

# Automotive News

## Nissan's Mr. K: Still blunt at 100 (about that 370Z ...)

**Hans Greimel**

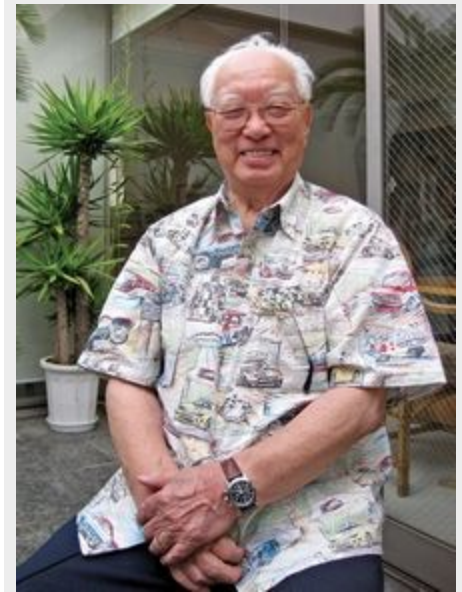
Automotive News | September 21, 2009 - 12:01 am EST

TOKYO -- Legendary Nissan pioneer Yutaka Katayama, known to fans in the United States as Mr. K, is aging just as well as the sporty Z car he championed four decades ago.

As he marks his 100th birthday, the founding father of Nissan in America is characteristically candid, offering opinions on the Z car's drift from its origins, Nissan Motor Co. CEO Carlos Ghosn and the resurrection of the Datsun brand -- something he desires.

"Every day I die at night, but I am reborn again in the morning. I feel 1 day old," Katayama told *Automotive News* before quietly celebrating his Sept. 15 milestone with family.

As head of U.S. operations for what was then Datsun, Mr. K paved the way for Japanese imports to the United States during the 1960s, bringing in the 510 sedan and then the 240Z. The two were instant hits.



Nissan's Yutaka Katayama: "You dealers are the first customers. So first you can make the money. Then I can earn the money from you."

But Katayama pulls no punches about the 370Z -- the most recent incarnation of his baby.

370Z? 'So-so'

"It's so-so. Very different from the 240Z," he says, sitting in a studio office bedecked with plaques and awards. In one corner stands a golden antique cash register given by a dealer as homage to Mr. K's role as the "cash machine" for early dealerships that risked signing on with Datsun.

Katayama has a 350Z in his garage but prefers to drive the family's Versa compact. "First, it's very heavy, and it's also very expensive," he says of recent Z cars when compared with the 240Z.

"Mr. Ghosn thinks he is making a car to make money. I was making an efficient car that can still earn money but also had the dealers in mind," Katayama says. "You dealers are the first customers. So first you make the money. Then I can earn the money from you."

Not only is today's Z car too expensive, he says, but its spirit has been usurped by the Mazda

MX-5 Miata. Says Katayama: "I'd like to have a sports car like the Miata. The Miata is taking the place of the 240Z."

Such blunt assessments won the outspoken Katayama few friends at Nissan headquarters in his early days. He regards being dispatched to California in 1960 as "exile" for fighting the union back home.

Katayama still urges a revival of the Datsun name, which was dropped in favor of Nissan in 1983.

Waxing philosophical, Katayama says the bigger concern is that car companies have strayed from the erstwhile ideal of replicating man's relationship with the horse.

"Man has lived with the horse for 5,000 years. It's in our DNA," he says. "The fun of driving cars is the same as riding a horse. We need a car that is like riding on horseback.

"We are making robots. Robots don't like human control."

Rediscovered Z

Katayama turned 100 just weeks after the first production 240Z intended for sale in the United States was rediscovered in the Connecticut garage of owner Rick Morgan. Internet Z Car Club President Carl Beck of Clearwater, Fla., says enthusiasts had been searching for the landmark 1969 vehicle for years.

The first three preproduction Datsun 240Zs were sent to America primarily for press introductions. Another three became factory-sponsored competition cars.

The one bearing vehicle identification number HLS30 00013 was the first intended for sale to the public. Morgan, a former parts manager for Bob Sharp Datsun, bought it, drove it for several years, then stored it in his garage when the odometer hit 100,000 miles.

The original Z changed American consumers' perceptions of Datsun and "of all cars made in Japan," Beck says. "Mr. K, perhaps better than any other top automotive executive, knew and liked his customers in America."

Katayama, today a great-grandfather to 14, attributes his longevity to drinking lots of water and the occasional thick, juicy steak. His wife of 52 years is a vibrant 96.

In the weeks before his birthday, he received box loads of cards from well-wishers around the world. "I don't know how I can answer them all," Katayama says.

Still, Mr. K has no plans to slow down. "I just entered the 100s. I have a long way to go."