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AMERICAN IDOLS ON THE ROAD NEW CHEVY SILVERADO AND AIRSTREAM

1968 1973 Datsun 510

The first Japanese car that truly mattered.

here was a time when buying a Japanese car marked you as someone a little short on common sense. It was a time when anything made on that side of the Pacific was regarded as tinny and short-lived, a time when the best-selling car in America wasn't a Toyota. Detroit was still mired in its oldschool ways, and few people really cared about fuel costs. The boxy Datsun 510 helped set the ball rolling to change all that, and it remains one of the most important Japanese cars ever built. It's no small coincidence that the 510 was also a flaming hoot to drive.

Early Japanese offerings in the United States were either too small, too full of sewing-machine engineering, too slow, or some painful combination of the three. This was largely due to still-isolated Japan's fuzzy picture of American driving. Yutaka Katayama, the enigmatic head of Datsun/Nissan America, played a key part in focusing that image. A nonconformist and a radical thinker, Katayama had become convinced over several years of living in the United States that the only way for Japanese automakers to succeed in America was for them to build cars tailored for the U.S. market. The 510 would be the first of that breed. By benchmarking the fast. solid, and fun BMW 1600, Katavama set ambitious goals: modern styling, durable engineering, and real-world speed. By building the 510 down to a price, he ensured its mass appeal. Katayama was successful—the diminutive sedan eventually sold more than half a million copies worldwide.

The first 510 rolled off the production line in late 1967. Initially available only in four-door form, the Teruo Uchino-designed car would later see showrooms as a two-door sedan, a four-door wagon, and a Japan-only two-door coupe. The suspension was independent and-like the BMW's-consisted of struts in front and semitrailing arms in the rear. (Wagons, however, had a live rear axle.) A gutsy 96 hp came from a vaguely agricultural but engaging 1.6-liter SOHC four-cylinder (with an additional two cylinders, a version of this engine would later power the iconic Datsun 240Z). Interior and exterior materials-although thin steel, cheap vinyl, and hard plastics-looked and felt relatively durable. Front disc brakes were standard.

The 510 may have been slightly slower and less refined than the world-beating BMW, but it also was a screaming deal; the Datsun's asking price was roughly \$2000, while the 1600 cost about \$3000. Two Trans-Am championships—by the famed John Morton/ Peter Brock pairing—over the BMW and Alfa Romeo competition proved the 510's inherent dynamic worth. For Katayama, the wins were just icing on the cake. By the time 510 production ended in 1973, the phrase "Japanese car" had ceased to be a punch line—and had become a reason to start watching the mirrors. Sam Smith



E ALL NEW DATSUN SEDAN AND STATION WAGON FOR '68



From top: A period ad. A stock 510 meets its racer cousin. In the early 1970s, led by Peter Brock's BRE team, Datsun 510s all but dominated the SCCA's Irans-Am 2.5 Challenge series.





VITAL INFO

WHAT TO PAY Good, solid drivers range from \$2000 to \$5000. Pristine survivors and concours-level cars can run upward of \$10,000.

BODY STYLES Two- or four-door sedan; four-door wagon. A two-door coupe was available only in Japan.

PRODUCTION Slightly more than 550,000 cars worldwide. Most were four-door sedans.

WATCH OUT FOR Rust—everywhere. Also be wary of cars on which more money has been spent for go-fast parts than for proper maintenance.

READ MORE

The Stainless Steel Carrot: An Auto Racing Odyssey by Sylvia Wilkinson, Houghton Mifflin, out of print. Used copies available at www.amazon.com

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