

## Kelly James Huhtala, '89



When Kelly James Huhtala became a varsity basketball player for Norwich, the Tornado soon went from perennial Southern Tier Athletic Conference also-ran to legitimate competitor. One might say the "birth" of NHS girls hoops as a viable STAC contender – a program, in fact – began with the 1989 Norwich High School graduate.

It would be another 13 years after James' graduation before Norwich would win a sectional title, but it was that 1989 season that Norwich had its breakthrough.

For one, in the near 15 years of varsity girls sports, Norwich had never beaten the Pete Hyde-coached Maine-Endwell Spartans. On Dec. 7, 1988, with James leading the way, Norwich pulled off a one-point victory.

That Norwich was competitive at all in James' senior season was in large part due to James, and point guard Jami Dansingburg. The Tornado began the season with just eight players under first-year varsity coach Doug Costin. Within the first month, two of those players were lost to injury. So, through the meat of the season, it was James carrying the large majority of the scoring load.

And score she did.

During one brutal stretch of games against powers Vestal, U-E, Ithaca, and Binghamton, James averaged around 30 points a game. While Norwich succumbed to those teams, the games were typically competitive. Against U-E, James scored a career-high 35 points in a 75-69 triple-overtime loss. U-E would ultimately go on to win the Section IV Class A title.

With James putting up around 25 points per outing, Norwich was never out of a game.

"With the arrival of Kelly, our games here became more competitive," said former NHS coach Norm Kaufman following Kelly's junior season. "We're not getting blown off the court anymore. It's a credit to her we did as well as we did. Others have to accept the (same) challenge."

As a sophomore new to the varsity basketball team and playing amongst several experienced players, Kelly averaged around 10 points a game, and established her style of play: Aggressive to the basket, quick down the floor, and ambidextrous around the basket.

Her junior year, James broke out in a big way scoring 399 points and averaging 19.95 points per game. She had 12 20-point games, and had Norwich on the rise. She was named a STAC all-division player and was one of 10 local athletes named to The Evening Sun's All-County club.

As a senior, James compiled a season that remains the best – by far – in the annals of Norwich girls basketball history. In 22 games, she scored at least 20 points 18 times, and had seven 30-point games with the aforementioned 35-point game her career-high. Remember, she was playing 32 minutes night in and night out for an NHS team that usually had just one substitute.

At the end of her season, she finished with a 24.8 points per game average and 546 points, both STAC records at the time, and marks that stood for well over a decade. She was an easy choice as an All-STAC pick, an All-Metro pick from the Binghamton Press and Sun Bulletin, and a repeat choice as an Evening Sun All-County pick.

She also pulled down 14.3 rebounds per game her senior year, and averaged a double-double in each of her final two varsity seasons at Norwich. Over her junior and senior seasons (42 games) she scored a remarkable 945 points, was in double figures scoring 41 times, and had 30 games with at least 20 points scored. Kaufman attributed James' consistency to her work ethic. "Kelly is constantly working on improving her skills," the former Norwich coach said.

While basketball was her primary sport, Kelly was the consummate three-sport athlete at Norwich. She was part of Norwich first varsity girls soccer teams, and played several years of varsity softball, mostly as at third base. A good hitter and fielder, Kelly was a STAC all-division player following her junior and senior seasons.

As she approached her high school graduation, several colleges courted Kelly for her basketball prowess, and she made Hartwick College her choice. The Hawks could not have selected a better player as Kelly was chosen as the ECAC freshman of the year. She was second team all-ECAC as a sophomore, and first team all-ECAC after her junior and senior years. She was also named the Empire Athletic Association player of the year following her junior and senior seasons, and was an honorable mention Division III All-American. During her four-year basketball career at Wick, she amassed 1,573 points and 973 rebounds. At the time of her graduation, she was Hartwick's second all-time leading scorer. She was inducted into the Hartwick Athletics Hall of Fame in 2006.

Kelly set the bar extremely high for Norwich girls basketball, and its at a level that no one has come close to clearing nearly 25 years after her graduation. She is one of only two Norwich girls (Joanna Schultz is the other) to ever clear 1,000 points. She is also the only Norwich girl to win the STAC scoring title, and is now a Hall-of-Famer at her college, on the Section IV level, and now at her high school alma mater.

Said Kaufman in a 1988 interview: "She is a dedicated player and an outstanding role model."

—Pat Newell