

A STORY 50 YEARS IN THE MAKING
BY FRANK DRUCKER, Publicity Director, Empire City @ Yonkers Raceway

YONKERS, NY, Tuesday, December 3, 2019—Every racetrack has them, folks whose names don't appear in the program, but without whom the program doesn't come close to getting off the ground.

Yonkers Raceway is no exception. The joint doesn't conduct 230-odd cards a year with very few hitches without them.

Do not refer to them as innominate. Do refer to them as invaluable.

Arthur Webb is one such person. To friends, of which he counts many, he's just 'Zeke,' and Zeke the caretaker is retiring after 50 years when Yonkers' 2019 season ends Tuesday night, Dec. 17th.

"It's time," Zeke said. "At least that what my wife (Mary) told me."

It seems Zeke, a 67-year-old native North Carolinian ('Running Rapids, near the Virginia line'), had no choice but to hang around with horses. His grandparents worked with them, while his two sisters and seven brothers—all older—were part of the Roosevelt and Yonkers Raceways circuit.

As for Zeke, who still resides in dearly-departed Roosevelt's Long Island locale of Westbury, his half-century of keeping the trotters and pacers healthy and racing began with Frank Popfinger.

After Popfinger ("I took care of his first 2:00 pacer, Goodnuff"), it was John Paton ("26-27 years"), then Mike Sorentino Jr. and, eventually, Don Sider.

Ask Zeke what's changed in the industry since 1969 and he mentions the sort of horses now filling the entry box.

"It's a lot of claimers now," he said. "When I first started, there were the ('letter-classified') horses. Trainers had them longer. Now, so many more claimers and we don't have a bonding with them the way we used to. It's lost some of the sport."

Then, there's the equipment. "Everything was so much heavier then," he said. "The hobbles, the bike, everything. Now, with the quick hitch and the other improvements, it's so much easier for the horse, especially young ones."

"They're able to be 'broken' quicker so they don't have to think as much. They get more confident, and I really think they sense if you like them."

It's the affection that Zeke made a point of reinforcing to his inquisitor.

"You have to love the animal," he said. "I didn't choose to do this for the money. For me, happiness is more important than money."

(For his part, Zeke, along with late brother, Van (Sylvanious), enjoyed modest ownership success with the pacer Redd Fox during the last half of the pacer's decade-long [1997-2007] career.)

"He even won a (Yonkers) race on my 50th birthday, Sept. 26, 2002".

Ask Zeke what he's going to miss and "It just being here. We're going to the Carolinas to be with our daughter, Yolanda, but when the weather warms up, I'm going to come back."

Ask Zeke if he'd choose this work all over again, he politely offers a correction.

"I haven't been working," Arthur Webb said, "I've been enjoying myself."

One last question before we go..."Zeke?"

"I was growing up and there was an older guy, Zeke Butler, who ran a tobacco tractor. He didn't move too fast and everyone said I was as slow as old Zeke Butler.

"I didn't much care for the nickname at first, but since everyone starting calling me Zeke, I sort of went along with it."

Alrighty then.

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(FFI...Frank Drucker, Yonkers Raceway Publicity Director, 914-968-4200)