

## Charlie Wightman, '94



Editor's note: Today is the fifth part in a seven-part series profiling the 2012 Norwich Sports Hall of Fame induction class. The author of today's article, Mark Abbott, was Charlie Wightman's varsity basketball and baseball coach.

Mark Abbott first met Charlie Wightman in the summer of 1981 when he couldn't have been more than five or six years old. Little did Abbott know what their relationship would grow and develop into. Charlie's sister's father and Abbott played on the same fast-pitch softball team (the

infamous Ray Lodge) and we went to a tournament in Rochester (NY). Charlie tagged along for the weekend and he and Abbott hung out quite a bit, playing catch whenever the opportunity arose.

As Charlie progressed through the youth sports programs in Norwich (Pop Warner, Little League, YMCA Travel Team) his accomplishments certainly caught the eyes of the coaches, particularly Abbott and Coach (Bob) Branham. "When he reached middle school, we decided to put him on the fast path to success," Abbott said.

As an eighth-grader Charlie played both junior varsity basketball and baseball. As a freshman he played both junior varsity football and basketball, though he came within a whisker of making the varsity basketball team.

"The plan devised by Coach Branham and me was to keep that sophomore group (Josh Jankowsky, Jason Robitelle and Drew Seiler) together with the four freshmen (Pete Burton, Jason James, Bobby Lazor and Charlie) for an entire season," Abbott said. "They had never all played together before, and there was a lot of talent there, we wanted to see what they could do."

What they did was merely go 20-0 and win the STAC JV championship. Was this a prelude of things to come in the future?

Charlie did make his first varsity appearance, earning the first of his ten varsity letters, in the spring of 1991 on the baseball team. The sweet swinging lefty batted .328 and earned the first of his four consecutive appearances as a STAC baseball all-star.

But it was in his sophomore year, 1991-'92, that Charlie really began to blossom and it was also then when the area's sports world would really begin to take notice. Though the majority of this article will look at Charlie's basketball career — as that is where most of his statistical information is available — he was a dynamic three-sport athlete, one of the best ever at Norwich High School.

The 1991 football season saw Norwich finish with a 7-2-1 overall record. Charlie had four receptions for 113 yards (28.3) and scored a pair of touchdowns, a 56-yarder against Chenango Valley and a two-yarder against Dryden. The big play touchdown would be a staple of Charlie's throughout his three seasons on the varsity.

The 1991-'92 basketball season saw the team finish with a 16-5 overall record, 12-3 in STAC, and they won Norwich's first division championship in almost 20 years. The Purple Tornado lost to Elmira Free Academy in the Section IV Class B semifinals though Charlie scored a team-high 23 points. Elmira Free Academy would eventually play in Glens Falls, a trip that Norwich would make a total of four times over the next two seasons.

Charlie finished the season as the team's leading scorer with 342 points (16.3), which was also his highest single season average. His 38 steals also led the team as did his 32 made three-point field goals and his percentage of

80.6 (75-93) from the free throw line. He was second on the team with 92 assists.

To cap his season he was named to the STAC All-Conference Team, *The Evening Sun* All-Chenango County Team and *The Press and Sun-Bulletin* All-Metro Team.

Charlie finished his sophomore year by being named to his second consecutive STAC All-Star baseball team in spite of the fact that he hit a career low .273. "Charlie hit in a lot of tough luck that year, he hit a lot of balls right on the button that were turned into outs. But he was a really hard out, still," Abbott said.

Charlie's junior football season started out with a loss to a very strong Binghamton team, but Charlie wouldn't be on a losing team again for a very long time, more than seven months to be exact.

After that opening loss, Norwich ripped off 10 straight wins, many by a convincing margin, to finish 10-1 overall, 5-0 in the division. They beat Hilton 28-14 in the Regional Final, in the last year before a state championship game was played.

For the season Charlie had one rush for 14 yards, 9 receptions for 283 yards (31.4) and scored three touchdowns; a 71-yarder against Chenango Valley, a 58-yarder against Oneonta and a 46-yarder against Chenango Forks. He also added eight successful conversion kicks.

After ten straight wins to cap the football season, it was time to hit the hardwood. And hit it they did as Norwich, in front of capacity crowds all season, rolled to a 29-0 season, one of three undefeated seasons in New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA) history. Along the way they captured a NYSPHSAA Class B state championship and a New York State Federation (NYSF) Class B state championship among their many accolades and achievements.

During the season, Charlie scored his career high of 30 points at Maine-Endwell, tossing in six trifectas that, at the time, was also a career-high.

That career high was shattered in grand style about six weeks later as he poured in a record eight three-pointers in an 84-56 romp past Central Square in the NYSPHSAA Class B semifinals. The eight made three point field goals is still a Glens Falls Civic Center record.

Charlie again was named to The Evening Sun All Chenango County Team and The Press and Sun-Bulletin All Metro Team as well as being selected Fourth Team Class B All State.

Charlie finished his junior year second on the team in scoring with 373 points (12.9) while leading the team in assists (126) and made three-point field goals (68), the latter, for about one year, being a school record. He was also third on the team with 55 steals.

