

If I Only Had a Brain



gordon jolley photo

Drawing Inspiration From "The Wizard of Oz," Greg Amy Is Looking for His Own Yellow Brick Road

story by patrick d'auria • photos as credited

For centuries, wise people have sought answers to life's deepest questions: Why are we here? Is there life after death? What spring rates should I run?

Okay, spring rates don't qualify as deep; nor are many of those who pursue such answers truly wise, or else they wouldn't pour hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars into funding an amateur-racing career.

Greg Amy, a 40-year-old computer-networking consultant from Middletown, Conn., and owner/driver of an SCCA Improved Touring Nissan NX 2000, may fit this description.

If the Shoe Fits

Greg drew inspiration from "The Wizard of Oz" when he named his team Kakashi Racing. Loosely translated from Japanese, "kakashi" means "scarecrow," as in the "Wizard of Oz" character who wished he "only had a brain."

This saying has become a mantra of sorts for Greg and his crew as they work through the trials of amateur racing. "We were constantly being told that if 'we only had a brain' we'd follow the advice given to us by those who should know," he said.

Kakashi Racing believes they have the fastest and best prepared NX 2000 in the SCCA's Improved Touring category. Getting to this level has involved a lot of trial and error due to a lack of proven race parts and solid knowledge base for this unconventional ride. "We tried a lot of that 'common knowledge,' and it just didn't work for us; so we kept forging into new territory," Greg explains.

Humble Beginnings

What got Greg into cars was his first set of wheels back in high school, a modified 1961 Volkswagen Beetle. As VWs tend to become addictive, he moved to the water-cooled variety.

Soon the speeding tickets started piling up, although that stopped when a young lady took him home to meet her folks. As fate would have it, this girl's father was deeply involved in the SCCA as a flagging and communications volunteer. Greg was introduced to the world of SCCA Solo events and Club Racing.

Next thing he knew, he was bolting a roll cage into a nearly new 1984 Rabbit GTI so he could attend his first driving school—where the car ended up on its lid. Undaunted, Greg was back on the track in no time, as the GTI became a parts donor for a used Scirocco.

Greg was hooked, and he got more involved with the SCCA, trying out Solo I and Solo II, as well as Improved Touring and Showroom Stock in its Club Racing program. "I had a very brief foray into IMSA Firehawk and SCCA endurance racing, but the personal funds never materialized to pursue it much past a few rides," he remembers.

In addition to the VW GTI and the Scirocco, Greg also raced a 1969 Merlyn Mk 11A, VW Dasher, Dodge Shelby Charger, Eagle Talon and, most recently, his Nissan NX 2000.

Lightning has struck twice for Greg. After he successfully raced the NX 2000 and then sold it, he found and restored the car more than five years later—a fantasy come true for many car guys as they dream about the "one that got away."

The Perfect Start

Back in 1992, Greg and his friend J. J. Gentler chose to build an NX 2000 for Showroom Stock B competition. "We searched the country for just the right model," Greg explains. "One with no T-tops, no air conditioning and radio delete."

A local Nissan dealership agreed to sell them a car at cost, but finding one this Spartan proved to be a difficult task. The race season had already started by the time a car was located in Texas. "The guys in Texas were very pleased to be able to flip a car without a/c," Greg recalls.

At the time, the SCCA's SSB class was extremely restrictive when it came to modifications; the only permitted changes were for safety. DOT-approved race tires and a roll cage, fire bottle, window net and driver's net were added to the NX 2000. After taping over the light lenses, Greg and crew went racing.

Despite the late start, with the assistance of Kessler Engineering the team saw some success during 1992, setting a new lap record at Mid-Ohio and earning two national wins. They earned enough points for an invitation to the Valvoline Runoffs, where they finished with a bronze medal and the Road Atlanta SSB lap record.

Greg's racing career was off to a great start, and hopes were high for 1993. Unfortunately, getting laid off from work meant that he had to hang up his helmet, and he sold the NX 2000 to a racer in Virginia.

