

## John Stewart, '54



John Stewart graduated from Norwich High School in 1954. He grew up a couple of houses from Alumni Field, home of Purple baseball, football, and tennis, and so was exposed at an early age to everything that had to do with sports in Norwich. Equally important to him and to all the kids who grew up in the southwest section of Norwich was the proximity of Stewart's Store, at the corner of Elm and Conkey, where such necessities as soda pop and ice cream could be had. Since John was the son of the owners, he and his brother Kenny were the envy of the rest, who had to pay for these important sources of nutrition.

Sports came naturally to John, and he participated in all the programs provided for younger kids. Although there was no Little League in Norwich until 1950, he played on the famous Southside Bombers in the Kiwanis league, hitting .586 as an 11-year-old, and .719 with a pitching record of 9 and 3 when he was 12. Probably most important to John were the basketball teams at the YMCA, organized, managed, coached, and paid for by The Norwich Sun's sports editor, Bob VanTine. As an eighth-grader, he was high scorer on the Y Juniors when they ended the season with a record of 24-2. When Norwich won the Section 3 basketball championship in Stewart's junior year, in a thrilling 43-40 overtime final victory over a tall Watertown team, VanTine couldn't help but reflect, "And so the dream of 6 years ago when the boys were pint-size court flashes has come true. The Purple has captured its first sectional title in 33 years and won the hearts of the citizenry."

Although Stewart would be elected co-captain of the football team in his senior year, he was best-known for his talent on the basketball court. A natural athlete, he scored 94 points as a sophomore, 325 as a junior, a new school record, and then broke that with 420 as a senior, for a career total of 839 — also a record. That last record stood for 22 years, until his son, Gary Stewart, tied it with his own 839. Coincidental or deliberate, that has to be one of the most fascinating statistics in all of Norwich sports.

The 1953 and 1954 basketball teams were coached by a new young teacher named Jim Flynn, who stayed in Norwich for three years before moving back to Elmira to coach an EFA team co-captained by Ernie Davis to a Section 4 title. His first year in Norwich also brought him a sectional championship, in Section 3. In that year, the Purple started slowly, losing to New Hartford and Saratoga Springs. They would lose only one more game the entire season, finishing with a record of 20-3, the last six wins in sectional play. They also claimed the title in the newly-formed Iroquois League.

The other schools in the Iroquois League were not pushovers, with Mohawk and Oneonta having especially strong teams. Norwich beat both twice, but the scores were close. Then in the sectionals, the purple "Whiz Kids," as VanTine had dubbed them, were called upon to meet Oneonta again, and were victorious 51-43, with Stewart scoring 28 points — in an era when

no shot counted for more than 2 points. Norwich also avenged its opening-game loss in a return match that saw New Hartford ace Phil Bisselle score 31 points; Norwich scoring was evenly distributed, with Captain Ron Tyler having 17, Stewart 15, Don Chirlin 14, and Ed Ackley 10 points and 27 rebounds. In spite of the scoring records that he set, 5'9" John Stewart was known as a team player, as willing to pass as to shoot. At the end of the season, he was the only junior selected to the Iroquois League all-star team, which was captained by Tyler. He was also selected to the Syracuse Herald-Journal's Central New York all-star team, joining players from Watertown and Syracuse, and the great Red Lakata of Johnson City.

The 1954 basketball season began as the prior year had, with a loss to New Hartford. Norwich had lost Ron Tyler, Don Chirlin, Ed Ackley, Jack Stone, and Barry Simmons to graduation, and would finish the season with a 14-6 record. In addition to Stewart, the regulars this season were seniors John Malady, Tom Swales, Wes Aldrich, Bob Tyler, and a precocious sophomore named Fred Swertfager, with juniors Joe Famolaro, Anthony Hill, and Martin Leahy seeing substantial playing time. (Senior captain Ernie Schraft, who had been an important element in the prior year's success, carried over an ankle injury from football that kept him out of the lineup for most of the season.) Before the season started, a national basketball magazine had named John Stewart one of the top 500 high school players in the Country, one of 19 in New York State, and the only one from the Southern Tier region. Coach Flynn was quoted as calling John a coach's "once-in-a-lifetime player." Athletic Director Kurt Beyer tried to temper the praise by saying that he was "a good all-around player, though not the dynamic type." Probably because of his low-key demeanor, Stewart was able to ignore the early plaudits and proceed to set more scoring records.

In addition to breaking his own single-season record with 420 points, and setting a new career record of 839, Stewart broke the single-game record of 31 set by sky-scraping Dick Norwood in 1948. Following a 56-48 win over a strong Mohawk team that included Dan Chrisman, in which Stewart had 28 points and 31 rebounds, he scored 45 points in an 87-46 victory over Little Falls, leaving the floor mid-way in the 4th quarter to a standing ovation from the Norwich crowd. Norwich split its games with Mohawk and Oneonta, and lost to Oneonta in the third game of the sectionals. Stewart was again named to the Iroquois League all-star team, and was unanimously chosen by his teammates as Norwich's most valuable player.

