

JDM Gentleman's Agreement: Why Iconic Japanese Cars Are Limited To 276 HP



By [Roger Biermann](#) — Jan 24, 2025

Aside from hailing from Japan, high-performance JDM legends from the 1990s and early 2000s all have one thing in common: 276 horsepower. It didn't matter whether its power came from a 2.0-liter turbo flat-four in the Subaru WRX STI, an inline-six in the case of the Nissan Skyline GT-R and Toyota Supra, or a 1.3-liter turbocharged rotary in the Mazda RX-7; they all had the same power.



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This was not some coincidence written in the stars or a technological limit of the era. Instead, it was by design after Japanese car companies came to an accord in 1988 that 276 hp (280 metric horsepower/ps) was the absolute limit for a series production car. This is what's commonly referred to as the JDM gentleman's agreement, and it's why most of the cars you'll import to the US when their 25 years are up will all have 276 hp.

There's just one problem... 276 hp was and is a lie.

But why were Japanese cars limited to 276 hp in the first place? And when did this all begin and end?

Note

This article was originally published in December 2023 but has since been updated with new information and is correct as of January 2025.

What Was The Gentleman's Agreement For Japanese Cars?

Throughout the 1980s, Japanese cars were in the midst of an incredible ascension to glory. They were technologically advanced pieces of machinery driven by the pursuit to become the best in every facet: more engaging, more powerful, and, importantly, quicker than their rivals in any one of a dozen forms of motorsport. But in the midst of all this, injuries and road deaths on Japanese roads also began to rise. Fearing backlash from lawmakers, Japanese automakers reached an informal agreement in 1988 to limit the power of their vehicles to 276 hp and speeds to 180 km/h (112 mph), specifically for cars sold in the Japanese market (the strict definition of a JDM car).

The generally accepted premise was that putting this limit in place would prevent an automotive arms race and a power war, which in turn would help curtail accidents, although some commenters have suggested that this limit would help Japanese automakers homologate road cars for certain motorsport classifications.

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Exceptions To The Rule

Since the agreement was settled by a handshake and not a binding contract on paper, it's difficult to track down its exact stipulations. However, it's believed that the agreement only applied to cars manufactured and sold in Japan and that it was only on series-production models. That means special editions existed outside the agreement and could be given more power.

While some cars still adhered to the agreement - like the Subaru 22B STI, which made a claimed 276 hp - the WRX STI S201, launched for the year 2000, made 296 hp. Other examples include the Nismo 400R - an R33 Skyline GT-R-based limited edition producing 400 hp - which was intended to be produced in a run of 100 cars, although only 44 were ever built. The Nismo Z-Tune (493 hp) was another example,

and there were various others from other JDM manufacturers that all pushed that boundary.

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276 Horsepower Was A Lie

The spec sheets for high-performance Japanese cars all claimed 276 hp, but the reality was that many of these cars made much, much more. There was absolutely no way the R33 and R34 Skyline GT-Rs manufactured at the turn of the millennium were producing the same power the R32 had in 1989, and the sheer performance numbers the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution and Subaru WRX STI were capable of were simply impossible for 276 hp, despite their all-wheel-drive systems and motorsport engineering.

There was also the curious case of vehicles sold in other markets miraculously producing an extra 50 hp with seemingly no mechanical changes. An example of this was the Mitsubishi 3000GT/GTO/Dodge Stealth, which had 276 hp in its land of origin but up to 320 hp in America (1994-1997 twin-turbo derivatives specifically). The first-gen Honda NSX had more power in Europe than in Japan, too, and the Nissan 300ZX was another model sold globally with 300 hp, but in Japan, it made 24 ponies fewer.

There wasn't a different state of tune, and the reality was that by the mid-1990s, cars were making more power and the numbers were fudged in Japan for the sake of compliance. This remained the case until 2005...

Here are some of the most iconic JDM cars that claimed to produce 276 hp but were widely known to make far more in reality:

Model	Engine	Claimed Horsepower	Estimated Horsepower
Nissan Skyline GT-R (R34)	2.6L Twin-Turbo Inline-Six	276 hp	~320 hp
Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution VI	2.0L Turbo Inline-Four	276 hp	~300 hp
Toyota Supra Mk4 (A80)	3.0L Twin-Turbo Inline-Six	276 hp	~320 hp
Mazda RX-7 (FD3S)	1.3L Twin-Turbo Rotary	276 hp	~290-300 hp
Honda NSX (NA1/NA2)	3.0L/3.2L VTEC V6	276 hp	~290 hp
Subaru Impreza WRX STI (GC8)	2.0L Turbo Flat-Four	276 hp	~300 hp
Nissan 300ZX (Z32)	3.0L Twin-Turbo V6	276 hp	~300 hp

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Which JDM Automaker Broke The 276-HP Pact?

By the time the new millennium rolled around, it was pretty much an open secret that automakers were only sticking to 276 horsepower on paper, yet they persisted in claiming the lesser figure.

In the era, some asserted that it was a show of unity; no automaker wanted to disrupt the harmony. Maybe it was simply great for marketing, as enough of the uninformed public would believe the 276-hp claims, see these cars destroying European and American rivals with a hundred horsepower more, and think the Japanese were gods among men. The real reason remains a secret, but we do know which automaker became the first to break the pact...

