

Zeke Bonura – A New Orleans Original

by Jay Gauthreaux



A member of the Society for American Baseball Research



Henry John “Zeke” Bonura, a .307 lifetime hitter in a seven-year major league career, was one of the best ballplayers that New Orleans ever sent to the major leagues.

A good natured, gifted athlete who became a darling of the fans and a headache to some managers, Zeke excelled in sports in his youth. In 1925, a 16-year old Bonura defeated Olympic gold medal winner Johnny Myra in the A.A.U. javelin championship.

He reportedly received his nickname from a sportswriter who, gazing at Bonura’s 6-foot, 210 pound frame, quipped, “Oh, what a physique!” It was shortened to Zeke.

Bonura attended Loyola University in New Orleans, where he was a standout in both baseball and football. He drew the attention of the New Orleans Pelicans of the Southern Association, who signed him to a professional contract in 1929. In the three years he played before the home folks, Zeke compiled a very impressive .338 mark, with 18 home runs in 271 games. He was sent to the Dallas Steers of the Texas League where he racked up more terrific numbers. In his second season with Dallas, in 1933, Zeke picked up Texas League MVP honors after hitting .357.

For the following season Zeke Bonura was acquired by the Chicago White Sox, where stories about his hitting and fielding (or lack thereof) would quickly make him a favorite among the Comiskey Park faithful.

In his first year in Chicago, Zeke set a White Sox rookie record for home runs with 27, a mark that stood until 1983. His 110 RBIs led the club. The Sox, incidentally, lost 99 games in 1934, Bonura’s rookie year. Zeke could not shake his reputation as a good-hit, no-field first baseman despite some rather remarkable fielding stats. Three times he led the American League in fielding percentage for first baseman, and in one year alone he led all A.L. first basemen in putouts, assists, double plays and total chances.

In 1936 Bonura established a White Sox record for RBIs in a season with 138. The very next year Zeke had his career-best batting average of .345, fourth best in the league.

After a remarkable offensive year in 1937, Zeke was traded to the Washington Senators, where he once again led the A.L. in fielding percentage while endearing himself to a new legion of fans, including Vice President of the United States John N. Garner.

Bonura was acquired by the New York Giants for the 1939 season and played alongside another New Orleans favorite, Mel Ott. The New Orleans lefty/righty tandem of Ott and Bonura combined for 160 runs, 38 homers and 165 RBIs in Bonura's only season in New York. The Giants finished fifth under manager Bill Terry.

Zeke's major league career ended with America's entry into World War II. Along with Bob Feller and Hank Greenberg, Bonura was among the first to enlist. Assigned to special services in Algeria, Zeke was in charge of organized sports programs to boost troop morale. After his discharge, Zeke returned to the minor leagues with stops in Minneapolis of the American Association, Thibodaux of the Evangeline League, and finally Midland in the Longhorn League.

Zeke Bonura's Career Stats									
Year	Club	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	Avg
1934	Chicago (AL)	510	86	154	35	4	27	110	.302
1935	Chicago (AL)	550	107	162	34	4	21	92	.295
1936	Chicago (AL)	587	120	194	39	7	12	138	.330
1937	Chicago (AL)	447	79	154	41	2	19	100	.345
1938	Washington (AL)	540	72	156	27	3	22	114	.289
1939	New York (NL)	455	75	146	26	6	11	85	.321
1940	Washington (AL)	311	41	85	16	3	3	45	.273
	Chicago (NL)	182	20	48	14	0	4	20	.264
	TOTAL	3,582	600	1,009	232	29	119	704	.307