

1992-93 NYSPHSAA CLASS B CHAMPIONS



*Kneeling (left to right): Mike Branham, Chris Maynard, Joey Alger, Drew Seiler, Jason James, Kevin Pole, Charlie Wightman;
Standing (left to right): Head Coach Mark Abbott, Rob Hamilton, Glenn Van Houten, Peter Burton, Jason Robitelle, Josh Jankowsky,
Josh Morris, Bob Lazor, Jason Lawrence, Paul Mackmer, Jim Boyer, Coach Bob Branham*

Coming off their first winning season in Mark Abbott's six years as head coach, expectations were high for a team returning three seniors and four juniors from a 16-5 team. Couple that with the fact that the junior varsity had gone a combined 38-2 the last two years and you can see the reason for the obvious optimism. "We thought we had a chance to be pretty good, we had some really talented players who worked really hard, but STAC basketball in the early 90's was absolutely loaded," reflected Abbott, who recently finished his 25th year as the Purple Tornado head coach. "Binghamton, Ithaca, Vestal, Seton, CV, they were all really good teams, REALLY good." "And we had had some great success at the JV level the past two seasons but varsity is an entirely different level. The speed, the intensity, the physicalness, they are something you need to experience to truly understand," continued the Tornado coach. "But what I think made this extra special was this is the group that Coach (Bob) Branham and I started the Little Tornadoes with when they were in elementary school on Saturday mornings and now here they were playing varsity basketball. The entire program was really in full development and we have been able to maintain that consistency pretty much ever since."

The 92-93 season started off with the Purple Tornado capturing their annual tipoff tournament by beating Chenango Forks 75-41 and Cortland, in the championship game, 90-33. Of particular note in that Forks game were the 14 rebounds pulled down by senior co-captain Josh Jankowsky, 10 of them offensive. Not a bad night's work for a shooting guard!!

Back-to-back 100 point games had Norwich feeling pretty good; 106-54 over Sherburne-Earlville and 102-63 over Susquehanna Valley, heading into a tough two game stretch. 6'8" junior Bob Lazor totaled 45 points in the two century toppers.

Game number 5 was a visit to the always unfriendly confines of Seton Catholic Central where the Purple was able to pull out a hard fought 73-61 win behind Lazor's 18 points and 17 more from junior Pete Burton. Game number 6 would be a visit from Chenango Valley and their senior big man Charles Gelatt.

The Warriors beat Norwich in last year's STAC semifinals and, with Gelatt, were a very formidable opponent that was also off to a solid start. But the real magnitude of the game wasn't really known until Abbott arrived at school that night.

"I have always arrived at school for a home game between 4:30 and 5:00, and I usually park right in front of the gym entrance, but not that night," reminisced Abbott. "I got to school my usual time and boy was I ever shocked! The parking lot was full and there was a line of people all the way through the lot waiting to get in. I think I had to park out behind the middle school that night." And this is before the high school gym was remodeled and could seat 400-500 more people. From that night on the purple and white played their home games in front of sold-out houses.

That first sellout crowd was treated to a real classic. Norwich raced out to a 22-13 lead after the opening minutes and the din was deafening! But CV would not go away. Behind Lazor's 23 points Norwich held on for a 69-68 win.

Four more victories; over Greene, Johnson City, Binghamton and Owego raised the record to 10-0 as Norwich was now becoming the circled game on each of their

opponent's schedules. "No doubt we were getting everyone's best effort," said Abbott, "but it felt good to be in that position. We had a great group of guys that worked very hard and people respected that."

Game 11 found Norwich down 34-29 at the half to Maine-Endwell but behind big second halves from Lazor and Burton, who finished with 25 and 18 points respectively, NHS pulled away for a 72-59 win.

Game 12 at Vestal was a nail biter from start to finish as each quarter was decided by a scant two points. Norwich got a key defensive stop at the end of regulation, and used clutch free throw shooting from junior guard Charlie Wightman (9-11) to escape, in overtime, 72-67. Lazor's 29 points included a 5-6 effort from downtown.

The next game was also a hard fought five point margin, a 67-62 win over Ithaca, putting Norwich at a "lucky" 13-0.

Relative breathers with Chenango Forks (99-47) and Union-Endicott (77-44) upped the ledger to 15-0 and set up the last round of divisional games as the Purple Tornado looked to lock up their second straight division championship, this time with an unbeaten league record.