Long-Lost Friend

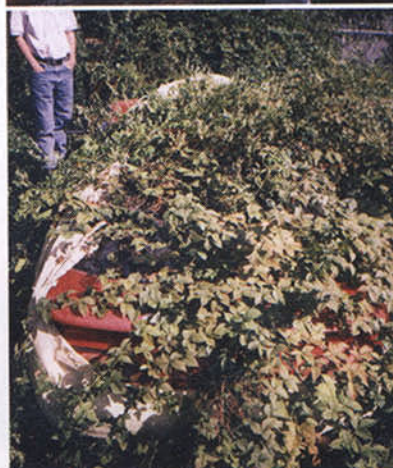
Five years later, during the summer of 1998, Greg needed a good used car for the street. Through several unsuccessful searches he kept thinking about how much he had enjoyed his old NX 2000.

He began pursuing a replacement, but couldn't find a good one; so he got curious about the fate of his old SSB ride. Greg's buddy, J. J., had the buyer's information from 1993 but was unable to contact him. That's when the Internet came to the rescue.

Greg inquired as to the whereabouts of the Nissan on various racing-specific Internet forums, and several people reported seeing the car in flames at Summit Point about 1996. Locating the car did not look promising until more leads suggested that the car was sitting behind Datsun Dynamics, a race shop in Virginia.

"I called the shop and confirmed the car was there, but it had [experienced] a seriously blown engine at Summit Point, and the subsequent oil spillage had caught fire," Greg says. The car had been sitting covered on a trailer for two years with its condition unknown. As expected, the shop was eager to have the car removed and told Greg how to contact the owner.

After two months of negotiations, Greg bought his car back and had it transported to Matt Kessler's race shop in Wallingford, Conn., for its rebirth as an Improved Touring racer. "The really amusing thing about the transaction was that the title was still in my name at my old Texas address," Greg explains. "None of the subsequent owners had bothered to retitle it!"



Who isn't happy to see their old race car? What if the car had suffered a driveline fire and was then allowed to be consumed by the brush? Despite the dense foliage coverage, Greg's Nissan NX 2000 was still in decent shape. Turns out the fire damage wasn't that bad.

Back and Better Than Ever

The next two-and-a-half years were spent stripping, repairing, fabricating and upgrading everything to its current state, as SCCA IT rules are more liberal than those for Showroom Stock racing.

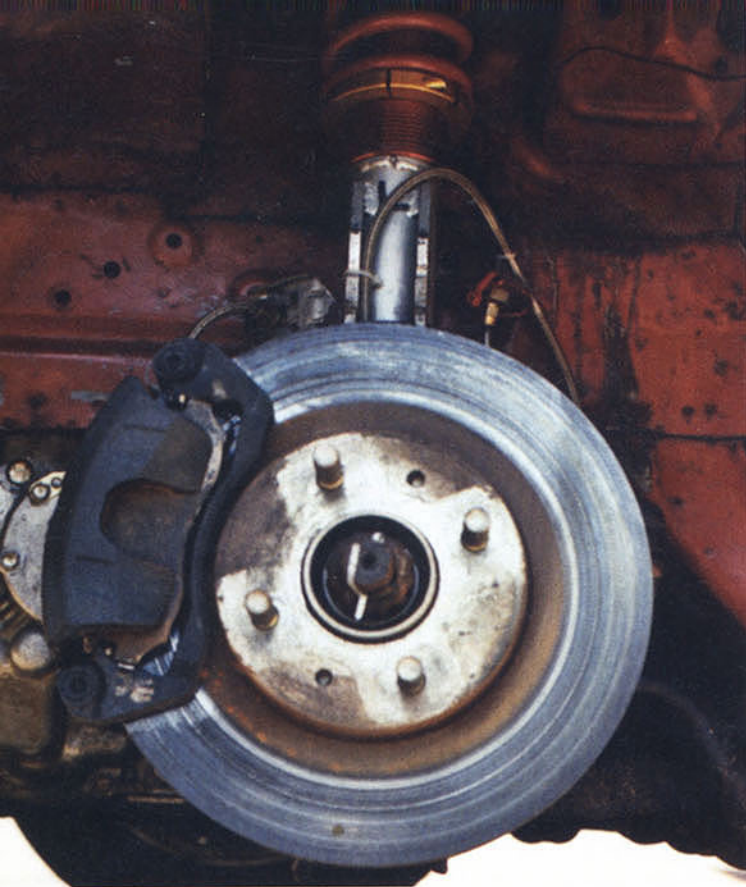
Starting with a bare shell, only items required by the rules were installed. "Just about every aftermarket part we've installed has been modified by Matt for either increased performance or weight reduction," says Greg.