In football, having lettered as a sophomore, Stewart was a starting halfback along with fellow junior Howard Ryan on the undefeated and record-setting team of 1952. Although Ryan was the fastest man on the team, Coach Beyer, in another classic understatement, said of Stewart, "...he shows surprising bursts of speed when the occasion requires." He was the second

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leading scorer and ground-gainer behind Ackley, averaging 5.7 yards a carry. In the crucial last game against an undefeated Oneida team, John scored 3 touchdowns, snared 2 interceptions, and Norwich finished undefeated and broke a 28-year-old record for most points in a season. The team elected him and lineman Pete Burns the co-captains of the 1953 team.

As a senior, John moved to the quarterback position, joined in the backfield by Howie Ryan, Fran Brennan, Dick "Lujack" Call, and Bob Endries. This was the first year for football in the Iroquois League, although the second for all other sports. Norwich started out with a win over Whitesboro, then a disappointing loss to Vestal 12-0, in which the Purple lost 5 fumbles and 3 interceptions and led VanTine to describe their play as "semi-lethargic." The loss ended an 11-game win streak going back to October of 1951. Then came four league victories, with a non-league win over highly-regarded Cortland in the middle. The next-to-last game, against Oneonta, was played on a Wednesday at Oneonta's insistence. Statistically, Oneonta had 13 first downs to Norwich's 7, and 230 total yards to Norwich's 127, but the Purple prevailed 14-6 on a pass from Brennan to J. R. Hamilton and another from Stewart to Endries. That left two days to prepare for Mohawk on Saturday, in a game that would decide the League championship. Mohawk was the smallest school in the league – in fact, so small that athletes were permitted to compete in two sports in a season, and track meets sometimes featured a Mohawk runner in a baseball uniform! But they were strong in football, and with legends named Stephens, Tibbets, Eysaman, and Chrisman, they prevailed over Norwich in a close and hard-fought game, to complete their second consecutive undefeated season. Norwich finished 6-2 and second in the league. John Stewart was the leading scorer and ground-gainer, averaging almost 6 yards a carry, and completing 50% of his passes. End Ernie Schraft was chosen MVP, and received a berth on the Syracuse paper's CNY all-star team, with Stewart and Burns getting honorable mention.

The spring season presented a dilemma for Stewart, because he had to choose between baseball and tennis. He loved baseball, and in his sophomore year pitched or played the infield on Frank Giltner's 11-1 team led by Ron Tyler and Skip Schibeci. In his junior year, Norwich was in tight competition to win the Iroquois All-sports Trophy in the league's first year, and was dependent on success in the spring sports to gain enough points to be a third of the way to retiring it. Athletic Director Beyer, sensing that Giltner's team would have no trouble capturing the baseball crown, asked Stewart to play tennis instead. Coach Charlie Miers put him at #1 singles in most matches, and teamed with Wes Aldrich at #1 doubles. He led the team, which split matches with Oneonta and Ithaca, to an 11-2 season. John lost to Ithaca's star, Johnny Roberts, and then beat him in the rematch. (Roberts was the nephew of Norwich senior class advisor, Marcia Stewart, and if someone were to do the research, probably a distant cousin of John Stewart.) In another non-league match, Norwich took the measure of unbeaten Binghamton for the first time since the undefeated purple squad of 1948 did it twice. (John's older brother, Charles "Stub" Stewart, played on that team, and was captain in 1947.) Norwich finished tied with Oneonta for the League championship. Stewart won the League tournament in singles, and then captured the Section 3 singles crown.

In the spring of his senior year, John started out on the tennis team, but switched to baseball in time to play in the fourth game. (Charlie Miers' team still managed to win the Iroquois tennis crown, with Kenny Stewart moving up to #2 singles.) With the emergence of sophomore phenoms Fred Swertfager and Charlie Townsend, John was called upon to pitch only one game, a win over Sherburne, but he played at third and shortstop, finishing as the leading hitter for the season. After a 2-1 win over Herkimer, in which Stewart went from first to third on a sacrifice and scored, then hit the winning shot over the left fielder's head, Van wrote, "Stewart's hustle paid off. It was a lucky day for the purple and white baseball team when John Stewart decided to swap his tennis racquet for a baseball bat." The 1954 team, captained by Howie Ryan

and Tom Swales, finished as champions of the league, with a 12-2 record in "Dank" Giltner's 25th and final season as coach.

At the conclusion of his high school career, John received the Dave Lee award as the best athlete of the class of 1954. Norwich did win the second leg on the Iroquois League all-sports trophy (and would retire it the following year). After high school, John played on the Oneonta State basketball team, and was a leading scorer as a freshman. He continued to be involved as a player in Norwich town-team baseball, City League softball, and YMCA basketball, and as a mentor for his children and grandchildren, who have carried on the Stewart athletic tradition.

—Jim Dunne