

Subaru: Portrait of a Car Brand

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Introduction

Subaru: Portrait of a Car Brand is the compelling story of how a relatively small Japanese automaker became a global icon, distinguished by its commitment to engineering, safety, performance, and community. From its roots in the aircraft industry to its current status as a beloved car brand with a fiercely loyal customer base, Subaru's journey is not just an industrial tale, but a reflection of the values that drive innovation and connect people across generations and continents.

The evolution of Subaru is deeply intertwined with twentieth-century Japanese history, technological ambition, and shifting cultural landscapes. What began as an aeronautical engineering enterprise—crafting engines and airplanes for the skies—shifted post-war to meet the demand for affordable, reliable transportation. The founding of Fuji Heavy Industries in 1953, and the symbolic choice of the “Subaru” name, marked the dawn of a new era. From the tiny and endearing Subaru 360 to the rugged, adventure-ready Outback, Subaru’s product line has consistently embraced the “road less traveled,” delivering vehicles that are both practical and distinctive.

Central to Subaru’s lasting appeal are its groundbreaking technical decisions: the steadfast use of the Boxer engine and the development of Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive. These two features, once considered niche or unnecessary in the broader automobile market, have become mainstays of Subaru’s identity, resonating with drivers who prioritize safety, performance, and confidence on any road. This commitment to distinctive engineering has not only shaped Subaru’s product offerings but has also influenced industry trends and even government safety standards.

Yet Subaru’s story is far richer than engineering and sales figures. It is, above all, a brand that has cultivated values of trust, community, and social responsibility. From its “Love Promise” campaigns in North America to its rigorous environmental policies and enduring commitment to safety, Subaru has built more than just vehicles—it has forged a brand ethos that connects with people’s lives and aspirations. The company’s marketing and community engagement strategies have cemented Subaru as a brand with heart, inspiring devotion among customers who see their cars as integral partners in life’s adventures.

Through a tapestry of historical milestones, legendary models, breakthroughs in motorsport, and stories from real-world drivers, this book charts the unfolding of Subaru’s legacy as an automotive innovator. Drawing on corporate archives, engineering blueprints, and the voices of designers, engineers, and enthusiasts, we will trace how a modest manufacturer became a household name and a champion of the spirit of adventure.

As Subaru moves into the future—embracing electrification, AI, and new visions of mobility—the brand’s journey offers valuable lessons on resilience, creativity, and the enduring power of a clear vision. The chapters ahead invite you to explore the evolution of Subaru, not only as a car brand but as a symbol of confidence, innovation, and driving joy that has left a profound mark on the world of automobiles.

CHAPTER ONE: Origins in the Skies: From Aircraft to

Automobiles

The story of Subaru, a brand now synonymous with rugged reliability and all-wheel-drive prowess, doesn't begin on asphalt but in the boundless blue of the sky. Before its automobiles traversed roads less traveled, the company's predecessors were soaring through the air, designing and manufacturing aircraft. This unique genesis provided a distinct engineering philosophy that would ultimately shape every car to bear the six-star emblem.

The earliest roots of what would become Subaru trace back to 1915, with the establishment of the Aircraft Research Laboratory. This pioneering venture was founded by Chikuhei Nakajima, a former naval officer with a vision for aviation in Japan. His ambition quickly propelled the company forward, and by 1917, it was officially known as Nakajima Aircraft Company. It was Japan's first aircraft manufacturer, quickly establishing itself as a key player in the nation's burgeoning aviation industry.

As the world progressed through the early 20th century and into the era of global conflict, Nakajima Aircraft Company's prominence grew. During World War II, it became a prolific manufacturer, supplying numerous aircraft to the Japanese government. The company produced some of Japan's most well-known planes of the era, including the agile Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa (Oscar) fighter, the Nakajima B5N (Kate) torpedo bomber, famously involved in the Pearl Harbor attack, and the Nakajima Ki-84 Hayate (Frank), considered one of the best Japanese fighters of the war. This period saw Nakajima establish itself alongside Mitsubishi Heavy Industries as one of Japan's two largest aircraft manufacturers.

The end of World War II brought a dramatic shift for Japan and, consequently, for Nakajima Aircraft. With the Allied occupation, the production and research of aircraft were prohibited, leading to the company's forced dissolution. This had a profound impact on Nakajima, which, unlike some of its contemporaries, had not diversified significantly into other heavy industries like shipbuilding.

In 1950, Nakajima Aircraft Company was reorganized and divided into twelve smaller corporations under the Japanese government's anti-zaibatsu legislation, designed to break up large industrial and financial monopolies. This period of fragmentation, while challenging, also laid the groundwork for a new direction. The engineers and managers, steeped in the precision and innovation of aerospace manufacturing, began to look for new applications for their expertise.

Out of this dissolution, a new entity began to take shape. In 1953, five of these twelve spin-off companies—Fuji Kogyo, Fuji Jidosha, Omiya Fuji Kogyo, Utsunomiya Sharyo, and Tokyo Fuji Sangyo—merged to form Fuji Heavy Industries (FHI). This strategic consolidation marked a pivotal moment, as it brought together a diverse range of

manufacturing capabilities, including scooter manufacturing, coach-building, engine production, and chassis construction.

The establishment of Fuji Heavy Industries was driven by a clear ambition: to enter the rapidly growing automotive industry. Kenji Kita, the astute CEO of FHI at the time, was a passionate advocate for this new venture. He recognized the immense opportunity in post-war Japan, where the number of operational cars was incredibly low, creating a vast demand for affordable and reliable transportation.

Kita envisioned a Japanese car with a Japanese name, a concept he "had been cherishing in his heart." While he sought suggestions from within the company for their first car, none quite captured his imagination. Ultimately, he chose "Subaru," the Japanese name for the Pleiades star cluster. This celestial cluster, also known as the "Six Sisters" or "six-star group," held symbolic significance, representing the five companies that had merged to form Fuji Heavy Industries, with the sixth "star" being FHI itself. This evocative name and its accompanying six-star logo would become an enduring emblem of the brand's origins and its unified vision.

With a name chosen and a clear direction, Fuji Heavy Industries embarked on its automotive journey. The first tangible result of this ambition was the prototype development code-named P-1. This four-wheel passenger vehicle, completed in February 1954, was a significant step. It featured Japan's first domestically manufactured monocoque body, a testament to the engineering prowess carried over from aircraft design. The P-1 also incorporated a front-wheel wishbone-type independent suspension with a coil spring and double-action oil damper combination, and a rear-wheel rigid axle suspension with a three-leaf spring and double-action oil damper combination, promising excellent riding comfort and driving stability for its time.

The P-1 was later officially named the Subaru 1500. However, despite its innovative design, the Subaru 1500 faced significant hurdles. Only twenty units were manufactured in 1954, with eleven using an engine sourced from Peugeot and built by Fuji Precision Technology (which later became Prince Motor Company), and the remaining nine using an in-house developed engine. Production was hampered by multiple supply issues and the challenging market conditions, particularly with larger manufacturers like Toyota and Prince also preparing to release new cars in the 1500cc class.

While the Subaru 1500 did not see mass production, its development was a crucial learning experience. Six of the twenty Subaru 1500 units were provided to taxi companies in various Japanese cities for private testing, yielding successful results. This early foray into automobile manufacturing, though limited in scale, showcased Fuji Heavy Industries' engineering capabilities and its determination to establish a foothold in the automotive world. The precision and attention to detail honed in

aircraft manufacturing, where even the heads of rivets were filed down to save weight, would continue to influence Subaru's approach to vehicle construction. The skies had given way to the roads, and a new automotive icon was slowly, but surely, beginning to take flight.

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