A custom roll cage was welded in for rigidity and strength, while a fire-suppression system was installed in the engine and passenger compartments. A Momo seat was installed with custom brackets. The factory dash remains, and a Sampson Racing Communications two-way radio was added so Greg could stay in touch with his crew.

The suspension is comprised of two-way adjustable Advance Design struts with Eibach 2.5-inch racing springs perched on Ground Control adjustable sleeves. Alignment settings are kept true with Energy Suspension bushings and custom fabricated upper camber plates. More custom parts tie the car together, as Greg added a custom rear anti-roll bar and front lower stress bar; the factory-issue front anti-roll bar remains, however.

Upon finding his old mount—and digging it out from the brush—Greg bought his former Showroom Stock racer and set about the conversion for Improved Touring competition. The buildup took 2½ years, as the car still needed a complete rebuild. While preparing the Nissan for Improved Touring S competition, Greg sought to keep things as light as possible. Since the NX 2000 isn't too popular among today's tuner, many parts are custom.





Advance Design dampers inserted into Kessler Engineering struts can be found at all four corners, and the stock discs benefit from the added stopping power offered by Hawk Blue pads. Underhood, the NX 2000's SR20DE-spec engine has been balanced and blueprinted to the limit of IT rules by Kessler Engineering, while horsepower is further increased with a compression ratio bumped up to 10.0:1.

Taking the already venerable Nissan SR20DE engine and building it to the limit of the IT rules was a task undertaken by Matt Kessler. Lots of factory metal was shed during the buildup, as Matt added factory-authorized oversized pistons while shaving the head and block to their minimum specs to achieve an extra half point of compression. (The stock 9.5:1 compression ratio has been increased to 10.0:1.)

New stock Nissan camshafts reside inside the head and breathe through a JWT cold-air intake. A Hotshot street header is currently bolted to a custom exhaust, but plans are in the works for a custom long-tube 4-into-1 race header for next year.

As it comes from the factory, the NX 2000 is really well balanced, Greg says. "When I drove it back in 1992, I remembered thinking it was the best-handling front-wheel-drive car I had ever driven." Modifying the potent little Nissan has only magnified these traits, he adds.

Get By With a Little Help

With its torquy four-cylinder engine, racing this machine is certainly a thrill, but the development and education process never stops, Greg explains. "The day we go to an event and learn nothing is the day we move on to another project."

Getting a little outside assistance has also helped, Greg recalls.

