



“JZ”

In Her Own Words

As told to **Lew Boyd**

- *Born on May 6, 1986 in Gloversville, New York*
- *An extraordinary woman, Jessica Zemken has amassed an enviable career in dirt sprint cars and modifieds. Her days are without bounds as racer, wife, mother, business and team manager and much more.*

I started going to the track at just a few weeks old, watching my dad race, and as a kid, I looked forward to being at the track more than anything else. I loved it.

I spent my days in my dad's transmission and stock car shop, a typical, greasy tom-boy. I was learning as much as possible, knowing early on that I wanted to be able to wrench my own equipment someday.

When I was about eight, my parents got me a kart. I remember running it around the house on the lawn, getting used to it and getting comfortable. I remember my dad coming out with the garden hose and wetting the grass to "see how fast you are now." My grandfather and family friend Jimmy Booth started taking me to races when my dad couldn't. I won over a hundred kart races and five titles.

By age 14, I was hot-lapping a sportsman car at Fonda. I was so determined to become respected as a racer. I didn't want to be a "good racer for a girl," I wanted to be a good racer who just so happened to be a girl.

When I won the Utica-Rome Speedway sportsman track title in 2004, running the Walton family's equipment, I'd built a decent reputation as a real competitor. I got some ride offers in 358 modifieds on dirt and asphalt, as well as a chance at a sprint car—finally. Running a winged sprint had always been a goal.

Tom Patterson and Doug Emery offered me a shot in a 360 winged sprint car. They helped me get my feet wet in the sprint car ranks and taught me a lot. Meanwhile, I kept working to get my own sprint car team together. I can't stress enough how setting goals has always been critical to me, learning the mechanics and setups to be able to work on my own equipment.

In 2008, I was at Ohsweken Speedway in Ontario for a sprint car show. We were running pretty well, but it must have looked like a struggle because it was just my mom and me, the car, a few spares, and the same set of tires for all night long. Mom was under the car changing gears when I was approached by John and Wendy Brush of Corr/Pak Merchandising in Toronto, who

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said they wanted to sponsor me. We've been like family ever since, and they've been my biggest supporters.

That was a pivotal moment. They saw my potential and were willing to invest in me, which opened up great opportunities to try different forms of racing. More importantly, I gained experience and an understanding of what I needed from the car, what adjustments I needed to be comfortable.

Along the way I've met so many incredible racers and families who have become some of my closest friends. It was at the track that I met my lifelong teammate, Stewart Friesen, who had come from Canada to run the dirt circuits. We dated on and off starting in 2004, although we were young and both determined to carve our own paths in racing. This often led us in different directions.

I got an opportunity to run a midget at the Chili Bowl, where I met some folks from Arizona who had a small sprint car and midget team. I simply packed up and moved out there for a couple of tough months working at crazy jobs to be able to run races on the weekend. I ran the midget Copper Classic at the dirt half-mile at Manzanita. Someone blew an engine, and I launched off of their right-rear tire. It was probably my worst crash to date. I spent 36 hours in the trauma center with a concussion. Arizona sure was a life adventure.

I also lived for a while in Ventura, California, working for Steve and Karen Watt at Maxwell Industries, where I was able to get in some more midget and non-winged laps.

Back home, John Brush, a huge Oswego fan, got me a ride in Ray Graham's super-modified for the Oswego Classic at the Steel Palace. We managed to qualify 11th. It was an incredible experience to race at such a historic track. That first time at Oswego—and later, the first time I ran wide open at the Nationals at Knoxville in a 410—gave me the necessary confidence: If I could do that, anything coming along couldn't be that hard. But, above all, I was on a mission with those sprint cars.

I had the opportunity with another team early in my sprint career to run a season

with the All Stars and 410s. We got some top-fives, and I was learning a lot, especially from people like Guy Forbrook.

But coming back to our own garage and our own cars was what I needed. I had gained a lot of experience, and with John and Wendy Brush and Corr/Pak's support, I could now operate my own team and handle every aspect of setting up the cars and making them comfortable and fast! It all started falling into place. Winning the Canadian Nationals at Ohsweken, the Brushes' home track, made it even sweeter. It was a huge milestone for our team.

