

# National Sprint Car Hall of Fame & Museum

## MIKE NAZARUK

Mike Nazaruk was born on October 2, 1921, in Newark (NJ) where his widowed mother spoke only Ukrainian. He had two sisters, Pauline and Kate. Prior to entering the U.S. Armed Services in World War II, Mike experienced midget racing. After his release from the Marine Corps, where he was a very deserving war hero on Guam and Guadalcanal, Mike picked up a job driving a florist's delivery truck and then another as a welder in the Long Island Grumman aircraft construction plant.

However, he later told car owner Clarence "Mutt" Anderson, "All the time I was at war, I promised myself if I ever got out alive, I'd be a race driver."

In 1946, Mike returned to the midget ranks with the small American Racing Association (ARA) and is remembered for crashing through the Freeport (NY) Speedway barrier in a mishap which injured 14 spectators.

The following year Nazaruk moved up to the American Race Drivers Club (ARDC) and won the 1947 track titles at Rhinebeck (NY) Speedway and Stapleton (Staten Island, NY) Speedway, which was also known as Thompson Stadium. He won six features that year driving for "Red" Eckert and Walt Gerner.

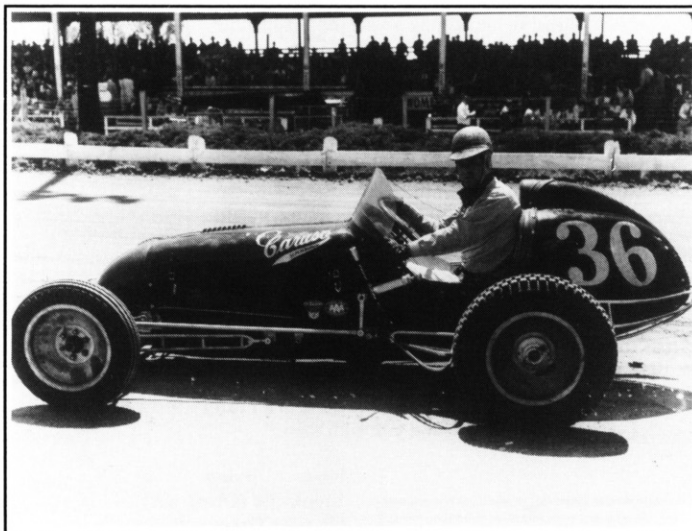
In 1948, driving the 'Buck' Wheeler 62 Offy and the famed Mike Caruso midget, Nazaruk was named the Victory Speedway (Middletown, NY) ARDC midget track champion. He won over twenty features that year, including four at Middletown, three each at Albany (NY), Paterson (NJ) and West Springfield (MA), two at Bridgeport (CT), and one each at Avon (NY), Danbury (CT) and Pittston (PA). Many of the wins were against his teammate "Broncho Bill" Schindler.

Mike was the 1949 and 1953 ARDC midget champion. In '49 he drove the Mike Caruso and Tony Plakstis cars. The next year he won the Hatfield (PA) track title. During that same year, Nazaruk, Schindler, Walt Ader, Lee Wallard and Walt Brown (who worked at the same aircraft plant that Mike did) all found themselves racing with the American Automobile Association (AAA), the sanction of the Indianapolis 500. In 1953, Mike won the inaugural "Hut Hundred" AAA midget race at the Terre Haute (IN) fairgrounds.

The early 1950s were the salty-tongued Mike Nazaruk's heyday in AAA 'big car' racing. He was known as being unusually brave. He would never admit to being scared, although the ragged way in which he drove usually terrified everyone around him. Johnnie Parsons once said, "Mike, you worry me", to which Nazaruk swaggered, "How the hell can you say that? I'm beautiful out there!"

And he once told Johnny Thomson, "The trouble with you, Thomson, is that after someone passes you, you don't fight back. Be like me. There's no son-of-a-bitch that can make me back down."

In 1950, Mike finished fourth in the AAA Eastern Division, behind the legendary Tommy Hinnershitz, Otis Stine and Mark Light. Mike scored sprint wins that year aboard Mike Caruso's number 36 machine at Roy Richwine's Williams Grove Speedway in Mechanicsburg (PA), Harrington (DE) and Rutland (VT).



Mike Nazaruk

(Bruce Craig Collection)

In 1951, in his rookie year at the Indianapolis 500, Nazaruk started seventh for owner Jim Robbins. Early in the race he followed mechanic Frankie Del Roy's advice and conserved his tires. However, feeling constrained, he soon began to open the Kurtis Offy up and he eventually burned out a tire. The extra pit stop dropped him to second place finish behind Lee Wallard. Although he was disgruntled at the time, it was an amazing performance by a real racer!

His reputation for laying it on the line each and every time earned him some of the top rides on the East Coast and even in the Midwest. He drove sprints for four seasons at such feared Midwest 'high banks' as Winchester (IN), Salem (IN) and Dayton (OH), against the likes of Duane "Pappy" Carter and Troy Ruttman.