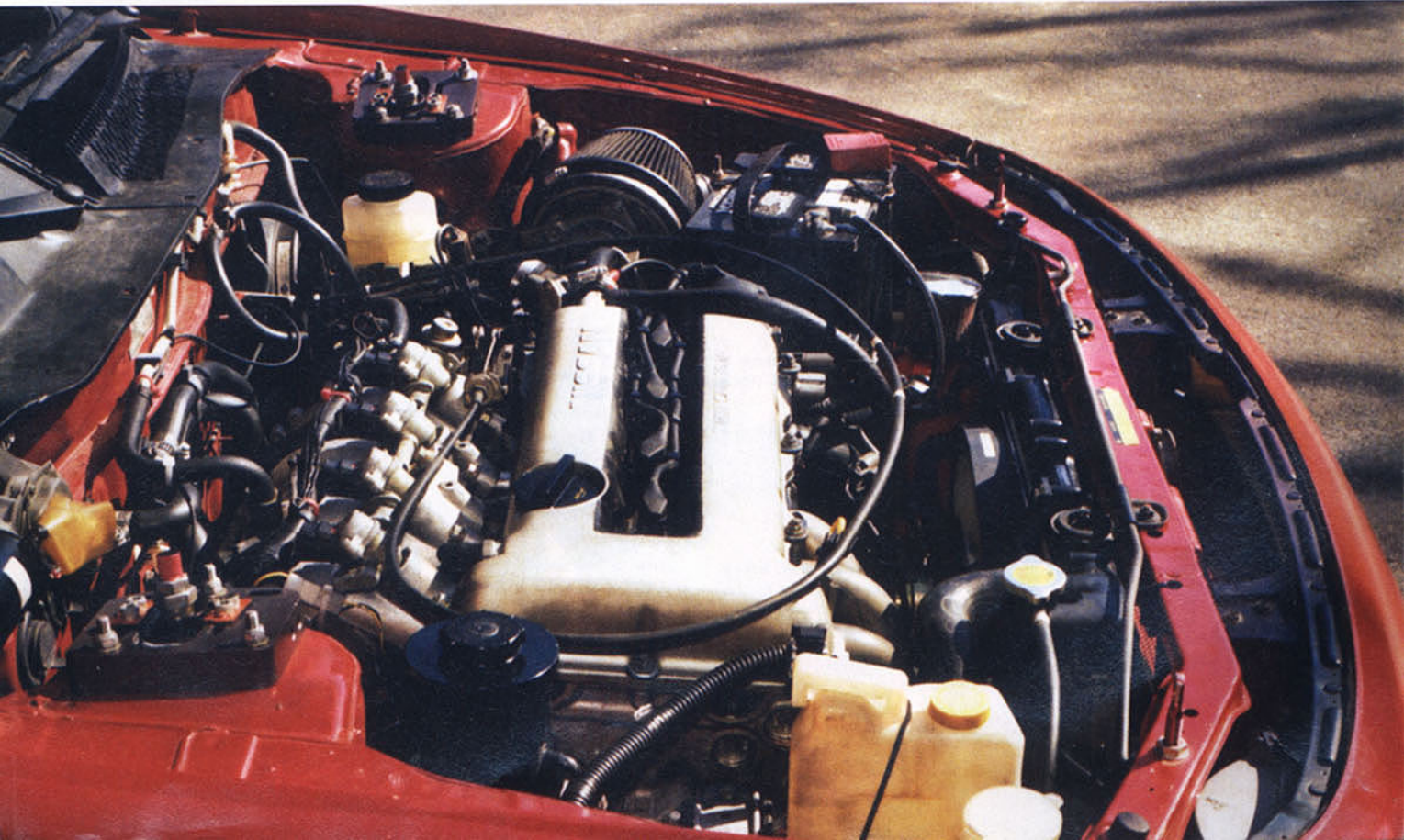
At a 1992 national race in Pocono, Pa., he was on the pole for a double-national weekend. Early in the first race, a missed shift over-revved the engine and caused some nasty valve-train damage, as several rocker arms failed. Unfortunately, Kakashi Racing didn't have any spares, and a nearby dealership was closed.

The team was about to call it a weekend when a spectator offered parts from his car. The crew replaced the damaged parts and drew a round of applause from the crowd as the engine fired up to make it to the second race. "Other problems kept us from winning, but success that weekend was gauged simply by making the race," Greg says.

Again, in 2003 at Road Atlanta's American Road Race of Champions, another bystander saved the day for Kakashi Racing. While breaking in a new engine during the practice laps, a dramatic failure sent a defective rod bolt out of the front of the block, through the header and into the radiator.

This time the team had a spare engine on hand, but it didn't have a replacement for the damaged exhaust header or radiator. A kind person donated the needed parts from their street car, and the crew was able to perform the swap in plenty of time to make the race.

