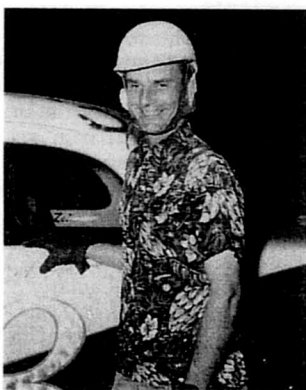


Behind the Wheel with Johnny Zeke

**J**ohnny Zeke was a racecar driver, promoter, starter, driving instructor, crew chief and a member of the Air Corps during WW II. Johnny "Zukowski" Zeke grew up across the street from the Castle Hill Speedway in the Bronx. He earned a Bachelor's degree in banking and finance from NYU. Even though he was racing, he went to work as a field rep and crew chief for Grumman Aircraft on Long Island in 1950. John remained with Grumman until retiring in 1984. While employed there, John and his family Wife, Veronica, and daughter, Christine) lived in Levittown until he was transferred by Grumman in 1972 to California where he still resides. One of John's biggest racing fans was his very pretty wife, Veronica, a former model who was also a scorekeeper at Islip Speedway.



Johnny Zeke showing one of his colorful shirts he wore when he was racing (Picture taken at the Freeport Stadium)

John began his auto racing career driving midget racing cars during the 1939 season at the Bronx Coliseum in New York. After the war, John raced midgets with the Auto Racing Association and the American Racing Drivers Club. He raced on dirt as well as asphalt tracks during his long career. During the 1948 season, while racing several nights a week and against the best drivers of the time such as Bill Schindler, Bill Holmes, Tony Bonadies and Len Duncan, Johnny Zeke won 13 main events and then 20 main events in 1949. He was crowned the midget racing champion three years in a row; 1949, 1950 and 1951 at Freeport Stadium.

Johnny was among the first drivers to race stock cars in the Northeast. Driving a modified 1937 Ford Coupe, he won the indoor driving championship at the Kingsbridge Armory in the Bronx for the 1950 season. Once the stock cars came on the scene, Zeke was soon running about 100 stock car events a season. Some of the stock car races were then being run on tracks that were built for the smaller midget racing cars which made the racing very close. During the late 1950s and early 1960s stock car racing took over as the top auto racing division and it was immensely popular with the fans. Midget racing made a comeback in the sixties and is still going on today at tracks all around the country.

Johnny's first win in stock car racing came at New York's Dexter Park in Woodhaven Queens driving the # 1 Trunz Meat Special, a 1939 Ford Coupe with a souped-up flathead engine. A bit of a showman, Zeke always wore white pants and colorful shirts when racing. His first win driving a midget came in a 100-lap indoor championship event at the Kingsbridge Armory in New York. His most memorable stock car victory was a 200-lap race at Dexter Park. He said, "That was a real slam-bang race but my car held together and I was fortunate enough to win." That's an understatement, to say the least, as Dexter Park's track was literally formed around a baseball diamond. Just imagine cars racing around home plate! Zeke said, "Just for your car to stay in one piece for that many laps was very rare in those days."



Johnny Zeke being interviewed by Duke Donaldson, Freeport promoter and M.C. for W.P.L.X Friday night live T.V. show while 2 members of his crew work on the #53 Wozniak Offy midget racecars

During the 1956 season at Islip Speedway, NASCAR conducted a racing driver's school with Johnny Zeke as the head instructor. During NASCAR Speed Weeks in February, 1957, on the famous beach and road course in Daytona Beach, Florida, Johnny raced in a special 100-lap modified race. Built right here on Long Island, the car was a red and cream 1937 Plymouth Coupe # X-111

with a 1957 V-8 Chrysler engine that would develop about 400 horsepower and hit close to 160 M.P.H. on the long straightway. The Plymouth had a Ford front and rear suspension with the engine moved back about 18 inches. John had the help of Art Drury of Queens, a top notch engine builder. Toward the end of the 1957 season, Johnny brought the # X-111 Plymouth Coupe to Islip Speedway just to see how it would perform on a short track. The car did so well that Johnny won the last three main events of the season.

