

# The World's Fastest Half-Mile Race Track The Woodbridge Speedway - 1927-1938

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**O**n Sundays, May through September, from 1927 through 1938, thrill-seeking crowds packed the stands of “The World’s Fastest Half-Mile Race Track” on St. George’s Avenue in Woodbridge, New Jersey—located on the site of the present Woodbridge High School.

Wilbert Baine, a speedway developer, built the track, Ralph A. Hankinson of Woodcliffe Lake served as general manager and Joe Heller as promoter. The races were conducted under the rules and sanctions of the Garden State Auto Racing Association.

Spectators came to watch well-known race car drivers from throughout the country compete for faster and faster speeds. During its years of operation, the Speedway was considered a proving ground for the early drivers of one-seat cars with supercharged engines. These drivers also tested auto parts for possible use in new models they were designing.

The excitement of the races was intense and the noise ear-splitting. Without mufflers, the relentless roar of the engines, driven as fast as possible, could be heard as far as the corner of Main Street and Amboy Avenue in downtown Woodbridge.

At first the track was constructed of wooden boards, an important feature of this era between 1910 and the early 1930s, a time often described as the “golden age of American car racing.” A board track was composed of thousands of wooden planks set on edge with steeply banked turns. The turns on the Woodbridge track were banked at 38 degrees.

The first board track was built in California in 1910 and, ten years later, there were board tracks all over the country. Home-grown cars with outside gear and brake levers were the popular autos racing on these banked oval circuits. This type of track, however, was difficult and expensive to maintain.

In May 1930 the notorious speed demon Barney Oldfield was a featured driver, and in 1931 Fred Frame drove a Duesenberg at the track and drove the same car at the Indianapolis Speedway later that year. Such cars as the Fronty Special, Vance Special, Miller Majestic Special, Mickey Mouse Special, and Tee Lynn Ambler tore around the track in the best of times, but several well-known drivers, including Johnny Rohr (1929), Bob Robinson (1930), Bernie Katz (1931), and Fred Farmer (1932) lost their lives at Woodbridge.

On July 27, 1930 Bob Robinson had just triumphed in two races before his tragic crash. He and Rick Decker from Staten Island, New York were vying for first place when Decker’s car blew a front tire forcing Robinson up against the outer guardrail which then collapsed. Still in his car, Robinson was thrown over the stands hitting a tree outside the track. Some years later, another account of Robinson’s accident was released. It stated that Decker was suddenly stung by a bee which caused him to swerve into Robinson who hit the frail old wooden guard rail circling the track. After the accident the management installed a strong steel cable around the perimeter.

When the Speedway board track rotted beyond repair, the boards were torn up and replaced by a slower, oiled dirt track in 1933. Now the scent of castor oil permeated the area and clouds of dust turned up by the speeding wheels darkened the skies around the track. Spectators at the dirt track races left for home covered with a fine brown dust, surely a badge of honor for true racing fans.

The top price for Speedway tickets in 1930 was \$1.75 enabling a fan to view the races from one of the wooden chairs in the grandstand. And for \$1.50 a racing aficionado could mingle with the race crews in

the center of the oval or sit in the bleachers. "Official" programs listing the drivers, cars and races sold for 15 cents. These programs featured advertisements for restaurants, local businesses and political figures campaigning for public office such as state senator from Union County and sheriff for Middlesex County.

The late Robert J. McEwen, local historian, author and collector of vintage Woodbridge photographs, remembered sitting on the roof of his childhood home on Freeman Street near the track as a thirteen year old to watch the races. In fact, he often charged Speedway patrons fifty cents to park in his backyard! McEwen also thought that the Speedway management may have given away free tickets to nearby residents to prevent them from complaining about the noise and dust.

The Woodbridge Speedway attracted many big-name drivers, such as Freddy Frame, the 1932 champion of the Indianapolis 500. Local drivers included Al Lattanzio and Red Moore of New Brunswick, Lloyd Broshan of Dunellen, and Bill Buechler of Perth Amboy. Other well-known speed demons from around the country who raced at Woodbridge were Fred Winnai, Malcolm Fox, Bryan Saulspaugh (later killed making a time trial on the West Coast), Al Theison, Bob Sall, Stubby Stubblefield, Jimmy and Bill Paterson, Jack Erickson, Mauri Rose, Doc MacKenzie, Chet Gardner, Billy Winn, Lou Moore, Johnny Gerber, Maynard Clark (known as the "Adonis of the Speedway"), Johnny Hannon, Rick Decker, Lou Moore, Joe Russo, Shorty Dressler, Don Church, Ted Kessler, Joe Miller and Ken Fowler.

