

Barry Benjamin, '83



One of this year's 2012 inductees into the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame is 1983 graduate, Barry Benjamin. Barry was an outstanding three-sport star in basketball, track and especially football, where he was a two-year All-County selection, and in 1982, was named The Evening Sun's Most Valuable Player. Benjamin was also an All-Metro selection for the Binghamton Press as a running back after the 1982 season.

On Friday night, Oct 2, 1981, in his junior season versus Corning West, Benjamin had 34

carries for 324 yards, a STAC record at the time, while also breaking the single-game Section IV rushing record. In that game, Benjamin had six TDs (one by interception and five rushing). His first score was a 59-yard interception return, and he followed with touchdown runs of 3, 72, 3, 64 and 46 yards. Norwich won the game 41-36.

Less than 24 hours later Dave Harby of Walton broke Benjamin's section record with 344 yards on 42 rushes.

On Nov. 1, 1980, during his sophomore season – and in the last regularly-scheduled high school game played at Alumni Field – Benjamin had TD runs of 25 and 70 yards versus Binghamton North, then coached by Jud Blanchard. With those runs, Benjamin showed his breakaway speed. Binghamton put 52 points on the board, and Blanchard said in the game summary he felt he needed to keep scoring because he respected the Norwich offense (and Benjamin) so much. Benjamin had 119 yards rushing on just eight carries, and gave a glimpse of his future greatness. In his sophomore season, Benjamin had 475 yards and three TDs. In his junior season, Benjamin rushed for 1,006 yards in just seven games and had 12 touchdowns. During his senior season, he not only led the defense with 78 tackles to go with three interceptions, but he capped his career with 1,172 rushing yards and 20 touchdowns. Of those touchdowns, eight went for 40 yards or more. Barry also had three punt returns for touchdowns. What's even more impressive about his 1,172 yards was that his teammate, sophomore Pat Stevens, had 823 yards on 117 carries.

Over his three-year varsity career, Barry scored 35 touchdowns, and more than half of his TD runs were for more than 20 yards. His overall rushing total of 2,652 yards was a school record at the time, and he held it until Jeff Parker established a new mark in 1996.

Beyond football, Benjamin also excelled in track and field. In the sixth grade at Gibson Elementary School, Benjamin high-jumped 5-foot-6. In Barry's first race on the varsity track and field team on May 10th of his senior year, he ran a 9.9 in the 100-yard dash. In that race, Benjamin pulled up with cramps and was unable to run the 200-yard dash. In another early track meet, wearing hightop Pony basketball sneakers and standing at the starting line, Barry broke Paul Zieno's school records of 11.3 in the 100 meters and 23.4 in the 200 meters by running to victory against Vestal in a time of 11.1 and 23.1 seconds respectively. In second place in the race was sophomore Chris Coleman, later an Olympic bobsledder from Vestal, who one year later broke the Section IV 100-meter record.

One week later, in a highly anticipated race between the two fastest runners in the section (Benjamin and Syracuse-bound Tim Pidgeon of Oneonta), Benjamin raced to victory by a half step and set a new school record of 10.9 in the 100 meters, which is still the second fastest 100-meter time in school history – only one-tenth of a second off Jason Morris's school

record. Pidgeon, who played pro football with the Miami Dolphins, claims to this day he nipped Benjamin at the finish. In Benjamin's brief career in track and field, he never lost a race.

In a recent phone interview with Evening Sun sports writer Pat Newell, Tim Pidgeon had these comments on Benjamin:

- "He was a great player and a great competitor, and somebody we really had to worry about, especially my junior and senior year."
- "When we played each other, most of the time it was either me tackling him when I was on defense, or him tackling me when he was on defense... We were both concerned that whoever had the better day, his team would win the game."
- "It wasn't a matter of stopping him. We knew he would get his big runs; we just didn't want him to have too many big plays. He was strong and fast, and hard to bring down."
- "To me, I wanted to do better than him. As far as running backs go, (Barry) set the bar high."

Pidgeon is not the only one to have commented on Benjamin's abilities. Here are other quotes of note from his career:

- Chuck Gottfried of perennial STAC champion Johnson City, whose record was a combined 29-1 during Benjamin's three years and 10-0 in the 1981-'82 seasons, said, "He would have run for 300 yards a game behind the Johnson City offensive line."
- In the 1982 football all-stars article, Dr. Tom Schwan, a Norwich sportswriter for 26 years, had this to say about Benjamin: "In my 14 years (covering football), he's the best that I've ever seen."

Also Hornell's then-coach, Tony Battone, had this to say about Benjamin and his defensive prowess: "His speed and quickness are amazing. We'd run sweeps, and he'd be on the line of scrimmage to make the stop. And if we tried to go deep, he'd be wherever our players went, too. He is one of the best defensive backs in the state."

Added 16-year Evening Sun Sports Editor, Pat Newell, "My first real memory of Norwich football was the Binghamton North game in 1980 when Barry ran for those two long touchdowns. I was just a young kid, and was in awe of his speed and athleticism. For young kids like me, Barry was our Michael Jordan. I have seen every great running back that has come through Norwich over the past 30 years. Steve Schutt, Steve Yu, Jason Morris, Jeff Parker, John Loisel, Jason James, and Joey Alger were all superb, but Barry, to me, is still the gold standard. To echo Gottfried's statement in 1982. If Barry ran behind those Norwich offensive lines from the sectional championship teams in the early 1990s, he would have put all of the school rushing records out of sight."

The final part of Benjamin's triple crown was basketball. As a JV basketball player in the '79-'80 season, Benjamin was on the STAC championship team. During his senior year for the Tornado, Benjamin averaged 9.6 points per game, and had a high of 27 points versus Seton Catholic Central. Also that season, Benjamin and his teammates stopped All-Metro Chris "Cookie" Jackson and broke Binghamton's 50-game home win streak in one of the great upsets in Norwich history. Leading 56-54, Benjamin blocked the final shot against Jackson for the victory.

After graduation Barry played one season of football at SUNY Albany, and established at the time the all-purpose yards record in a single game. Benjamin also played semi-pro football for the TC Jets where he played safety along side four-year Syracuse starter and Union-Endicott graduate Ed Koban.

One last tidbit: Tom Schwan made a prophetic statement in his football forecast before Norwich's game at Corning West in 1981. Regarding the two-hour drive: "This one might be worth the trip."

Boy, was it worth it for Norwich fans!

—Hawk Edwards