

Salvatore "Toots" Mirabito, '37

Imagine a survey done among ten people who have known Salvatore Mirabito for most of his life. They would be asked to share two memories of Toots.

One would remember that he has an older brother, Frank, who is known as King Kong and has thirteen children. One would recall that Toots had a long successful career as a school administrator at Floral Park Memorial High School on Long Island. Another one could have an interesting story about how his dad, also named Salvatore, would salvage hoses discarded from O&W freight cars to repair the shoes for Toots and his siblings. The fact that Toots's younger brother, Fred, was a popular mayor of Norwich would be mentioned by one.

Another might recall that Toots and his fellow NHS running back, Bunky Morris, matriculated at Manlius Military Academy and Syracuse University together — in fact, they insisted on being accepted as a package deal. The family's chicken coop might be mentioned by one. One probably would recollect another of the older siblings, "Big Jim," who owned and operated the Ontario Hotel for decades. One, no doubt, would talk about Toots's grandsons who played quarterback for the Chenango Forks football team, and, even more significantly, went on to play Division I College Lacrosse for Navy and Georgetown. Another would recall that older brothers Joe, Frank and Jim all dropped out of school to help feed the family when the family needed more income. Finally, the story of being an undefeated boxer for Syracuse University would be told.

But, all ten would certainly share their belief that Salvatore "Toots" Mirabito was the heart and soul of the 1937 "Dream Team," Norwich High School's undefeated, untied and unscored-upon football team.

Toots was born on November 3, 1918, the fifth of eight children, two of whom perished as pre-schoolers, born to immigrants from the Lipari Islands off Sicily. He went on to enjoy a stellar athletic career for NHS, which included football, baseball, boxing, basketball, and wrestling. He graduated in 1937, after captaining a solid 1936 football team to a 5-3 mark, winning a state title in wrestling and two in boxing (in admittedly abbreviated formats), and hitting about .400 as the catcher on the baseball team.

What takes his, and Norwich High School's, story from "good" to "great" is that in those days it was common for students to "PG," which meant to spend an extra year in high school as a post-graduate. Accordingly, virtually all teams had a few PG's on their rosters. The 1937 NHS Football squad had three such students: Toots Mirabito, Bunky Morris and Buck Wassung. All played important roles in creating one of the greatest teams in Southern Tier history.

On September 25, 1937, the Tornado opened the season with a home win over Kingston, 24-0, which was considered quite significant as Norwich had struggled to edge them the year before, 6-0. Toots scored one of the four NHS touchdowns on a short run and threw a touchdown pass to Stan Burdell. The following Friday afternoon took the team to Cortland where Norwich won, 21-0, and Toots scored one of the three touchdowns.

Next up was a home game versus Johnson City, a team that was also 2-0 coming into Alumni Field. Norwich's game versus Cortland the week before had been changed from Saturday to Friday to allow fans to see the Cornell-Colgate game on Saturday and make it handy for fans to motor up from Cortland to Syracuse on Friday evening to see the Orangemen play St. Lawrence. Unfortunately for them, the Johnson City coaching staff did not know of the schedule change. Thus, when they went to Cortland on Saturday afternoon to scout the Norwich-Cortland game, they learned they were 24 hours too late. Norwich breezed past the JC Wildcats, 27-0, with Toots rushing for one touchdown, passing to Burdell for a touchdown and returning an interception for another.

Next up was a home game versus Binghamton Central, almost always the toughest opponent on the schedule. This year was no exception as Central also came into the game undefeated, untied and unscored-upon. Anticipation for the game was like no other — press coverage even had the Binghamton team's itinerary to Norwich, complete with their pre-game meal in Greene. The mid October day was beautiful with a crowd estimated at 3,000 people. While Norwich cruised to a decisive win, the most important sequence of plays occurred on defense late in the game, and

preserved the unscored-upon part of the season. Binghamton drove to a first and goal at the Tornado four yard line. On fourth down the Central ball carrier was stopped at the one FOOT line and the Purple took over on downs. Toots blasted into the middle of the line for a few yards and Burt Palmatier ran the ball out to the thirteen yard line on second down. Toots then broke loose for an eighty-seven yard touchdown scamper, his third touchdown of the afternoon, to make the final tally NHS 25, Bingo 0.

The last home game of the season was on Friday afternoon, October 22, versus Little Falls. Norwich led at halftime, 40-0, allowing Coach Beyer to empty his bench and give everyone some playing time. Of Norwich's eight touchdowns in the 53-0 rout, Toots rushed for three and passed to Stan Burdell for another. The next victim was Binghamton North, 41-0. Toots rushed for four of the Tornado's six TDs. Another easy road win, 34-0, at Johnstown, featured Toots running for four of the five Norwich touchdowns. Seven games into the record books and the tally was NHS — 225, Opponents — 0. Only Oneonta stood in the way of perfection.

As the Norwich team's charter bus wound its way through the rainy streets of Oneonta, all the bus's occupants were surprised to see signs all over Oneonta, including the movie marquee, that said things like "Beat Norwich", or "Score on Norwich", but most of them read "Stop Mirabito." Despite being aided by a muddy field, the Oneonta defense could not stop Norwich, although they did harness Toots as well as any other team had all season. He scored but one touchdown, on a pass reception, in the 26-0 win. The touchdown in Oneonta was Toots's nineteenth of the season; the team scored 38 touchdowns, so he scored exactly half of them. He also passed for three. Jimmy Rotundo kicked 19 extra points.

The greater Norwich community was captivated by the team's success. For each of the last three games of the season, Floyd Lothridge would call the scores to Ingalls Sport Shop or The Norwich Sun so that people could then call Ingalls or the paper to obtain the score. The Monday after the Oneonta game, school began with a pep rally to honor the team and then Principal Hogue announced that school would recess for the remainder of the day to allow the community to celebrate the team's accomplishments. The season ending banquet occurred the next evening, November 16, and a community-wide banquet to honor the team was held in December.

Following his years at NHS, Toots went on to The Manlius School and then Syracuse University. At Syracuse, Toots played baseball, football and was undefeated as a heavyweight boxer, culminating his athletic career as the NCAA Heavyweight Boxing Champion in 1942. He was honored at a Testimonial Dinner in Norwich on April 14, 1942, to recognize his many achievements at Syracuse University. Toots fought in World War II, followed superintendent Frank Wassung's advice and moved to Long Island and married Ruth Welch, a Madison girl who had moved to Norwich to work at Norwich Mills. They raised five youngsters while Toots, now Sal to most, taught, coached football, became an Athletic Director and then an assistant principal. He was inducted into the Syracuse University Letterwinners of Distinction in 1978 and is in the Inaugural Class of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame. Sal and Ruth still reside on Long Island.

