

30: The Legendary Toyota MR2

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Still dominating a racetrack near you. How a maxed-out mid-engine changed the course for performance cars around the world, featuring three MR2 owners, hobby builders, and limit pushers.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:00:32] Alright, Kelsey, we are back. We've got a new look, some new sounds going on in the Toyota Untold Podcast. But some things have changed since the last time we were talking to everybody.

Kelsey Soule: [00:00:46] Guess who's back and better than ever? Exactly, except-

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:00:52] You and I-

Kelsey Soule: [00:00:53] Except not.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:00:55] Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: [00:00:55] So, lots of things have changed since, gosh, I don't even know when the last time we recorded a podcast in the office. Obviously, you're in the office.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:01:04] Yes. Talking to you via Zoom.

Kelsey Soule: [00:01:06] Also, recently, we had a massive storm here in Texas that no one was prepared for, particularly, my apartment because the pipes and ceiling burst and flooded my entire apartment. So, that means that my podcast equipment was also sadly lost.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:01:25] Yes. So, I'll be taking over some narrations, some recording for you short-term though because I need you back. I need you back.

Kelsey Soule: [00:01:33] Yes, of course. I will be back. But for the first couple of episodes, it will be all Tyler all the time. But I'm still around just waiting on that podcast equipment to come in, so that I can jump back in.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:01:47] That's right. But some exciting new episodes, I have to say, that-

Kelsey Soule: [00:01:51] Yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:01:52] ... that are coming up. And-

Kelsey Soule: [00:01:53] I think we're taking a little bit of a different approach this time. We've been listening to some feedback that we got on social. We've been looking for new stories, new ways to tell the Toyota story, more things that people may not know. And we're really excited about what we have coming up.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:02:08] That's right. And that's how we incorporated whether it's the new sound, new images that you'll see in social, new people that we're talking to for upcoming episodes of Toyota Untold. I can't wait. I'm personally very excited about it. Have you been surviving during this pandemic, Kelsey?

Kelsey Soule: [00:02:25] Honestly, yeah. I mean, I was doing good up until the flood. We're making it through.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:02:31] Good. Good, I'm glad. I miss human contact, I have to say. I love my family, love my kids, love my husband. He, during the storm, did some great McGyvering of stuff up in our attic to unfreeze some pipes. Very thankful for that, but I do miss other people, and humans, and going places.

Kelsey Soule: [00:02:52] Yeah.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:02:52] And we're coming up on spring break here in Texas. And literally, that was the last time I traveled was last year's spring break.

Kelsey Soule: [00:03:00] Yeah. It's crazy that it's been a year since we started staying home.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:03:05] Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: [00:03:05] So, a lot has happened but a lot has stayed the same. It hasn't really been a year, I don't really know what's going on-

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:03:13] Yeah.

Kelsey Soule: [00:03:13] But we're making it work just like everybody else.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:03:17] Time is nebulous. I don't – yeah. But we're going to make it work. We're going to help people pass the time with new episodes of the Toyota Untold Podcast. And I can't wait. And you will be back soon to narrate and be fully involved once you get all that equipment sent your way.

Kelsey Soule: [00:03:33] Absolutely, can't wait.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:03:34] All right. Without further ado, this is the MR2 episode of Toyota Untold.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:03:46] Its attainable performance that's still fun to drive, where you don't have to have a whole lot of money or spend a whole lot to have an engaging driving experience. And I wouldn't say it's a legend but it is much revered. And people, when you say you have an MR2 within Toyota, "Oh, is it the NSW20 or is it the Turbo?" And the folks at events still get excited about it even to this day. And I think that there are still very much car enthusiasts working for Toyota that are still into it. And it is very well-revered.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:04:21] The MR2, is it legend or is it a "classic"? Is it both? Does it really matter? It's one of the most revered sportscars of its day, plenty of fun features and affordability, in, really, only a way that Toyota can. So, what's the cost of fans' love affair with the MR2? For this, we have to go back to the mid-'80s, early-'90s, where sportscars had sleek angles, and having an X in the title was all the rage. NSX, 300ZX, RX7, WRX, even Buick put out the Regal GNX. It was everywhere.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:05:02] Sidenote and fun fact, when I was little, we started a fund where we put all our pennies, any pennies, you know, nickels we found in a 300ZX jar, because we thought we were going to get one. I think we collected like 50 bucks at the end of the day. We did not get it. Every carmaker had their Xs pitted against the other guys' GTs. So, where did the MR2 name come from? We've heard Midship Runabout, Mid-engine Roadster, and Mid-engine Rear-wheel drive. So, we talked to Toyota team members, Jack Ferguson, Senior Quality Engineer, Accessory Quality Engineering, and Andrew Eleazar, Development Senior Engineer, Accessory Design Engineering, and they help provide some insight.