After remaining close all those years, Stewart and I married on September 4, 2014. On September 6th, we celebrated by running one-two in a 360 winged sprint feature at Utica-Rome. Stewart did win it, but it was close! We began to put down some roots, built a house, and started a screen-printing business called One Zee Tees to generate reliable future income.

We both continued in sprint cars and modifieds, running everything possible. Stewart was recruited by Chris Larsen and Halmar to campaign Craftsman trucks nationally. Our schedule was getting wild, but we knew we wanted to start a family, and in December 2015 our son Parker was born.

I was back in a car five months later at the start of the 2016 season. I flipped a 360 sprint car at Utica Rome, and shortly afterwards, Stewart also had a bad wreck in a 410 sprint. We came to the decision that, while safety is always a concern in our line of work, winged sprint cars are certainly one of the most dangerous forms of racing; perhaps this was our sign to step away from the sprint car operation altogether. If we couldn't do it right, we didn't want to do it at all.

As Parker got older, we noticed he wasn't hitting certain milestones. When he was diagnosed with autism, that became our absolute priority. I put my racing career on hold and focused exclusively on educating myself on how to help him. It was especially rough in the beginning, as Parker was not verbal for three years. We did Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy with him, one-on-one for three

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hours, five days a week, for years, had speech therapists, everything.

Fortunately, things have progressed well, and he's doing absolutely amazingly. One thing for sure, Parker is an incredible character. We're so proud of him. He is doing very well now at school and really showing his capabilities. Keeping him on as much of a consistent schedule as possible during the week is important, so I'm staying close to home, for the most part just running our local tracks. But Stewart and I make our livings racing and, especially for Stewart, being on the road is often a necessity. Parker and I try to go with Stewart as much as we can, which means everything. We incorporate family adventures as much as possible because that's our time to show him places and things around the country. We're a team.

Parker is now taking a huge interest in what we do. All of a sudden, he's asking us why we run certain tire compounds. He's making so many connections. It's an incredible feeling, and we're fully aware of how fortunate we are. Stewart and I started a non-profit called Aim Autism. With our

foundation, we've been able to help our local community provide the resources and support that we ourselves so desperately sought when Parker was first diagnosed.

Meanwhile, the Halmar Friesen truck years with Chris Larsen have been wonderful. I am so proud of what Stewart has done. I've had the opportunity to run our second No. 62 truck a few times in the NASCAR series. It's been a great experience.

Recently, my own involvement in the truck program has changed. The HFR truck operation is located in Statesville, North Carolina, and I've now taken on the overall team's administration. Fortunately, I can do most of that from home, but it takes a lot of effort to make all the endless arrangements for travel, sponsors, hotels, merchandising, payroll, etc., etc. I must say with that effort, on top of taking care of Parker, running our non-profit, managing and driving our modifieds, and trying to keep up with growing T-shirt sales, it gets crazy!

For example, we had to fly to North Carolina to help out at the truck shop. We then snuck a couple of days off for Easter with

Parker in the Keys, and then it was up to Martinsville for the truck race. Immediately afterwards, we drove all night up to Grandview, Pennsylvania, for a modified show, where we met up with our modified hauler and merchandising trailer. On three hours of sleep, Parker and I sold shirts, Stewart raced. Then Stewart hopped in the hauler for the drive home, while Parker and I followed with the merchandise trailer. We pulled in at five in the morning, thinking about the next stop, Can-Am Speedway up by the Great Lakes.

We know this just can't go on forever, but we intend to make hay while the sun shines. I've been so very fortunate. We're making it all work somehow and try to squeeze as much out of this crazy life as we can. I couldn't imagine it any other way.

My 29th season behind the wheel will be this weekend at Fonda and Utica-Rome Speedways. I can't wait! Getting behind the wheel is my mental health break. It's my girls' night, massage, shopping trip—my passion. **FSW**