cont'd on pg. 75





Greg Amy's NX 2000 By The Numbers

general		roll cage:	
car (year, make, model):	1992 Nissan NX 2000		Kessler Engineering eight-point roll-cage
class:	Improved Touring S (ITS)	seat:	Momo Start FIA-approved seat
club:	SCCA	steering wheel:	Momo w/quick release
competition record:	SSB track record at Valvoline Runoffs, Road Atlanta, 1992; 12th at 2003 ARRC	other safety gear:	British Halon fire extinguisher system, 2 nozzles (cockpit, engine), G-Force window net, Sparco three-layer driver's suit, shoes, gloves, Bell helmet, Wright Device head and neck restraint (www.over40racing.com), Sampson Racing Communications radio system
sponsors:	"No official financial sponsors; all sponsor decals on the car are event contingency sponsors. My crew chief Matt Kessler of Kessler Engineering contributes greatly to the project both in time and technology, but the whole shebang is pretty much paid for from our pockets."		
engine and drivetrain		suspension	
engine make:	Nissan	type, f/r:	independent MacPherson strut, all four corners
type:	SR20DE	alignment settings, f/r:	"Varies with track, usually: 3 degrees negative negative camber front, 1.5 degrees negative rear; 1/16 inch toe-out front, zero toe rear; max positive caster front, minimal positive rear."
displacement:	1998cc + 1mm overbore	anti-roll bars, f/r:	stock NX 2000 front, Kessler-fabricated based on Speedway Engineering torsion bars, ranging from 7/8 in. to 1 1/4 in. rear.
builder:	Matt Kessler, Kessler Engineering	bushings, f/r:	Energy Suspension polyurethane bushings all around
output:	"More than stock."	shock absorbers, f/r:	Advance Design dampers front and rear inserted in Kessler Engineering struts
camshafts:	stock	springs, f/r:	Ground Control height-adjustable sleeves using Eibach ERS 2.5-inch springs, rates and lengths dependent on track and conditions; range from 450 to 700 lbs./in. front and 650 to 1200 lbs./in. rear
connecting rods:	stock, balanced and blueprinted	stress bars, f/r:	Kessler Engineering front lower stress bar
crankshaft:	stock, balanced and blueprinted	steering type/ratio:	factory system w/ OEM power steering
cylinder head:	stock, port-matched and blueprinted	other suspension mods:	Kessler Engineering adjustable upper strut mounts, all four corners
engine management:	OEM ECU, working on program for improvements		
exhaust system:	aftermarket headers with Kessler-fabricated side-exit	brakes	
exhaust:	Ultra Flo with custom side exhaust	discs:	stock 257x26mm vented front discs and stock 234x7mm solid rear discs
fuel injection:	stock	ducts:	none
ignition wires:	aftermarket from Nissan Motorsports	fluid:	Castrol GT LMA
injectors:	stock blueprinted by Marren	lines:	SMC Products stainless braided lines
intake system:	stock port-matched intake manifold, stock throttle body, JWT cold-air intake	pads/shoes, f/r:	Hawk Blue/stock
lines and fittings:	Kessler-fabricated Aeroquip components	other brake mods:	none
oil:	Mobil 1	wheels and tires	
oil cooler:	"No external oil cooler at this time."	tire brand/size, f/r:	Hoosier R3S04 P225/50ZR14
oil filter:	OEM	tire pressures, f/r:	"Varies by track and condition, generally low-to-mid 30s cold."
oil pan:	stock	wheel brand/size, f/r:	14x7-in. Borbet Type T
pistons:	"Custom aftermarket performance pieces, same dimensions as stock except for overbore."	body	
clutch:	JWT pressure plate, 2000 Sentra SE-R disc	body construction/mods:	stock body, Kessler Engineering front air dam, windshield retainer clips
flywheel:	stock, unmodified except for balancing	paint/graphics:	"Not much, pretty Spartan. The best mod: my Grassroots Motorsports sticker."
shifter/shift kit:	Momo shift knob	weight:	2250 pounds dry, without driver or ballast
transmission:	OEM RS5F32V transaxle, JDM Sunny Lucino 4.437:1 ring and pinion, Nismo clutch-type limited-slip differential		
transmission fluid:	Red Line		
interior/safety equipment			
belts:	Simpson		
gauges:	Stack ST 8130 display		
pedals:	stock		



gordon jolley photo

The IT2 Initiative

Since newer cars offer much more performance than the models they replace, the SCCA's Improved Touring category has experienced a bottleneck of sorts, as most anything built during the last dozen-plus years has wound up in the top-rung ITS class.