Jack Ferguson: [00:05:45] I do know they really owned the midship phrasing, like it appears on several of the badges, and going forward on floor mats and advertising material. I think the biggest thing is at the time, it seems like sportscar names, the three-letter acronym was great, if you could find a way to weasel an X into it, all the better, because you look at a lot of the names at the time, WRX, SVX, NSX, RX7. There are so many examples of sports car needs three-letter acronym or three-character alphanumeric acronym name. So, I suspect there was probably some leveraging to make some words fit. They were on the acronym train long before they came up with Midship Runabout, but I will say the one thing that peeves me more than anything else, that was when people hyphenate it, there isn't a hyphen in MR2.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:06:36] In Japan, they referred to their vehicles by their layout quite often. So, like an FF would be a front engine front drive. FR would be front engine rear drive. And MR would be mid-engine rear drive. So, I believe there was an intention to use that designation, so that the common enthusiast would

understand. Clearly that it's midship and rear-drive.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:06:58] So, it sounds like the answer is both. Toyota was able to use the badge and branding of Midship Runabout and keep the three-digit acronym trend of the day, continuing the duality of function and style that we're going to see as an ongoing trend for the MR2. Aside from the name, what makes it different from all the other nimble sportscars of its era? And more importantly, what keeps the love of the MR2 alive all these years later?

Andrew Eleazar: [00:07:25] For me, it was the fact that it's mid-engine, but yet it was priced at where it was attainable. There's just plenty of mid-engine cars out there like Ferraris and even something like an Acura NSX, but the MR2 was at a price point where you didn't really have to worry about driving it and flagging it on the back roads or at the track. If something broke on it, it isn't terribly difficult to maintain, yet it was so fun to drive. And especially with having a mid-engine layout, the turn-in is so quick, and on the braking, it really outperforms vehicles that are front-engine. And there are very few other cars out there at that attainable price point where you could have that much fun.

Jack Ferguson: [00:08:09] But yeah. Some of the parts that would be common maintenance parts are still readily available, because they were shared with other Toyota vehicles. So, I've got the same water pump that a '90s Camry has. So, it does, it makes it more approachable from a standpoint of the mid-engine layout to be able to get that level of handling without potentially the maintenance requirements and cost of dealing with some of the European options like Porsche or some of the more exotic mid-engine cars.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:08:42] Bill Strong, Owner of Racing Strong Motorsports, Moderator of the MR2 Owners Club, and generally, just a globally recognized MR2 expert explains how small, mid-engine Roadsters like the Fiat X1/9 and the Pontiac Fiero led to the angular style and low profile that the MR2 would come to adopt.

Bill Strong: [00:09:01] When the first-generation MR2 came out in the States, it was '85, and there really wasn't a lot of competition. There's the Pontiac Fiero and the Bertone or Fiat X1/9. Those were the two major competitors, kinda in the same price point. The Fiero had set the world alight, because plastic car, it had a—I don't think it had a V6 in it just yet. Not as angular, more rounded, but really nice car at the time. And then, Toyota came out with theirs that was just nimble. It took everything from both vehicles and just took it to the next level.

Bill Strong: [00:09:37] But when the MR2 came out, you got the Toyota reliability, you have the handling of the car, which was just amazing. The fit and finish was just incredible on the Toyotas at that time and it was just a cooler-looking car. They weren't resting on the lot like some of the older cars did back then, because it was just well-done. Better interior too. And it was like Toyota thought about it when they designed it, they just didn't put gauges here and there. They actually had gauges you could use, and it told you something about driving the car.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:10:10] For the MR2, it wasn't just style and substance. Value and reliability are two things Toyota have been known for, but in that era, they weren't always a staple in sportscars.

