air on Speed in September.

Strictures imposed by the TV crew kept us from seeing much of what went on through the week. Still, the pressure on contestants (ranging in age from 19 to mid-30s) was real, including scrutiny from an all-star panel of judges that included racers Tommy Kendall, Liz Halliday and Danny Sullivan. Sullivan was instrumental in the much-discussed Red Bull Driver Search in 2002.

Heitkotter, 30, performed strongly and put together an impressive drive in the 20-minute race that decided the winner. He also scored highest at the *GT5* final in Orlando. Recently unemployed, the Fresno, Calif., native will move to the United Kingdom for seven months of intensive training at Silverstone and a debut with Nissan in a GT4-class 370Z tentatively scheduled for the 24 Hours of Dubai in January 2012. 🏎️



READER'S GARAGE

Front-Runner

VINTAGE RACER STARTED WHEN IT WAS REALLY VINTAGE

BY PHIL BERG

■ IN 1972, APOLLO astronauts last walked on the moon. Five burglars were arrested breaking into offices at Washington, D.C.'s Watergate Hotel. *Pong*, the world's first popular video game, debuted, as did HBO, the first cable movie channel. And Frank Righetti raced his first vintage car, a Crosley 750-cc-powered aluminum-and-fiberglass Jabro roadster built a decade earlier. "That was my first VSCCA [Vintage Sports Car Club of America] racer," he recalls.

Righetti's season this year, 39 seasons later, is spent driving an early-1960s Volvo 544, which the upstate New Yorker races at Lime Rock Park in Connecticut. It was during a visit to the course as a spectator in 1970 that Righetti fell in love with road racing and vintage race

cars. The 88-year-old's favorites are kept in a large garage he designed in 1971.

Righetti grew up in the Bronx, where he attended Samuel Gompers Career and Technical Education High School when it opened in 1936. There, he learned to weld and use machine tools.

When he was drafted during the war to maintain steam engines on a ship carrying soldiers to Mumbai, his racing bug went into hibernation. But his appreciation for cars stayed active, and during the 1960s, while he raised two sons, he was an auto-crosser and sports-car club member, driving an Austin-Healey Sprite and a Porsche 356 SC that he bought new in 1965, a car that resides in his garage.

"In 1970, I went to Lime Rock again. That's when the bug bit me. I just knew I had to go racing," he says.

Righetti's garage today is identical to a garage he had custom-built in 1971. The first

garage was constructed next to the fuel-station business he built in upstate New York after World War II.

"It had a lot of wall space, so I looked around and saw these beautiful porcelain signs, and so I started to collect them," he says. "At one time, I had 15 tons of signs in storage."

Righetti retired in the 1980s and sold his business and the garage. A doctor bought the second garage and let a nearby hospital use it for storage, until about six years ago. "It was disgusting," Righetti says, so he bought it back.

These days, vintage race cars share space with Righetti's Porsche and Ford Phaeton collector cars, as well



Top: The Volvo 544 is Righetti's current race car (left). The Bugeye Sprite (right) is restored to racing condition. Above: He bought the Porsche 356 SC new in 1965.

as his favorite signs.

After the Jabro, he raced a Turner roadster, a Lotus Seven, the Sprite and the 544. He claims he races the Volvo sedan for safety and that at age 88, he wants to race a car with a roof. "With the Lotus Seven, I was a front-runner. They all chased me. With the Sprite, I was in

the middle; the Volvo, I am also in the middle," he says.

Righetti says he's happy with the Volvo, which is much faster than his original Jabro.

"I don't really miss the 750-cc engine," he says. "It wasn't a front-runner; it was a follower. I want to be a front-runner, no question about it." 🏁

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