

## Jason "Merc" Morris, '92

Whether he was in street clothes or in uniform, it must have been hard for opponents to think that this nice-looking lad with a wonderful smile, so friendly, so cordial, could possibly want to "leave them in his dust," so to speak. But, that is exactly what he did.

Jason hit the varsity football scene as a junior and was immediately a two-way starter, wide receiver on offense and a cornerback on defense. He caught 10 passes during the season (Norwich did not throw the ball a great deal) for 275 yards, three of which went for touchdowns. Jason also ran the ball 29 times for 242 yards, including one touchdown run of 63 yards. On defense, he returned a fumble and an interception for touchdowns. All told, Jason scored six touchdowns — all but the 25-yard fumble recovery were for over 40 yards and three were for over 60 yards! The Evening Sun placed him on their First Team as a receiver.

The 1990-91 Norwich High basketball team had a 6-15 record. Jason was second in scoring, netting 228 points in 21 games, including a career high of 27 against Sherburne-Earlville. With a 20-0 JV squad and Jamie Shultz and Jason as returning starters, the Tornado looked poised to improve greatly in the 1991-92 season.

Everyone knew Jason was fast, but any question as to how fast was answered in the 1991 track season. Besting U-E's speed merchant, Jarvis Shields, Jason ran for the STAC and Section IV 100 meter dash championship. The stage was now set for what many thought would be a great senior year for Jason Morris — and for Norwich teams.

Norwich had not won a football crown since the 1970 squad went 7-1 in the Iroquois League's last season, losing only to Utica Proctor, 6-2, in the non-league season opener. That team was tri-captained by Danny Ryan, Ron Swingle and Dave Gantt, and included such other fine performers at Gary Podenak, Roger Shonosky and Doug Wilson.

Pre-season football practice began and expectations for Coach Pluta's Norwich squad were high in the southern tier, as John Fox, longtime Binghamton sports editor touted the Purple and the "speeding bullet" ball carrier he compared to Cornell's Heisman Trophy runner-up, Ed Marinaro. The optimistic mood took a decidedly negative turn as Jason was inexplicably ill following his (often) long runs. Jason soon came to the realization that if the run was over forty yards, he got sick. At first, the solution was not to let him run the ball more than forty yards from pay dirt, but, after a few days, trainer Kip Cooper diagnosed the problem. Jason was holding his breath and getting oxygen deprived when he had to sprint for too long a distance. Problem solved and the season began with Jason, once again, in top form.

In the season opener versus Johnson City, the Tornado fell, 20-19, despite Jason rushing for 84 yards on eleven carries and catching three passes for 76 more. "Merc," as his teammates since Pop Warner days called him, did not cross the goal line that night, but the next eight games were going to be "ones for the record books!" Week 2 saw NHS dismantle Corning West, 40-8, as Jason carried the mail ten times for 150 yards and caught two passes for 27 yards, in the process scoring four touchdowns — two rushing and two receiving. The rushing scores were from 36 and 68 yards. The following Friday night the Purple Tornado beat the Purple Lions of Dryden, 34-8, as Jason rushed but 8 times for 152 yards, which included a touchdown of 64 yards; plus he returned a kickoff 79 yards for another touchdown.

Next up was Chenango Forks, which fell 49-0. At Forks, he scored three rushing touchdowns, one of 61 yards, on only eight carries. Week 5 was a Friday night in Ithaca (who wound up 6-2-1, their only other loss to undefeated Binghamton), one of the Big Schools in the section, and NHS came away with a shocking 55-0 win. Jason ground out 202 yards on fourteen carries and three more touchdowns; on one, he went 67 yards and on another, he traversed 56 yards! Oneonta came to town for game six and the Purple Defense twirled its third straight shutout, with NHS prevailing, 33-0. [Note: this was the first time NHS had recorded three consecutive shutouts since the last two games of the 1951 season and the season opener of the '52 season, according to some stellar research by the late Tom Schwan.] Jason caught a pass for 12 yards and scored three times on only six carries — the arithmetic on the TD jaunts being 32, 37 and 40 yards. Chenango Valley invaded Norwich for a Friday night tilt, with the Purple riding a five game winning streak. Behind Jason's eleven carries for 110 yards and one reception for 32 yards and two more rushing touchdowns, including a forty yarder, NHS breezed to a 42-18 win. Of special significance was that gave the Tornado 272 points for the season to eclipse the previous record of the undefeated 1952 Ed Ackley-led outfit. This would be a good time to digress on the great Tornado line, to which Jason gives most of the credit for his success, namely Mike Blenis, Dan Jennings, Keith Evans, Tom Stoddard and Steve Brean. Kevin Slater's flawlessly run offense and prodigious extra point kicking, 2nd leading rusher Sean Ryan, and a couple of sophomore receivers, Pete Burton and Charlie Wightman, combined for additional firepower.