Bill Strong: [00:10:20] I think they were somewhere around \$10,000 new, but it was a good buy. And you got a lot with it. You got a decent warranty with it. And you got an engine that pretty much was rock solid. The 4AG was a proven engine, been out a long time with a new 16-valve head plopped onto it. And it was a great little car. You could fit a ton of stuff in the trunk, in the frunk, which is the front trunk, of course, if you don't know what a frunk is. And it got great mileage for those that just weren't racers. At the time, a lot of people who were buying them were, back in the '80s, you call it secretary car, but it was a cute little car to have fun with.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:10:57] While not quite a jack of all trades, this car provided the sporty drive and racing handling for enthusiasts while also covering the reliability and gas mileage for the everyday driver. The MR2 could go from the office to the track really without missing a beat. And that's something that auto crossers really took advantage of. And auto crossing, for those of you that don't know, that's park and lot racing.

Bill Strong: [00:11:20] And then, the enthusiasts got it for auto crossing and it just dominated everything it did. Auto crossing is, I'd like to call it parking lot racing with cones. Pretty much all over United States, the SCCA or other sanctioning bodies will come in, set up a bunch of cones in a parking lot, and it's a timed event. You get three runs for the day, you pay a few bucks, and get some experience in car control and car handling. It's fun. That's how a lot of people got started racing. I'm one of them.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:11:49] We'll get to more on racing later in the episode, because in order to understand the love of racing in MR2, we have to talk about the experience of driving an MR2. Jack and Andrew are back to explain.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:12:02] I think having that mid-engine layout really helps a lot, because we're taking a lot of weight off the front axle and the center of the polar moment of inertia, which is kind of the center of gravity, is within the wheelbase of the vehicle. And so, the rotation center is closer to the center of mass. And because of that, it's able to pivot really quickly in about that center of mass. And consequently, you have that agile feeling and quick response; whereas, when you have a front-engine vehicle, that you have all that weight on the front axle, and the vehicle's not necessarily pivoting about that.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:12:43] And so, it's kind of just plowing through it, whereas a mid-engine vehicle, it doesn't have that weight up there and you can really get into the turn more quickly once you turn the wheel. All three generations have really good sight lines and driving positions. And I remember the second gen that I had, you feel like you're like in a GTP car or a prototype vehicle, because you are so low to the ground, but the sightlines are really, really low. And so, you're looking basically right at the road in front of you, so you really feel connected when you're that low.

Jack Ferguson: [00:13:16] To springboard from that, really, I think people who haven't driven them, probably, you can look at it from the outside and kind of appreciate that it's low slung. But until you're in that driver's seat or actually driving around, it struck me at one point when I was driving it, I was sitting at a stoplight, and I looked over, and it was just a Nissan Altima next to me, and I realized that the top of my roof was basically level with the bottom of where their windows started. So, until you're really in the cockpit, it's hard to appreciate just how that seating position affects you.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:13:56] For MR2 fans, there's an unanswerable question, one, two, or three, which generation has your heart? Is it the angular '80 sportscar aesthetic of the original, the Italian vibes of the second gen, or the refined, almost German third gen? We asked Jack and Andrew about their favorite.

Jack Ferguson: [00:14:17] Well, I think Drew and I are probably both going to be a little bit biased towards the second gen. It's absolutely my favorite. I have played with all three of them. I spent some time on track with the AW11. I've had, obviously, my SW20 for almost 14 years now. And then, I've played a little bit with the Spyders, the ZZW30s, and I've entertained thoughts of a project there even recently. But I think from a standpoint of, and if you look at the sales numbers, they don't lie, the AW11 outsold all of the others by a fair margin, especially here in North America, which, that actually was a surprising kind of revelation for me. I guess that I would have thought that—I guess my personal bias would have led me to believe that the second gen was the peak. But yeah, if you look at sales, the first gen really knocked it out of the park.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:15:14] I do also have that same bias for the Mark II styling. I just think the exterior is just a mini-Ferrari, mini-NSX gorgeous styling, but I have driven all three generations as well. For the Mark I, I had

a friend in high school that had one, as well as another colleague, and those are just pure, and raw, and basic, but it definitely had its own flavor. And the Mark III was kind of a more back-to-basics approach too in trying to get as light as possible. And all three have their own merits, but from a styling point of view and power point of view, I think Mark II was my favorite, but I do wish Mark II had the lightness and agility that maybe the other Mark I and Mark III has had, though.