In the spring he made his third straight STAC All Star appearance in baseball as he batted a solid .342 with 26 base hits while striking out just four times in 76 at bats.

He also displayed his versatility and athleticism in the field by playing second base, shortstop and center field while also even taking a few turns on the pitching mound.

The ten-game winning streak that culminated the previous fall's football season stretched to 20 in a row before the Purple got nipped by Chittenango 21-20 in the state quarterfinals to again finish 10-1 overall, and 4-0 in the division this time. Charlie was named a Section IV Division III All Star and was selected to The Evening Sun All Chenango County Team.

Charlie had seven rushes for 62 yards (8.9), which included a 25-yard scoring scamper against Johnson City, 18 receptions for 537 yards (29.8) and another eight touchdowns, including a career long 77 yarder against Chenango Forks, a two-point conversion and 36 successful conversion kicks for a total of 86 points (7.8 per game).

Charlie finished his football career with eight rushes for 76 yards (9.5), 31 receptions for 933 (yards), 13 total touchdowns, one two-point

conversion, 44 successful conversion kicks and a total of 124 points. His team's overall record was 27-4-1 and they never lost a division game in his three years on the varsity.

"A game breaker, every time Charlie got the ball he was a threat to go all the way," noted former Norwich coach John Pluta. "Not only did he have great ability to go after the ball, and possess great leaping ability, he had football speed—you never really knew how fast he was."

That 29-game winning streak that culminated the previous winter's basketball season reached 37 in a row before they lost to Gonzaga Collegiate (Washington, DC) 74-69 in the STOP-DWI Holiday Classic National Division Championship game. Charlie was a force in that game with 27 points and five three-point field goals. Norwich is the only local team in the history of the STOP-DWI to win two games in the National Division.

Following the loss to Gonzaga Collegiate came a 19-game winning streak that included a second consecutive NYSPHSAA Class B state championship, but ended in the Federation finals with a loss to Long Island Lutheran.

In the Federation semifinals, Charlie scored a team-high 28 points, which included six three-point field goals, as Norwich beat a Paul Robeson team out of New York City that included 6'5" Todd Myles (West Virginia), 6'9" Shamel Jones (Seton Hall), 6'10" Jameel Watkins (Georgetown) and future Syracuse University point guard Allen Griffin, 76-67.

"I mentioned in last year's 1993-94 team article that the Paul Robeson game was my favorite of all time, I will never forget the excitement and intensity on the court that night!" Abbott said

Norwich's 57-2 two-year record makes it the winningest program in NYSPHSAA history over a two-year period.

Charlie finished his senior season as the team's second leading scorer with 430 points (14.8) and was also second in assists with 106. He set new school records, records that will more than likely never be broken, with 93 steals and 87 made three point field goals.

He was named to the STAC All Division Team and for the third straight year was selected for both The Evening Sun All-Chenango County Team and The Press and Sun-Bulletin All-Metro team. He was also a repeat selection to the New York State Class B Fourth Team.

"I have just really always had a hard time believing that there were 15 better basketball players in Class B than Charlie those two years. All I know is that even if I had the opportunity I wouldn't have traded him for any of the other 14, and I say 14 because we already had Bobby (two-time First Team selection and Charlie's teammate Bobby Lazor)," Abbott said.

Charlie ended his basketball career with a cumulative 72-7 record. He played on, and was a big part of, teams that won 46 straight against Section IV teams, 43 straight home games, 41 straight against STAC teams, and 37 in a row overall.

He holds season records with 93 steals and 87 made three-point field goals and career records in both of those categories with 186 of each. His 1,145 career points are number three all-time and his 324 assists rank second overall.

He also went out with a bang his senior year of baseball with a career-high .406 batting average and a career-high 28 hits while striking out just five times in 69 at bats and being named a STAC All-Star for a fourth straight year.

"He had very soft hands and his swing was a thing of beauty, that classic lefty swing you always hear about," Abbott said.

Charlie finished his four years of varsity baseball with a .338 career batting average, 93 hits and 67 runs scored, while striking out just a total of 27 times.

"Being Charlie's coach in multiple sports allowed me to see him in ways other people couldn't. But my favorite Charlie Wightman story ever comes from a simple summer league basketball game," Abbott said "Years ago we used to play our summer league basketball down at the Jewish Community

Center in Vestal. Well, one night we were beating Johnson City quite handily and it was late in the game, but Charlie was still in there because, for whatever reasons, we were short guys that night. A Johnson City kid got the ball ahead of the pack on a breakaway, and it looked like an easy two points, but Charlie took off on a full sprint, ran the kid down and knocked the ball out of bounds. He was just not going to give that kid an easy two points. And that's the way Charlie played the game of basketball. He never gave in, he never backed own, he never let up.

"I coached in Norwich for 30 years and I have a lot of great memories and a lot of great friendships as a result of that. I got to work with, and get to know, a lot of great people but I have very few of what I call 'Ultimates.' Mr. (Jack) Jones is my ULTIMATE ROLE MODEL. Chris Brightman and Keegan Edwards are the ULTIMATE TEAMMATES. And Charlie Wightman is the ULTIMATE COMPETITOR. And, let me tell you, second place isn't even close."

—Mark Abbott