

Shifting Gears

[Just Drifting: A Japanese Import Roaring on American Race Tracks](#)

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Vaughn Gittin's 845 HP Monster Ford Mustang RTR

By Roger Witherspoon

Anyone who has driven a car on sheet ice knows the feeling.

You hit the gas pedal, and the wheels spin faster and faster, but the rear of the car is sliding sideways and there is no forward progress at all. At that point, most motorists know they are in trouble.

Unless, of course, sliding sideways is what you *intend* to do.

At that point, it is called *drifting* and, if one is good at it, he can make a car go down a track sideways at more than 100 miles per hour, shoot straight through a curve and slide out the other side. And if one is really good at it, he or she can turn professional, guiding a roaring racing drifter nearly sideways down a track a couple of inches away from another side winding machine and wheel them around each other like very big spitting cats.

Anyone who has ever seen the equivalent of the automotive ballet employed in televised ads with sleek new cars sliding in and out of each other like a choreographed ballet, or sat through any of the *Fast and Furious* movies, is familiar with drifting. It's a street sport variation on drag racing which originated in Asia and in the last decade has caught on with

the drag strip crowd.

“The sport started in Japan where this was done as an exhibition of speed and car control,” said Richard Kulach of Nissan Motor Sports. “It blossomed over there and then took off in the US.

“Nissan was associated with it early on, particularly the 240 SX model. It had a four-cylinder motor and was a rear wheel drive car, and that is the preferred drive train. The car could also be modified easily. The SX was available in a turbocharged version which produced double the horsepower than the cars originally came with.”

The sport migrated to America as the Japanese auto industry gained more prominence on American roads. Japanese drifters began having demonstration competitions on west coast speedways – and that intrigued American drag racers and the makers of traditional American muscle cars. As a result, the ad hoc nature of these demonstrations morphed into formal Formula 1 Drifting competitions, with the American manufacturers playing an increasing role. For auto makers like Ford and Chevy, drifting was a progression from their heavy involvement in American NASCAR and other organized road races.

The result of that intercontinental competition will be on display today and Saturday at the Wall Stadium Speedway, off the Garden State Parkway in Wall Township, New Jersey, which is hosting the Formula 1 Drift Championships.

“The Formula 1 Championship is essentially a title fight where the premier competitors have to earn a right to sign up,” explained Paul Brearey, who oversees marketing for Ford’s drift racing efforts. “You have to start somewhere else and participate in local geographic drift series and at least place to earn the right to move up. It is a different type of sport from traditional racing, especially if you are from the old school where someone clearly wins and loses.



Paul Brearey

“Drifting tends to be more like dancing with cars – at high speed – rather than a race. And it is somewhat subjective, with the judges looking at style and how they went across the track

rather than actual objective numbers. There are, however, sensors on the walls on the curves and the closer you get to the wall without crashing the more points you'll get."

It's the mechanical dance which gripped Vaughn Gittin, Jr., the 2012 drift champ who is seeking a repeat to the podium Saturday in his Monster Ford Mustang RTR (Ready to Rock).

"It's not exactly a street car," said Gittin of what came out of the Ford factory as a Mustang GT. "At 845 horsepower she wouldn't get goo good gas mileage. She drinks over a gallon a lap, and a lap is three quarters of a mile."

Heavy engines in small cars are the norm for drifting competitions. Chris Forsberg, who drives a modified Nissan 370Z – which is usually a reliable roadster – discarded the Z's standard engine and replaced it with one from a Nissan Titan pickup truck.



"Drifting is fast," explained Gittin. "The Mustang RTR can easily do 200 going straight, but we are going sideways and around curves at over 100 miles per hour. The car is sliding sideways but always going forward. You need a lot of horsepower so you can put a ton of grip in the road to go forwards and still drive it sideways. If you don't have a ton of grip, the car is going to slide right off the track."

Gittin came to drifting slowly, and his acceptance of an American car was even slower.

"Growing up," he recalled, "I was not a big fan of Mustangs. It had a little to do with me being rebellious and not wanting what my parents had." His father had been a used car salesman from Newark, "and I remember him squealing tires and I thought that was the coolest thing ever.

"I had a go-kart as a kid and was an adrenaline junkie. I used to fool around in industrial parks, and then when I was 19, I saw a video of drifting and fell in love with the sport that let me express myself behind a wheel. It was like skateboarding in a car."

Gittin was a computer geek at the time, working as a network administrator for an Arlington, VA company but spending his spare time and money building and modifying cars to compete in drift races.

"In 2004 I saw the new redesigned Mustang and thought it was cool-looking and thought it

would be cool to bring a Mustang to an import-dominated sport. Once we built the car and



drove it, I fell in love with it and that was all she wrote.

“When drifting started it was kind of monkey-see, monkey-do. All the Americans were doing exactly what we saw the Japanese drivers doing. I was no different; my car was a Nissan 240 SX, a rear wheel drive sports car. Little did I know then that we had the best kept secret in our own back yard – the Ford Mustang.”

In 2007, Gittin gave up the computer job and began working full time as a professional drift driver. Along the way he has won both the American and Chinese Formula 1 Drift series.

This weekend’s championship at Wall Speedway is something of a special return engagement for Gittin, whose parents were Jersey natives. “I have a ton of relatives here,” he said “and about 40 or 50 will come out to support us. It’s our homecoming, and it’s going to be really awesome.”