Asked his opinion of 'the Hills', Nazaruk grinned and said, "I got nothing against the hills. Any bastard who can steer a sprint car with his eyes always out of focus can win on the hills."

Nazaruk finished the '51 season fifth in points in the AAA Midwestern Division, behind Ruttman, Carter, Joe James and "Doc" Shanebrook. He recorded one win aboard the Charlie Engle car at Dayton (OH).

The Long Islander, who missed the '52 Indy 500, won the championship car race on June 8th of that year at the Wisconsin State Fairgrounds in Milwaukee. It was at that same event that Johnny

McDowell was killed. Less than a week later Nazaruk set a new 100-lap midget record at Dayton and followed it up with a win in September in a hundred-lap midget main at Indy's Sixteenth Street Speedway for August "Gus" Hoffman and "Mutt" Anderson. And he again finished the AAA Midwest point season in fifth, behind Joe James, Gene Force, Pat O'Connor and "Red" Renner. His sprint wins came at Dayton (twice) and Terre Haute.

Mike finished 21st at Indy in 1953 with owner Lee Elkins of Kalamazoo (MI) and mechanic Anderson. On September 27th of that year he set a new 100-lap record at Winchester (83.12 mph average speed) with the McNamara Trucking sprinter. And he completed the AAA Midwestern season in third place following champion Pat O'Connor and runner-up Bob Sweikert. Besides Winchester, his sprint wins again came at Dayton and Terre Haute.

1954 brought a fifth place finish at Indy with Elkins, Anderson, and McNamara. Then another track record at Dayton on July 25th, this time a new 50-lap sprint car standard (82.84 mph average speed). And another third in Midwestern points, behind champion O'Connor and Mike's bitter rival Eddie Sachs. Besides Dayton (twice), "Iron Mike" won at Winchester, Salem, Williams Grove and Langhorne (PA). The Pennsylvania wins came aboard the Ted Nyquist number 29 machine.

On March 20, 1955, Nazaruk won at Langhorne (PA) in the Nyquist Offy in the 25-mile AAA Eastern Inaugural Sweepstakes. It was the same race in which friend/rival Larry "Crash" Crockett of Columbus (IN) was killed.

Tragically, and ironically, Mike Nazaruk was killed less than two months later on May 1st at Langhorne. He was suffering from the flu that day and he was asked why he was even racing. His reply was not surprising, "Aw, I need the money."

Also not surprising was the fact that he was leading the sprint race by a large margin when the tail of his Nyquist Special slapped the wall. According to witness David Bell, "Mike reached up to wipe his goggles and the fast charging Offy got away from him and slammed into the fence, bouncing back on the track for a run of 300 feet as he fought to bring it under control. The rampaging mount then blasted through the fence and began a series of rolls on its side. Mike was thrown 150 yards away on the grass."

The Belmore (NY) resident was pronounced dead on arrival at Lower Bucks Hospital in nearby Bristol Township. According to daughter Marie, who was age eight at the time of his death, "One day my dad went to a race and never came back. He had some kind of flu or cold, and he was taking medicine, probably an antihistamine. He had been running a fever and my mother asked him to

### ( Mike Nazaruk Bio Continued Below )

please not go. Then I remember that he hit his head on the car door getting in. That was the last I saw of him. Later a priest arrived at our front door to notify Mom that he had been killed.

Mike Nazaruk was survived by his wife, the former Marie Welke whom he married in 1946 and two daughters, Marie and Kathy.

Following his death, many of his friends and rivals offered their impressions of one of the bravest of the brave. According to AAA official Tommy Nicholson, "Nazaruk was just a hell-of-a-fighter. He had something chewing inside of him. He was fearless. He didn't care whether the wheels were wobbling or anything. All he knew was 'stand on it.' You never knew when that s.o.b. was hurt."

Fellow midget driver and mechanic Charlie Szekendy concurred, "He'd say 'put the oil, water and fuel in; I'll manhandle it'."

Said car owner and mechanic "Mutt" Anderson, "He was a man's man. He was one of the all-around toughest drivers that ever lived. I never thought there was a race car built that could kill him."

And from racing official Russ Clendenen, "He was not as rough as he talked. And Mike took care of his money. He didn't spend it foolishly."

According to mechanic Clint Brawner, "He wanted to make as much money racing as he could in a short time, then quit. Nazaruk figured he might not

live through it anyway. But, if he did, he wanted to have plenty of money set aside."

Troy Ruttman once said about the driver who is now buried in Pinelawn National Cemetery on Long Island, he was "the best driver in America."

But maybe it was daughter Marie Nazaruk Stone who said it best when she recalled "He was very strong, very loving. I remember travelling quite a bit to the state fairs. It was a hard way for him to make a living and it was an odd occupation for a man with a wife and two kids, but he enjoyed it. He was a good father and a good provider."