Jack Ferguson: [00:16:03] I would agree there, and I'm glad you mentioned styling, Drew, because it's one of the things that I—the thoughts that kind of hit me as I was thinking about this was the second gen seems like it has aged the best from a standpoint of the aesthetic. It was just a good blend of being just edgy enough for its time that it has become kind of timeless in just the aesthetic shape of it, definitely a factor that's kept me around on that one.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:16:32] As you can probably tell from their responses, it's not easy to answer that question. You may start describing your favorite gen, but as you reminisce on the entire lineup of the MR2, the elements of every generations, they're pulling you in different directions. Here's Bill Strong with more.

Bill Strong: [00:16:48] It's kind of cool because there's so many different MR2s. You have the first generation, there are two versions of the normally aspirated version, then you have the supercharged version as well. Then, you have the second gen with the Mark IIs that have a different engine in it; whereas, the later '93 got an upgraded engine until '95 in the States, and then the rest of the world kept it until '98. And they had different engines in them. It was a different performance. And then, of course, the Spyder comes out, the MR2 Spyder. And again, that was a totally different look and feel to what Toyota had before. It's more Porsche-like, like the Boxster, had that kind of feel to it. A lot of people don't like the headlights, but I don't care. I just want to drive the thing. It's such a great little car. I've got three of them, one that I can actually drive every day, the other two are in the shop being converted to whatever I want to do this week.

Bill Strong: [00:17:41] Well, the most successful by sales would be the Mark I MR2, the '85, the Mark IA is what they call it, the 1985, 1986 MR2s. 100,000 were sold in '85 and over 100,000 in '86. So, they are considered the most popular ever sold. The numbers went down considerably after that, and the Mark II never hit those numbers, the Mark III never hit them as well.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:18:02] Next, the cleaning, perfecting, and of course, driving the MR2, what's the most satisfying activity? Far and wide, the answer is modding. And before I go any further, just a reminder, that modifying your vehicle with non-genuine Toyota parts can negatively affect your warranty, safety performance, and street legality. And while some people keep their MR2s strictly stock, others opt for a complete exterior and interior overhaul. And the customization options are almost infinite. A big part of owning an MR2 or any car for that matter is making it yours. Let's see what Bill, Jack, and Andrew think about the different mods and styling options.

Bill Strong: [00:18:43] I think there are multiple levels. You have the day-to-day, like the guy that keeps it stock, he just drives it, throws tires on it when it needs it, changes the oil, he participates in the community. Then, you have the guys that are the hardcore stock. Do not change those lug nuts. Those lug nuts are original equipment. You can't change the car. It has to stay like it is, because these are classic cars.

Bill Strong: [00:19:06] And then, you have the guy that first thing he does as he gets home is change everything, buys 20-inch wheels, and/or changes it into a show car, changes it into a street drag car, changes it into a race drag car, even road racing cars, track day cars. There are different levels there. And that's kind of what's cool about MR2. A lot of folks don't know what it is. They see this car that kind of looks like a Ferrari or some foreign little sports car, and they think it's kind of cool, and it does stand out.

Jack Ferguson: [00:19:36] Mine, personally, I do have a set of side skirts that I'm considering. I have not made the decision yet. But as of this point, every part that's on my car, on the exterior body is a factory part. They're not necessarily factory North American parts. Mine is, at this point, basically a clone of '98 GTS. But yeah, effectively, with just that small level of updating to me, really, is kind of, in my mind, the ideal form for the second gen.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:20:14] I do appreciate the classic look, but there is one body kit that always caught my eye and that was the TRD Japan, the 2000GT kit, the widebody kit with the wide tires. And I just really dig the look, mainly because it looks more like a race car for the streets.