The following Friday night saw the Saints of Seton Catholic Central roll into town. Seton had the unusual record of losing to CV, edging Forks and tying Maine-Endwell, the

team that everyone thought would be the key game of the season for Norwich in week nine, one week hence. In a hard fought back and forth tussle, the Tornado's six game winning streak came to a surprising halt in the form of a 21-21 tie. Jason had his seventh straight game of rushing for over one hundred yards and scoring at least two touchdowns — 196 yards on 16 carries, including two TDs covering 47 and 63 yards.

The last regular season game of the year produced the perfect match-up. Both Norwich and Maine-Endwell were 2-0-1 in the division, so the winner of the game would win the division and go on to play Windsor in the Section IV Bowl II game. Of additional importance was that the Section IV rushing title depended on the two key running backs in the fray — M-E's Nate Kofira and Merc. The game was a struggle for about 1 ½ quarters, but then the Purple took control and ground out a 26-7 victory. Only 5:23 into the game, quarterback Slater went down with a broken arm. Jason's younger brother, Josh, took over Slater's duties and ran the offense efficiently, including a touchdown pass to Burton. Fullback Matt Gale had his best game of the year, rambling for 88 yards and two touchdowns. Jason scored one touchdown and outgained Kofira, 202 yards to 40, to cop the rushing title.

The bowl game against Windsor was anti-climatic. Whether it was the let down following the big win at M-E, Slater's injury (by now NHS was starting five sophomores — the aforementioned Burton, Wightman, and "Little" Morris, plus Jason James and Ray Bliss), or a great game plan on Windsor's part (Windsor had coasted to their division title allowing them plenty of time to scout Norwich), the Tornado lost, 27-8. Jason was limited to 62 yards on thirteen carries, caught one pass for fourteen yards and had a sixty-yard scoring reception nullified due to an illegal procedure penalty.

The honors and accolades rolled in for Jason at season's end. Among the honors were All Evening Sun, All Metro and, most prestigiously, he was named the Press and Sun-Bulletin Athlete of the Year for 1991, the first and, to date, only Norwich athlete to win the award, which was created in 1949. Jason also set an NHS season rushing mark of 1388 yards. Of his 20 touchdowns, 13 covered over 30 yards. Finally, his rushing average wound up an eye-popping 12 yards per carry!

NHS had a similarly successful basketball season. For the first time since the 1972-73 team, (a team that featured Kurt Collier, Vince Biviano, Mike and Dan Bauder, Ed Downey, John Cruz and All-Metro selection Mark Simmons) the Tornado copped a STAC division title. Jason captained the Mark Abbott-coached squad to a 16-5 record which included Norwich's first ever appearance at the Arena in Binghamton, a STAC semi-final loss to Chenango Valley, and reaching the Section IV Class B semi-finals, a loss to Elmira Free Academy. Jason scored 232 points in 21 games, third to sophomores Charlie Wightman and Bobby Lazor. His high game for the season was a 24-point effort in the home game against M-E, which featured a two-handed slam-dunk in front of a raucous, standing room only crowd. The 85-72 win was crucial to the Tornado edging M-E for the division crown.

Spring brought the end of Jason's high school career with yet another Section IV 100 Meter Dash championship. Merc was the first NHS track sectional champion since the 1985 trio of Doug Grzibowski, Shawn Howard and Maureen Smith and the first back-to-back champion since Grzibowski won the discus for the Purple in 1984 and 1985. Jason's records in the 100, 200 and 4x100 relay still stand.

Following graduation, Jason went on to attend Brockport, graduated from Herkimer CC and attended Hartwick. He is employed by NYSEG and is the proud dad of three beautiful children — Madelyn, 6, Jacob, 5, and Aiden, 1 ½. Among Jason's civic endeavors are returning to his athletic roots as a member of the Cyclones' coaching staff.

Part of the fun of sports is the discussion of who was the best, or fastest, or most valuable. There can be some interesting debates over the years as to whether or not Jason Morris's senior year was the best ever for a three-sport NHS athlete. Or, how about this: do Jason, brother Josh, and half siblings Joey, Jordan and Stef Alger (she is now Mrs. Josh Bennett) make up the best family of athletes ever to grace the halls of Norwich High School?

