

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Bus driving champ gave up exec job

By GUY T. BAEHR

SAN FRANCISCO—Peter Knize of Middletown likes driving a bus so much he gave up a job as director of a management consulting firm to become a professional bus driver.

The 28-year-old Academy Lines driver, who has been taking Monmouth and Middlesex county commuters to and from Manhattan for the past two years, says he likes guiding a 40-foot long bus safely through rush hour traffic at the Holland Tunnel even more than he once enjoyed driving his red 1968 Corvette.

One reason Knize enjoys driving so much may be that he's very good at it.

He showed that here last week when he took third place in what might be called the Olympics of bus driving, the American Public Transit Association's International Bus Roadeo.

Knize was the first New Jersey driver to break into the top three places in the annual competition since it was started 12 years ago.

The competition, a test of bus handling skill and safety, pitted 100 drivers from local transit systems throughout the United States and Canada against each other. All, like Knize, were winners in local "roadeos" and have been accident free for at least one year.

Three other New Jersey drivers, all NJ Transit employees, also competed here last week and all placed in the top quarter.

They were Joseph Grandioso from NJ Transit's Market Street Garage in Paterson, Milton Michaels from NJ Transit Mercer in Trenton and Robert Pear from the transit agency's new Howell Garage.

As soon as the results were announced, Knize said he was ready to come back next year and win first place.

"I bumped a ten-point cone that I shouldn't have. It's a matter of concentration," he said.

He said the course is made up of 11 obstacles including one called "diminishing clearances" which simulates going through a toll booth or merging in traffic.

It consists of two rows of 55-gallon oil drums which start out about 12 feet apart but then funnel down to nine feet, just enough to allow three inches of clearance on each side of a standard 102-inch wide bus.

Judges use a police radar gun to make sure the drivers are maintaining a speed of at least 20 miles-per-hour when they clear the last pair of drums.

Knize said he had to adjust slightly for that obstacle because the bus he



Photo by Jeff Huntley

Peter Knize of Middletown sits behind the wheel of his bus

drives in New Jersey, a Greyhound-type commuter bus, is six inches narrower than the ones used in the competition.

"I had to sit six inches over in my seat," he said.

Knize said he first fell in love with bus driving in college, where he drove for the Kent State Campus Bus Service for a year and a half.

During that time he competed in the Ohio State Bus Roadeo, taking a second place.

After graduating with a degree in psychology, Knize spent more than two years as assistant to the president of a computer distributing company and then became director of management for the consulting company he helped found.

That lasted a year.

"I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. I hated the kind of work I was doing," he said.

At the same time, he said, "I remembered with great fondness how much I enjoyed driving a bus in college."

"One day I watched one of Academy's beautiful MC-9s on Route 36 and I decided I had to drive one. So I got a license in New Jersey and here I am," he said.

Knize drives the same bus every day, No. 5201, a new MC-9 leased to Academy by NJ Transit, making three

morning runs starting at 4:40 a.m. from Monmouth and Middlesex counties to either the Port Authority Bus Terminal or to the Wall Street area in lower Manhattan.

In 6,000 hours of driving he said he's never had an accident, "even a fender bender."

"I really enjoy driving. I feel totally at ease on the road," he said.

When he's not working, he usually drives a sports car. He recently sold a red 1968 Corvette convertible, which he said he enjoyed driving "almost as much as the bus."

Driving his bus gives him extra satisfaction because, he said, "When I look up in the rear-view mirror and see the tops of all those people's heads, many of them sleeping, I know they're trusting me with their lives. It's a big responsibility and it keeps me on my toes."

Knize said he says "hello" and "good night" to about 150 passengers a day, most of them regulars who return his courtesy.

Not too long ago he said he had a special license plate made up and put on the front of his bus. It reads, "This bus driven with pride by Peter Knize."

"At first I got some kidding from the other drivers, but after a while some of them have asked me where they can get one like it," he said.