Jack Ferguson: [00:20:33] And you bring up a great point on wheels, that realistically, I think the right wheels just make the car. And I've played that game myself a little bit. And I think you'd nailed it with the TRD, the Alumi-Ks, which were the variation on the work equips. That was my—it's my first set of wheels that I had on mine that just weren't the factory wheels. That's where the magic really happens, is a little bit of work for the ride height, and getting the right wheel and tire package on it.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:21:05] So, modding takes work and it's been said that working on an MR2 is a lot like riding a good horse. It will sometimes give you a lot of pushback, test your capabilities, and sometimes, even fight you, but there comes a moment where it relents and the bond is built. You finally get that alternator changed, it eventually accepts the shiny new downpipe. You and the horse, or in this case, the car, achieve a mutual respect.

Jack Ferguson: [00:21:30] I would absolutely agree with the comment about the horse. I think I've always called it character, that just from a perspective of what Toyota's offered, is it the most extreme sports car we've ever done? Not necessarily, but I feel like it does just have the most character and soul. And yeah, occasionally, it will fight you, especially like you said, getting that alternator out. I would think for me, just from my most recent endeavors, to me, the thing that-

Jack Ferguson: [00:22:03] At least for the second gen, that's where the bulk of my experience lies, I have played with the other two as well, but the second gen, I think, in this day and age, is starting to get let down by the EFI system. So, it was a relatively early turbocharged electronic fuel injection system and it's starting to show its age. So, especially the North American spec cars with the airflow meter, it causes it to run rich. I had an issue with mine, where starting, it became an exercise like a carbureted car where I have to give it some pedal to get it to start.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:22:46] Speaking of mods, gearheads always have a friend, who knows a friend, who spent years swapping out the stock MR2 engine for a V6, but what's one step further than a V6? Bill Strong tells us how his owners' club helped him achieve that next level.

Bill Strong: [00:23:01] I had talked about different engines that you could put in the MR2. One of them was the V6s, guys were already doing it. V8s, nobody done it. So, we had been discussing it. And part of the process of owning a website, you need to get your name out there. So, I sent, at the time, Sport Compact Car magazine, which is a huge magazine in the day, "Hey, this is my website, this is a club, and this is what we do." And I also said, "Here's Racing Strong Motorsports, here's my website."

Bill Strong: [00:23:30] And so, the magazine gave a little description about the MR2OC. "Yeah, typical club. All the guys talking about cars. They're Racing Strong. We kind of noticed that he had this thing about the V8 MR2. We think he really needs to stop talking about it and actually build it." So, now, it's like, I just got challenged out by a magazine.

Bill Strong: [00:23:48] So, six months go by, and I'm at my local junkyard and/or salvage yard, don't call them junkyards, my local salvage yard, and there's a Cadillac, front-wheel-drive Cadillac sitting right next to an MR2 in the junkyard. It just happened to be at the MR2. And I look over, it's like, "Huh, those are front-wheel-drive. Let's see what happens." So, I opened up the hood, get my measuring tape out, that might fit. I mean, it's going to be tight, but it might fit. And it's a Northstar V8, which at the time was a pretty darn cool engine. It's multi-valve. So, the salvage yard guy knows me. He's like, "Take the car home, strip out whatever you need, then I'll come pick it up." I'm like, "Okay," gave him a few bucks, and the rest is kind of history.

Bill Strong: [00:24:28] Over Thanksgiving in 2002, Buddy came out from West Virginia. We cut the MR2 firewall out that sits behind your back and we basically set the car on this Northstar drive train and the internet went crazy. That was fun. That was really fun. Took about six months, and I'm doing this on a shoestring budget, just had two kids, so no money. Shoestring budget, hacking away everything with basic hand tools when you should have like machine tools to do this, the internet making fun of me the whole time, but it's one of those things, I don't care. I'm having fun doing this and learning.

Bill Strong: [00:25:04] After I started that, there were other people that looked at it, and there was a gentleman in New Zealand, Wayne. Wayne, who I'm still friends with, he actually had stuffed a Toyota V8 into the back of his MR2 using a turbo transmission into a Mark I. And then, Paul Woods over in the UK was kind of contemplating what he was going to do, and he ended up using an Audi V8, turned north-south using the Audi transaxle, everything kind of lines up if you cut firewalls away and redo everything. But that's kind of where those ended up. My V8, per the Toyota MR2 magazine, was considered the first V8 MR2 for the street.