Johnny Zeke holds quite a few records on Long Island, including nine straight stock car main event victories and 26 main event wins during one season. In 1953, Zeke raced in early NASCAR late model (later called Winston Cup and now Nextel Cup) events on the one-mile dirt track at Langhorne, Pa. During his career Johnny raced three-quarter midgets, full midgets, sports cars and stock cars. After retiring from active racing, Johnny became the race starter at Islip Speedway and a very good one at that. Then in the late sixties, Johnny gave up starting races and once again did some driving in both midgets and stock cars, finally retiring for good at the end of 1968. Among my great racing memories are the times I raced side by side with Johnny Zeke.

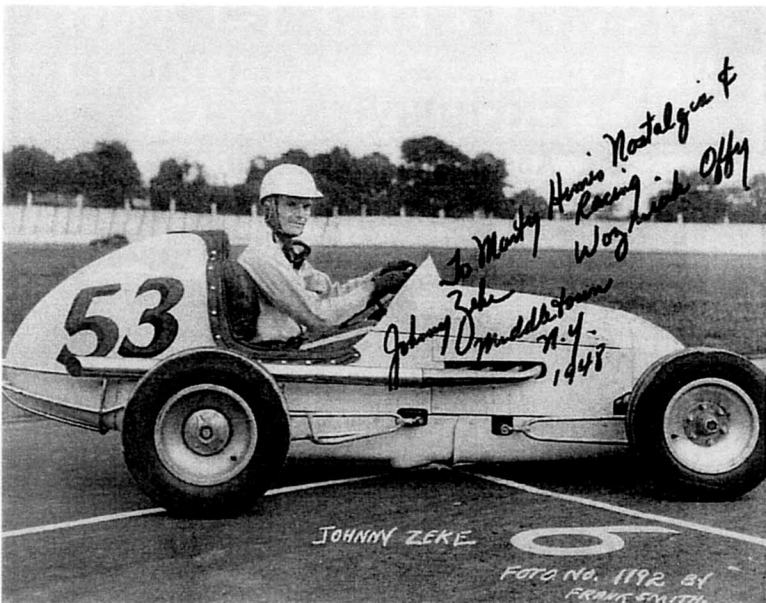
Johnny not only competed in the sport of auto racing but in 1936, he made the finals on the Olympic team for high diving and was supposed to go to Germany along with the famed Jessie Owens. But just before it was time to go John suffered a serious ear injury and could not attend.

He belonged to several auto racing clubs including the A.R.A., the A.R.D.C., on which he served on the board of Governors, NASCAR and the Allstate Stock Car Racing Club, of which he was the president and also the Long Island Overall 1951 Season Champion. The Long Island track championship included Freeport Stadium, Dexter Park and Islip Speedway. Also at one time during the late 1940s, Johnny Zeke became the racing promoter at the Deer Park Speedrome which featured midget auto racing on Sunday afternoons. As a matter of fact, the first race Johnny Zeke promoted at Deer Park Speedrome on Sunday March 23rd, 1947, was won by Long Island driver Chet Gibbons driving Lynbrook's Frank Curtis red and cream Offenhauser- powered midget # 5. Chet won the first qualifying race and the semi-final and then went on to win the main event and set a new 25-lap track record in the process. That winning car, by the way, is on display in the Himes Museum in Bay Shore along with Johnny Zeke memorabilia. ●

**JOHNNY ZEKE PRESENTS**  
**Midget Auto Racing at**  
**Deer Park Speedrome**  
**SUNDAY AFTERNOONS - 2 P. M.**  
 DEER PARK AVE., DEER PARK, L. I.  
**100 - LAPS - 100**  
**Eastern States Championship Race**  
 SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 9  
 CHILDREN UNDER 12 YEARS FREE  
 A.R.A. SANCTION—OPEN COMPETITION

Ad for Johnny Zeke Promotion at Deer Park Speedrome (taken from Nassau Daily Review Star, Long Island Newspaper 1947)

Marty Himes is the owner-curator of the nationally recognized Himes Museum of Motor Racing Nostalgia in Bay Shore. (631) 666-4912



Johnny Zeke, #53 Wozniak Offy Victory Speedway 1/5 mile paved track Middletown, New York Main Event Winner 1948