As a result, ITS contains a wide variety of cars. For the most part, the class is dominated by the E36-chassis BMW 325i—not an inexpensive car to build—followed by the aging Datsun 240Z and the second-generation Mazda RX-7. Look further down the scoreboard for the others in the class, including cars such as the Nissan Sentra SE-R, Dodge Neon ACR, 2.0-liter VW GTI 16v and the Honda Civic Si.

According to the SCCA, these cars offer too much performance potential for the ITA class; so they're stuck, some say hopelessly, in the ITS ranks. On the other hand, these cars are immensely popular with today's tuners, autocrossers and street drivers.

The IT2 Initiative aims to create a home

in which these late-model, front-drive compacts can compete against one another on a more level playing field. IT2 is not a recognized class, but organizers offer their own points race for competitors flying the IT2 colors—or at least running the sticker—during SCCA Improved Touring events.

Greg Amy and his NX 2000 may have only finished 12th in class at last year's ARRC, but they were the highest-placing front-drive car in the ITS field and thus claimed the Lockwood Raceworks 2003 IT2 Challenge Trophy. In addition to Lockwood Raceworks, the IT2 Challenge at the ARRC was supported by Isaac Head and Neck Restraint, RaceShopper.com and Appalachian Tire. Individuals also got involved, as ITA Miata driver Ony Anglade posted \$25 for the IT2 Hard Charger Award. Greg Amy matched Anglade's gesture.—David S. Wallens



john swain photo

Fitting In

"Despite our best efforts, this car is still classified in ITS against the BMWs, RX-7s, and Datsun Z-cars," Greg laments. "Our car is a 135-wheel-horsepower, front-wheel-drive car; we are pitted against 210-plus-wheel-horsepower, rear-drive competitors. We have no possible chances for victory in this class."

Greg has petitioned the SCCA to move the NX 2000 into a more fitting class. "This is a very popular chassis, and it should be competitive against comparable cars." (More information on what is being called the IT2 Initiative—a movement by enthusiasts to realistically classify late-model, front-drive compacts—can be found at www.it2.evaluand.com.)

Greg would also like to see NASA bring their SE-R Cup series to the East Coast (www.sercup.com). Until these changes take place, Greg and Kakashi Racing will continue to prepare the car to the limits of the rules and pursue their goal to compete and have fun.

Looking back, Greg has some advice for those thinking about following a similar path into road racing. "Budget five times as much money and 10 times as much time as you think it's going to take; then add a few dollars for beer and aspirin," he says.

Being self-sponsored has helped Greg keep the experience fun. "The time and motivation it took to pursue sponsors and keep them happy was far outweighed by the amount of money that came back and its effect on my personal life; I would have been much better off taking a second job instead," he says. He credits his wife, Thea, and Matt Kessler for their support and assistance in helping him enjoy his hobby.



SOURCE

Kakashi Racing
www.kakashiracing.com

Cars Fitting the IT2 Profile:

Acura Integra LS 1996-'01
Acura Integra RS 1990-'93
Acura Integra RS 1994-'97
Chrysler Neon SOHC 1995-'96
Chrysler Neon SOHC 1996-'99
Chrysler Neon DOHC 1996-'99
Chrysler Neon DOHC 1995-'96
Honda Civic EX coupe 1994-'95
Honda Civic EX coupe 1996-2000
Honda Civic Si 1992-'95
Ford Focus ZX-3 2000-'01
Mazda Protegé LX 1990-'93
Mazda Protegé ES 1996-'98
Mazda Protegé ES 1999-2000
Nissan NX 2000 1990-'92
Nissan Sentra SE-R 1990-'92
Nissan 200SX SE-R 1996-'98
Nissan Sentra SE 1998
Saab 900 16v 2.1 1991-'92
Saturn SC2 1991-'95
Saturn SL2 1997-'01
Saturn SC2 Coupe 1997-2001
Toyota Corolla VE 1998
VW GTI 2.0 16v 1990-'92
VW GTI 2.0 8v 1993-up
VW Jetta GLI 2.0 16v 1991
VW Jetta 2.0 8v 1993-up
VW Golf III Sport 1996-'97
VW GTI 1997-'98
VW Jetta III 1996-'98