Bill Strong: [00:25:41] We never really drove it on the street. We drove around the yard, because part of the process of building a car is you actually have to know what you're doing on all the parts. That wasn't me. I kind of learned things as I go. I'm not a trained mechanic, but I just learned by doing. And there's a lot of mistakes I made on that car. I don't think I would have ever driven it on the street, because it probably would have killed me, just my welding wasn't very good and just all kinds of things. But ultimately, it was fun and it led to where I'm kind of at today.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:26:13] After all the planning, modding, parting out, testing, fixing, and testing again, it's time to get the MR2 out on the track, but how does a car enthusiast go from driver to racer? All of our guests shared some of their racing experiences through the lens of MR2.

Bill Strong: [00:26:30] In 2000, I went to my first track day and just watched, because I wanted to see what exactly it was. With the SE2001 event, they did a track day at Little Talladega, they call it. It's a little tiny track outside Talladega, Alabama, that you can do track days at. So, I watched that, because my car was blown up, so I couldn't participate in it. So, the next year, I went back, I just had a blast. And after that, street racing was a big deal back then, because Fast and Furious was just coming out. We were getting a lot of kids wanting to emulate that. And not just kids, but older people as well. So, one of the things that my partners with the MR2OC talked about was, "Why don't we start doing track day sponsored by the MR2OC? Let's get these kids off the street and get them at a track." And it worked.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:27:17] Well, when I first took my MR2 out to a track down here, it was one of those HPD driver events, and I was paired with a driver who was used to racing spec Miatas, the Mazda MX-5 Roadsters. And I wasn't familiar with the track, but he was quite familiar. And with him by my side, he was telling me where to break, and where to accelerate and turn. And I remember we ended up spinning the car about three times, mainly because he was telling me the braking, and accelerating points, and shift points, based on his experience from driving a Miata, but Miata definitely has a much different balance.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:28:01] And I learned from day one that you need to drive the MR2 differently than you drive other vehicles. You really shouldn't be trail-braking too much into the turns. You can turn in sooner and

get on the throttle earlier. But just things with the handling that maybe people who aren't used to driving a mid-engine vehicle like that aren't used to. And so, it actually prepared me to try to catch the slide quite a bit sooner and it kept me on my toes. So, I'll never forget that first time going for a few spins quite literally in the car.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:28:39] There's racing, and then there's racing. 24 Hours of Le Mans, that's right, Le Mans, not Le Man, is a series of endurance races with one rule, between car, mods, and parts, you can only spend \$500. The race actually holds the Guinness World Record for the most participants in a single race with 216 cars. The MR2 has always been quite a staple at the Le Mans race, taking all conceivable forms, from an MR2 Spyder Frankenstein with the Volkswagen Vanagon to a plane-powered MR2 boasting an aircraft engine from the 1930s.

Bill Strong: [00:29:14] If you're not familiar with 24 Hours of Le Mans, it's a \$500 car, you put a cage in it and go racing. I kind of think of it as a, and a few people think of it like this, it's a party where a race broke out. We got together a bunch of, actually, moderators from our forum and we called the team Mod Squad Racing. And we just had a blast at our first Le Mans race. It was like a hundred cars packed on the Carolina Motorsports Park track and the rest is history. So, we just said, "Forget all the show cars or the street cars, we're going racing." So, that's basically what we did.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:29:49] A party it may be, but 24 Hours of Le Mans also provides a chance for some of Toyota's engineering teams to flex their mechanical muscles. Jack Ferguson recounts his own experience from the race.

Jack Ferguson: [00:30:01] We campaigned a couple of cars, one of which was an '85 MR2. I was crew chief on that car and also one of the drivers. And I'll never forget the experience with that just because if you haven't done wheel-to-wheel racing, especially in an environment where it's fairly low buck and most of the people around you care just as little about their car as you do about yours, it's really life-changing. It's some of the most fun I've ever had. And that car, shoutout to the Daimondai 2 team, which is Japanese for big trouble, that car ended up going on to become the first mid-engine car ever to win a 24 Hours of Le Mans event.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:30:44] The Tail of the Dragon is another car fan mecca frequented by MR2 owners. A stretch of US Highway 129, straddling the Carolina and Tennessee border, at the edge of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, the Tail boasts 318 turns over the course of 11 miles. It's isolated on a scenic highway with no intersections. Both Jack Ferguson and Bill Strong shared their stories from the Dragon's Tail.