A trip to Owego resulted in a 30-30 deadlock at the half but Lazor and Wightman fueled a big second half as Norwich won 80-62, Lazor finishing with a career high 30 points.

A huge 25-9 second quarter lifted Norwich to an 84-61 win at Maine-Endwell to clinch that second straight division title. Wightman drained six trifectas on his way to a career high 30 points.

The Purple capped a perfect regular season, in front of yet another capacity crowd, hammering Johnson City on Senior Night 103-81. Norwich raced to a 32-10 first quarter lead and eventually led 83-50 after three quarters. Jankowsky, in his last game on his home court, scored a team high 19 points and was joined in double figures by a quintet of juniors; Jim Boyer, Burton, Jason Lawrence, Lazor and Wightman.

Up next would be a STAC semifinal rematch at the Broome County Veteran's Memorial Arena against Chenango Valley. Just like their earlier meeting at a sold out NHS, Norwich jumped to a big early lead as they led 18-8 at the end of the first quarter. And just like in the previous contest back came the Warriors, behind Gelatt, eventually tying the game at 36-36 heading into the final quarter. Clutch free throw shooting by Wightman (7-8) and great team defense, holding the Warriors to just 10 fourth quarter points, advanced Norwich to its first ever STAC championship game, winning 52-46. Wightman led the scoring with 18 points and Lazor had 15.

Waiting for them in the title game was the Ithaca Little Red who ousted Seton in the other semifinal game. Norwich had won the regular season meeting 67-62. The Purple used a 23-14 third quarter advantage to open up a 59-44 lead and cruised to a 74-62 triumph. Lazor established a new career high with 32 points as he was virtually unstoppable and Wightman's five three balls netted him 15 points. As the top seed in Class B, Norwich wasted little effort in dispatching their first two

sectional opponents; Corning East (70-43) and, for the third time, Maine-Endwell (71-42). The 29 point margin over the Spartans was the most convincing of the three and this came despite Norwich trailing 18-16 after one quarter of play. It was now on to the Section IV Class B championship game.

Could their first ever STAC title be followed two weeks later by their first ever Section IV title? Well, if it was, they were going to have to beat the Chenango Valley Warriors for the third time this year, no easy accomplishment as the first two meetings between these powerhouses, both Norwich victories, were decided by a total of just seven points. And Chenango Valley had actually outscored Norwich in five of the previous eight quarters of play. This one was colored all purple as they raced to a 23-10 lead, never scored less than twenty points in any one quarter, and wound up on the good side of a 90-67 final score. "I honestly feel that if we hadn't have won the state championship that Chenango Valley would have," said Abbott. "For us to beat them three straight times was quite an accomplishment, they were a really good team."

An overall record of 23-0, STAC champions and Section IV Class B champions. That's quite an impressive resume' to be carrying into regional play, also a first for the Purple Tornado. It's on to West Point. Albertus Magnus was waiting for Norwich when they arrived at the United States Military Academy and, though they were a game opponent, they could not match Norwich's inside tandem of Lazor and Burton as the Norwich strongmen muscled their way to a combined 41 points and each pulled down 11 rebounds. In the stands scouting all this was Norwich's regional final opponent, Monticello High School.

But the return trip to West Point to play that regional final would have to wait until the Blizzard of '93 had passed. And when it finally did there were immediately Tornado warnings issued along the Hudson River! Leading 43-32 at the half, a 24-9 third quarter onslaught highlighted by senior Drew Seiler's pass off the backboard to a trailing Lazor for a thunderous dunk, punched the Norwich ticket to the Final Four in Glens Falls, the final score being 82-59. Wightman's six 3's contributed significantly to his game high total of 28 points and Lazor added 21. Add a line for Region I champions to the ledger. "Last March we took the guys to watch a day of action in Glens Falls to experience the atmosphere and I think they liked it," said a chuckling Abbott. "Our fan support has been tremendous all year and I'm quite sure the Glens Falls Civic Center has never been colored in as much purple as it will be next weekend!"

First up was Section III champion Central Square. Perhaps because of the early Saturday morning tipoff, the first quarter was a rather sluggish 11-11. But that would be the last hurrah for Central Square as a 21-1 second quarter and 52 second half points powered Norwich to an 84-56 victory and a spot in Sunday afternoon's Class B championship game against Rochester's Ben Franklin High School from Section V. For Central Square it was simply a case of way too much Wightman and Lazor as the lefty sharpshooter tossed in 28 points for the second straight game. That total includes a Glens Falls record eight three pointers, a record that still stands today. Lazor powered his way to 13 points, 15 rebounds and five blocked shots.