On October 7, 2004, Honda announced the new Legend (sold as the Acura RL in the US), with a 3.5-liter V6 developing 300 hp in Japan. It's not known whether Honda broke the pact with the blessing of other automakers or not, but it's believed that this was the tipping point, after which JDM cars frequently claimed over 300 hp, more in line with what these engines had been making all along.

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Life After The Gentleman's Agreement: Japanese Cars With Over 276 HP

When Honda broke the agreement with the 300-hp Legend in 2004, the floodgates opened for Japanese automakers to finally claim the true performance of their cars.

Since then, Japan has produced an array of groundbreaking vehicles with power figures that openly reflect their engineering prowess. Here are some standout models that carried on the legacy of JDM performance, free from the constraints of the gentleman's agreement:

- Nissan GT-R (R35): When Nissan launched the R35 in 2007, it made a bold statement with its VR38DETT twin-turbo V6 producing an official 473 hp. Over the years, the GT-R has evolved to produce up to 600 hp in special editions like the NISMO, solidifying its place as a supercar slayer.
- Lexus LFA: This halo car from Toyota's luxury arm debuted in 2010 with a screaming 4.8-liter V10, co-developed with Yamaha, delivering 553 hp. The LFA remains one of the most iconic Japanese cars ever built.
- Toyota GR Supra (A90): Reviving the Supra name in 2019, the A90 featured a 3.0-liter BMW-sourced inline-six producing 382 hp (US spec). While not a purebred JDM car, it pays homage to its A80 predecessor.
- Acura NSX (2nd Gen): Returning in 2016 with a hybrid powertrain, the second-generation NSX combines a 3.5-liter twin-turbo V6 with three electric motors, producing a combined 573 hp. It showcases Honda's technological evolution.
- Toyota GR Yaris: A modern homologation special, the GR Yaris launched in 2020 with a 1.6-liter three-cylinder turbo engine making 268 hp in global markets but producing closer to 300 hp in some regions. Despite being small, it punches far above its weight class.
- Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution X: The final Evo departed from the gentleman's agreement with a 2.0-liter turbocharged 4B11T engine producing up to 303 hp in the GSR trim, giving it a proper send-off in 2015.

A New Era Of Japanese Performance

These modern JDM cars prove that Japanese automakers have not only moved past the constraints of the gentleman's agreement but also embraced the challenge of competing on a global stage. From hybrids to high-revving naturally aspirated engines and brutal turbocharged monsters, Japan continues to push the boundaries of performance, cementing its status as one of the world's automotive powerhouses. With whispers of rotary engines returning and new electric performance models on the horizon, the JDM legacy shows no signs of slowing down.

Other Automotive Gentleman's Agreements

BMW



JDM carmakers aren't the only automakers to have entered into a gentleman's agreement in the automotive world.

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German carmakers once entered into something similar, limiting the top speeds of sedans, wagons, and crossovers to 155 mph. Specialist sports cars were exempt

from this, and the likes of BMW, Mercedes-Benz, and Audi have routinely offered packages on their M, AMG, and RS models that lift the speed restriction on these high-performance derivatives.

Another example of an informal agreement was the one entered into by Japanese and European motorcycle manufacturers. When Suzuki announced a Hayabusa capable of 310 km/h (190 mph) in 1999, fears of a European clampdown in the name of safety prompted European and Japanese bike manufacturers to agree to a speed limit of 300 km/h (186 mph). This came into effect in 2000 and is supposedly still active to this day, although a few have pushed to 190 mph.

Sources: Toyota, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Subaru, Honda, Nissan

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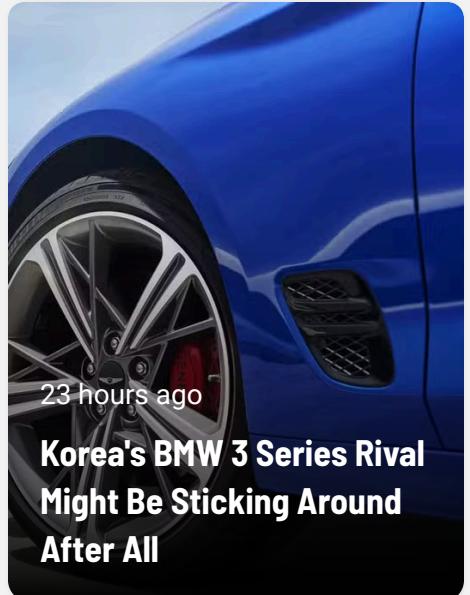
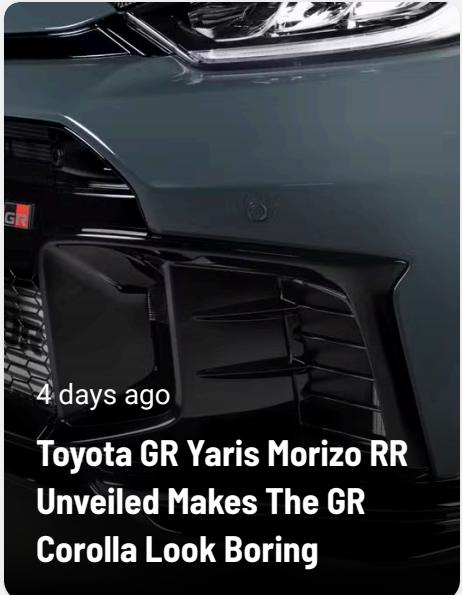
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