Bill Strong: [00:31:08] We used to call this little drive called Strong Stock. Somebody named it that, so I just kept it, because it sounded cool. Strong Stock, we come out. We do little rallies, but not time, not for speed. It's just traveling through the countryside, and going through the small roads, and just having fun, nothing dangerous or anything like that. Those are super fun times with Strong Stocks. And we did the Tail of the Dragon a couple of times. It's like a hundred-something turns on this road within so many miles, and it's just fun. A lot of people show up for that. And those are good times.

Jack Ferguson: [00:31:43] The first time I took it to the Tail of the Dragon, it was a longer round trip than I had been in that car with a little bit more turning in anger than the other trips that I had. We were all excited, getting ready the night before, just checking out everybody's cars in a friend's garage and somebody notices a puddle under mine. So, I get to digging in. And this is, probably, 9:00 PM the night before we were planning to leave. And as I popped the hood, I find a pinhole leak sprung in the radiator. And it's just sprung coolant.

Jack Ferguson: [00:32:21] Being desperate to not cancel the trip, I attempted heroic 11-hour repairs and I ended cleaning the spot. And ultimately, just patched it with JB Weld, and decided that would hold. I gave it a few hours of shakedown the next morning just to make sure I wasn't still losing coolant. And we went on our merry way the next day. I kept all my coolant until I got back, and that repair, I think, lasted a total of about nine days.

Jack Ferguson: [00:32:55] But it did still bite me. As we were just getting into the Dragon Proper, I go to downshift from third into second, and second is not there. Then, with a little playing around, I determined, the fourth also wasn't there. So, I'm convinced that I've broken the shifter cable, but we still have 11 miles of 300 and some odd turns until we get to a realistic pull off. So, I hang my head out the window and holler at the friend in front of me, he's like, "No, go. I don't have second. I've got first or third."

Jack Ferguson: [00:33:29] So, we get to the end of the run at Tabcat Bridge after some creative shifting. I determined, at that point, I'm convinced I've broken the cable, so I just resigned myself to driving the probably four hours home with only first, third, and fifth, because I find out in the parking lot that I don't have reverse either. Turns out it wasn't the cable. So, I drove it all the way home with three gears for almost nothing. There's a little clip that retains the end of the shifter cable housing on the transmission, and that clip had fallen out, and that just created enough play in the shifter cable that it could push, but it couldn't pull. So, yeah, that was an interesting trip, and that's the reason I still have four of those clips in my glove box at all times.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:34:18] And the connection with other fans is cross-continent too. Bill Strong helped facilitate this global camaraderie around the MR2 on the forum, MR2 Owners Club, or MR2OC.

Bill Strong: [00:34:28] When you're moderating or adminning a small forum, it's easy. When you're moderating a forum that has a worldwide reach, it's not so easy. You have the guys in California that can't do certain things because of emissions testing. You've got guys up in the northeast that want to do things a certain way. And then, you have the guys in England, which are pretty hardcore group of MR2 owners over there, and they have their way of doing things.

Bill Strong: [00:34:54] And trying to get everybody to understand that everybody has a different way of working on their cars, of customizing them, but it's different everywhere you go. So, trying to get people to understand that, and then getting everybody to work together, and kind of helping each other out. The fun side of it is that there's just so many people like yourself out there. It took us a little time to understand, because there's no instruction book on how to run a forum on the internet.