But, as Abbott was quick to point out, it was, and has been, a total team effort all year. "Bobby and Charlie are great players but they know that this is all about the team. And Pete has certainly put up some nice numbers all year but none of this could have happened if not for a number of guys that have flown below the publicity radar; guys like the Josh's (Jankowsky and Morris), Bear (Drew Seiler), and all three Jason's (James, Lawrence and Robitelle). And we have some darn good players that people don't hear much about during games but they are such good teammates; Chris Maynard, Jimmy Boyer, Kevin Pole, Glenn Van Houten, Paul Mackmer and Rob Hamilton. Since day number one it has been all about the team and what WE can accomplish."

And it was one of those guys that had pretty much flown below the publicity radar that had his coming out party in the New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA) Class B championship game, he being one Drew "Bear" Seiler. In a tightly played defensive battle it was Seiler who was key in Norwich's 56-49 victory. The senior guard scored six points, dished out six assists, had three

steals, and, amazingly, drew three offensive fouls that seemed to take Ben Franklin's lightning quick guards right out of their bread and butter dribble penetration game and turn them into a jump shooting team. "Bear was phenomenal tonight," praised Abbott. "He came in and played his heart out, he was exactly the spark we needed."

The big three of Lazor, Wightman and Burton scored 19, 15 and 14 points respectively, 48 of the team's 56 points, but it was the play of Seiler that turned the game around. Trailing 30-27 at the half, Norwich cut the lead to a single point, 43-42, heading into the final eight minutes. That's when the defense of Seiler and his mates limited the runner-ups to just six fourth quarter points, and the championship hardware and ensuing victory parade through the crowded city streets, belonged to the Purple Tornado.

New York State Class B champions but there is still one more mountain to climb, a return trip to Glens Falls the following weekend for the New York State Federation championship which brings together the champions of New York's four tournaments (Public, Private, Catholic, Independent). Lazor's 20 points and Wightman's 17 led Norwich to a 69-47 victory over The Fieldston School (Bronx) and into the championship game against Buffalo St. Joseph's. Thirty-two minutes away from a perfect season, a season that started almost five months ago. However, the first eight of those final thirty-two minutes are minutes that the Purple and their faithful would like to forget as Buffalo St. Joseph's raced to a 22-9 lead. Norwich battled back as they trimmed the lead to 38-33 at the half and 51-49 after three quarters. With a will to win that was second to none, the hometown heroes prevailed 75-69 to cap an unbeaten season at 29-0. "What was once a dream is now reality, we are 29-0," said an emotionally exhausted Abbott after the game. "We showed the heart of a champion today and that is exactly what we are, CHAMPIONS!" With a heavily blanketed Wightman held to just five points, Lazor had a big game with 30 points and nine rebounds, Burton an equally impressive 26 and seven, Morris had a key 10 points and seven assists and Seiler had a team high eight assists. And, like Seiler in the previous championship game, the 6'8" Lazor drew three offensive fouls.

Norwich Tipoff Tournament champions, STAC champions, Section IV Class B champions, Region I champions, NYSPHSAA Class B champions, NYS Federation champions and the # 1 ranked Class B team in New York State; what a hardware haul! Norwich was just the second team in NYSPHSAA history to finish an undefeated season at 29-0 (through 2011 that total is just three). And the statistics, both individual and team, are records that may never be broken.

Notable team records set include most wins in a season (29), most points scored in a season (2,275), highest points per game average in a season (78.4), largest points per game differential (+ 22.4), most points scored in a game (106), most two point field goals made in a season (702), most three point field goals made in a season (131) and most free throws made in a season (478).

Individual records set include most points scored in a season (Lazor-586), most three point field goals made in a game (Wightman-8) and in a season (Wightman-68), most two point field goals made in a season (Lazor-205), most defensive rebounds in a season (Lazor-178), total rebounds in a season (Lazor-281) and most defensive charges in a game (Lazor and Seiler 3 each) and in a season (Seiler-12).

Lazor was named Class B First Team and was the Class B Player of the Year while Burton and Wightman were named to the Fourth Team. It's hard to believe that there were 14 other players better than them in Class B, isn't it? In 1993 Norwich also won the New York State Scholar Team Award with the recipients being Boyer, Hamilton, Jankowsky, Lazor, Mackmer, Maynard and Pole. And Jankowsky was named the team's Scholar Athlete.

Quite a season indeed!