

Coach Kurt Beyer, 1930-58



Kurt Beyer came to Norwich in 1930 as head football coach and director of athletics. He was a native of Kaukauna, Wisconsin, where he was captain of the basketball team, and a graduate of the University of Illinois. He remained in Norwich through the 1957 football season, compiling a record of 125 wins, 75 losses, and 9 ties.

During the 28 years that he coached football in Norwich, two teams, 1937 and 1952, were undefeated. Seven more teams lost only one game, and four lost only two. Eighteen teams won more than half their games, while 7 teams lost more games than they won. In most of those 28 years, Norwich played as an independent, challenging teams from larger schools within sections 3 and 4, and from Floral Park, Kingston, Newburgh, and Albany. During the 28 seasons, Norwich played 40 different opponents, some every season and some just once. Of the 40 opponents, only 7 won more games against Norwich than they lost.

In a speech to Rotary, Beyer once explained his scheduling philosophy: "I tried to schedule 2 teams from larger schools that should be better than we are year in and year out; 2 from smaller schools that hopefully were not as good as we are; and 4 teams that are our equal year in and year out. In my opinion, the worst things that can happen to any team, school, or community are too much failure or too much success. The way of the world needs a mixture of defeat to spur continuing effort, and the success of victory to bring confidence in fair amounts."

In addition to football, Beyer coached track from 1943 to 1958, basketball from 1930 to 1935, J. V. basketball from 1941 to 1947, and introduced many other sports into the Norwich schools. During the 1950s, in addition to the major sports, there were inter-scholastic teams in tennis, volleyball, badminton, ping-pong, riflery, and golf. He also started girls' teams in several sports, well before they were mandated. His goal was to have every student involved in at least one sport. He said, "The real job here is to try to develop the special abilities of each and every youngster." In order to reach them all, he taught several phys-ed classes every day too.

While directing the athletic program in Norwich, Coach Beyer was also deeply involved in the NYSPHSAA — the New York State Public High School Athletic Association. He was elected president of Section 4 in 1935 and continued in that position for 18 years, representing Section 4 on the Central and Executive Committees of the NYSPHSAA. In 1943 he was elected State Association president, the youngest man (at 36) and the first active coach to serve in that position. While serving as co-chairman of the committee on junior high school sports, he is generally credited with designing the Modified program which exists today throughout New York State. During the late 1940s, Beyer was one of three men who began the process of establishing state tournaments, first in track, then in wrestling and the other sports.

Coach was a historian. He used the annual football programs to make sure that fans remembered the great teams and players from Norwich's past, writing stories about the days before he came to Norwich as often as the early days of his own career. He was also being a historian when he would stop practice during the week before the Binghamton game, and relate how, in the Bingo game played on the 19th of October, 1935, Paul Rice had blocked a punt and then, after his teammate had picked up the ball, threw a block that sprang him loose for a touchdown and a 15-13 win. His recall of details was legendary.

Coach Beyer was very involved in the community. In a letter that he wrote when he was leaving Norwich, he said:

Athletic teams are symbols of a community. They are a focal point for the loyalty of students, alumni and adults. These teams have always respected their responsibilities; whether in victory or defeat. They have done much to give Norwich a fine reputation throughout the state. . . Norwich's splendid reputation may be traced to the turn of the century and reflects the splendid ideals fostered by the "old timers."

When his former players talk about Coach, it is always about the lessons learned that have been applied for life-long benefit, lessons having to do with character, courtesy, and doing the right thing. He taught these lessons by example as well as by instruction.

A man true to his convictions, Beyer left Norwich in 1958 after a disagreement with the superintendent, but returned after he retired in 1973. Fortunately, he was recognized during his lifetime by the Norwich community, by his former players, and by his peers. Norwich's new outdoor swimming pool was named for him, in thanks for the years he managed the City's summer recreation program, personally teaching generations of youngsters to swim in the uncertain waters of Canasawacta Creek. In 1955, local businessmen organized a testimonial dinner in recognition of 25 years of Beyer football. In 1992, a grass-roots celebration organized by his former players honored Coach on the occasion of his 85th birthday. Frank Benenati spearheaded this event, as he had the former one, and players from all the Beyer teams, from Ken Stewart in 1930 to Fred Miers in 1957, paid tribute to the only man they consistently called "Coach."

In 1980 Beyer was inducted into the Section IV Hall of Fame, and in 1982 he was a member of the inaugural class to be inducted into the National High School Sports Hall of Fame. He accepted these honors gracefully, always acknowledging the contributions of the players, his fellow coaches (especially his long-time assistant, Frank Giltner), the sports writers, his family, and the Norwich townspeople. He would not have thought that being one of the first inductees into the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame was any less an honor.