Bill Strong: [00:35:19] It's just—a friend of mine, Armando. You remember that part about having to put an engine in the car at a five-star hotel, we were up all night trying to get this thing working. Finally, Armando convinces me, this isn't going to be done. I say, okay. We were tired. We'd been up, no sleep, whatsoever, in easily 36 hours. So, he says, let's go to breakfast. So, we go to breakfast, and ends up, I'm talking, and I pick up my coffee, finally, I put it down, and Armando's face fell down right into his pancakes. He was so tired. It's just one of the stories that you're out with car friends and just crazy stuff like that happens. We all share stories, sit around at night, just drink some beers, and talk cars.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:36:06] Like anything that truly binds a group of people together, it's the experiences you share and the stories you walk away with that create a real connection. The highs of experiencing racing for the first time and the lows of having to repair a broken clutch on the Dragon Path, when these things happen with other car fans, it creates an unforgettable bond.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:36:25] The MR2 isn't only the car to breed these experiences, but it's certainly one of the most memorable. Before we close things out, we'd be remiss if we didn't bring up the one thing on every MR2 fans' mind, will it ever return? If the Supra made a resurgence, it seems possible that this mid-engine beauty might eventually get its own reboot. For now, our lips are sealed. But here's Bill, Jack, and Andrew with their wish list for a 21st Century MR2.

Bill Strong: [00:36:54] If you look at the progression of the MR2, lightweight sportscar when it first came out with the Mark I. Mark II was a little heavier, more of a GT class car, more refined, still fast, but more refined. And then, a Spyder came out, which was not as friendly for traveling, because it just didn't have all the storage

bases the other MR2s did. Some people were disappointed in the engine. They wanted a turbocharged, supercharged V6s, V8s, or whatever.

Bill Strong: [00:37:20] But I think it's a great little car to go around, and super lightweight. I mean, it's actually lighter than the Mark I. And it's probably one of the best handling MR2s ever. Longer wheelbase. Even though it looks smaller, it's actually a really big car. I parked my Spyder next to my Mark II, and I was like, wow, it looks smaller, but it's not. It's actually larger. And it's a safer car.

Bill Strong: [00:37:41] So, the newer cars are probably going to be a lot cleaner. You're probably going to have a hybrid setup, which I had no issues with the hybrids, there seems to be a few people out there that do. If it's going to be a sports car, it's going to be an MR2, and it's going to have some sort of hybrid setup, because that's kind of where the world's going. It's going to be nimble, probably pretty lightweight for a hybrid setup and pretty powerful. I don't think Toyota is going to risk the history of the MR2 on something that doesn't perform well.

Bill Strong: [00:38:12] But the problem with it is companies, nowadays, have to trademark names, and I know that MR2 is not trademarked yet. Once they trademark it, that's a go button. It's coming. Toyota just updated the trademark on the Celica, so I believe that's the next car to be pushed out by Toyota, which is great, because it's the three sisters, the Supra, Celica, and MR. I think they will. The next generation is going to be really, really interesting, especially with the way that Toyota is moving.

Andrew Eleazar: [00:38:44] I'd like to see an homage to the Mark II just because I think that from a form point of view, the basic form of it, the design language was so classic. I'd love to see a modern rendition of that same basic-form language.

Jack Ferguson: [00:38:59] Yeah, I couldn't agree more, and I am with you, Drew. I would lament that the pop-up headlines couldn't stick around. They aren't among my favorite features. And I think there's actually a lot of evidence in the mid-engine options that are out there that could lend to that from an aspect of the proportions. Even some of the other options like the Tesla Roadster, I do think there's a case study to be made there in kind of the modern mid-engine design language. I think there's evidence out there to what could be.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:39:30] As we wind things down, we have to make a quick plug for an MR2 event. Yes, a real event coming this May. The North American MR2 Nationals is happening in the Dallas-Fort Worth area with events spread throughout the weekend at ATS Racing Texas Motorplex and Motorsports Range. For more information on the meet, search for MR2 Nationals 2021 on Facebook and we'll have that link for you in the show notes too. And we'll leave you with one last note from Bill Strong to sum it all up.

Bill Strong: [00:39:59] Thank you very much, folks. And drive them. That's all I ask. Just drive the cars.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:40:03] Thanks for listening to Toyota Untold. This is Tyler.

Tyler Litchenberger: [00:40:06] A reminder that modifying your vehicle with non-Genuine Toyota parts can negatively affect your warranty, safety performance, and street legality. The opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the guest(s) and/or host(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of Toyota or Lexus, divisions of Toyota Motor Sales USA, Inc. Please note that Toyota Motor Sales USA, Inc. is not responsible for any errors, or the accuracy, or timeliness of the content provided. Used with permission. All rights reserved worldwide.