Readers of the racetrack today can thank the late John Kozub (1913-1999) of Edison, NJ and earlier of Perth Amboy, for much of the existing information and photographs of the Woodbridge Speedway. Kozub was a devoted follower of the auto-racing circuit throughout his life. As a young man he walked from Perth Amboy to the Woodbridge racetrack enjoying the roar of the motors and scent of castor oil as he approached the speedway. He kept meticulous records of the races, capturing the action of the pit and the infield using his Leica camera. He made friends with the drivers, wrote articles for racing magazines and collected motor-sports memorabilia.

In an interview for the *Star-Ledger* on July 18, 1999, a few months before his death, Kozub was quoted, "most cars would average more than 90 miles per hour on the old board track at Woodbridge. The best drivers could do a half-mile lap in 18 seconds for an average speed of 100 mph."

So popular were the Woodbridge races that the Pennsylvania Railroad ran special trains during the later years of the Speedway's operation. Trains left from Penn Station at 34th Street in New York City, with stops in Newark and Elizabeth, and from the Hudson Terminal. Spectators were let off at Edgar Station in the Edgar Hill section of Woodbridge which was in walking distance of the rear of the grandstand. The special round trip fare from Penn Station was one dollar and five cents and ninety cents from Hudson Terminal.

And for those lucky enough to own automobiles during these years of the Great Depression, a road map circulating at the time proclaimed, "By Auto All Roads Lead to Woodbridge Speedway." (And remember, this announcement came years before the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway actually converged at Woodbridge!)

Headlines on the sports page in *The Woodbridge Leader* for Friday, June 16, 1933, announced:

#### CRACK DRIVERS EXPECTED AT WOODBRIDGE SPEEDWAY NEXT SUNDAY AFTERNOON

"Stop Johnny Hannon at Woodbridge" is the war-cry of nation's best drivers. - Many new jobs to make their debut at half-mile dustless saucer."

Hannon, "the Conshohocken, Pennsylvania boy" had won a race at Woodbridge a few weeks earlier before a crowd of 4,000 speed fans. And adding to the excitement of that race was a cameo appearance by the former heavyweight boxing champion of the world, Jack Dempsey, aka "the Manasa Mauler," who waved the green starting flag. Hannon proceeded to win that 25-mile final in 27 minutes, 15 seconds. Another heavyweight boxing champion and actor, Max Baer, was billed as an upcoming attraction at the track later that year.

A car and driver were assigned a starting position based on a point system which involved the number of races, position at finish, fastest lap time and other factors. Each crew pushed its car into position and waited, hoping they were ready to go. Then a track official probably announced, "Gentlemen, start your engines," which meant that a mechanic had to spin the hand crank. If all drivers held their positions for a pace lap, they would be off to a flying start when the green flag came down. A tow truck always stood ready at trackside.

The local paper also announced upcoming races at Reading, Pennsylvania's race track and venues throughout New Jersey, such as Olympic Park Stadium in Irvington, Nutley, New Market, Freehold, and Cape May Court House, indicating the immense popularity of auto racing in the state during the 1930s.

And for dining and dancing after the races there was Wana's "located at Woodbridge on shore highway at the Speedway." Wana's advertised sandwiches, sodas and refreshments as well as chicken, steak or chop dinners for \$1.50. But it's possible that Wana's "Mammoth Girlie Revue" drew the most customers, especially since there was "no cover charge at any time." Robin's Inn was another popular restaurant near the track at 187 Amboy Avenue where "Adolf Cobel's frankfurters were used exclusively!"

Falling prices and the massive economic problems of the Depression eventually took its toll on the Woodbridge Speedway. Floodlights were installed for night racing, ticket prices were dropped, but the cheering fans simply were not there anymore. "The World's Fastest Half-Mile Race Track" closed forever after the 1938 season.