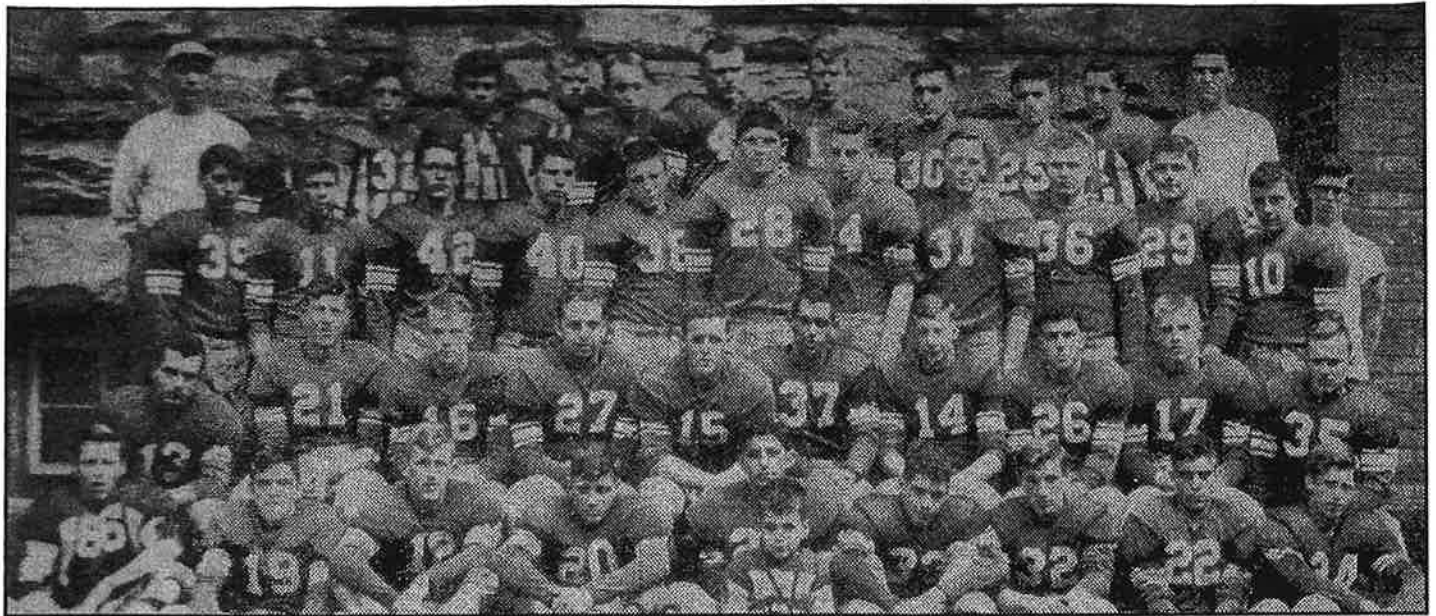


1952 NHS Football Team



Bottom row: Claude Cooper, Bill Dodds, Gary Carpenter, Dick Freed, Joe Frank, Mascot Phil Giltner, Dick Call, Bob Tyler, JR Hamilton, Ron Palmer. Second row: Fran Brennan, Jim Horan, Dick Bowers, Bud Sheehan, Capt. Ed Ackley, Nick Elia, Jack Stone, Jim Golden, Ron Tyler, Bill Watson. Third row: Joe Famolaro, Howard Ryan, Ron Steward, Leon Gridley, John Stewart, Tony Vellake, Don Chirlin, Pete Burns, Ernie Schraft, Bob Endries, Tom Swales, Mgr. Mike Martin. Top row: Coach Kurt Beyer, John Podenak, Jerry Annesi, Sal Mirabito, Bruee Messenger, Dick Fern, Marvin Morgenstein, John Malady, Frank Zaia, Angelo Magistro, John Aloï, Asst. Coach Frank Giltner.

On September 1, 1952, nearly 61 years ago, forty three young athletes, along with Head Coach Kurt Beyer, Assistant Coach Frank Giltner and Team Manager Mike Martin, walked up the staircase from the boys' locker room at the old high school on West Main Street. They proceeded from Maple Street south to Hayes Street, then west to Elm Street, south on Elm Street to Conkey Avenue and on to Alumni Field.

This walk would be made five or six times a week for the next two and a half months. Keep in mind they also walked back after practice and game days. One of the rules issued by Coach Beyer was, "Try to walk on the grass so you don't wear down the cleats."

The 1952 team was going to be running the "Split-T" offensive system that had been introduced in 1951. The 1951 team, led by co-captains Skip Schibeci and Bob Steward, had been very successful with a five wins and two losses season. The 1952 team would take full advantage of the lessons learned in the first year running the Split-T option offense - lessons which included an intensive pre-season week of three practices a day at Y Camp.

The '52 Team had the perfect blend of personnel at each of the offensive and defensive positions. The center, Jim Golden, and guards, Nick Elia, Jim Horan, Ron Steward and Leon Gridley, all brought the versatility and quickness that came from also being outstanding wrestlers. Bob

Endries, Pete Burns, Bud Sheehan and sophomore Tony Vellake (another wrestler) gave the tackle positions size and toughness. The ends, sometimes referred to as the "skilled positions," were Dick Bowers, Jack Stone, Ernie Schraft and Don Chirlin. Dick, Ernie and Jack shared the defensive end positions and Don was in the defensive backfield when the ball changed hands. The starting offensive running backs were three truly gifted athletes. Howie Ryan was the quickest and fastest of the bunch. John Stewart and Ron Tyler were almost twins on the gridiron, even though John was much stockier. They played both sides of the ball, offense and defense, with so much athleticism that they made a tough game look easy. Ron and John, together with gifted offensive end Don Chirlin, combined to form arguably the best defensive backfield in NHS football history, limiting opponents to 33 completions while intercepting 22 passes . . . a school record at the time. The defense also allowed only one running play of over 17 yards, a 36 yard run by Oneida's great running back, Pete Perkins, in the final game of the season. Captain Ed Ackley was the quarterback and a linebacker on defense.

While the starting players enjoyed most of the headlines the team had outstanding back-up players, including Tom Swales at quarterback, running backs Francis Brennan, Bobby Tyler and Dick Call, and end Bill Watson.

The season opened with the Purple visiting Whitesboro,



1952 LETTERMEN— Bottom row: Ron Tyler, Bud Sheehan, Dick Bowers, Capt. Ed Ackley, Nick Elia, Don Chirlin, Jim Golden. Second row: Ron Steward, Jim Horan, Jack Stone, Bob Endries, Pete Burns, Bill Watson. Third row: John Stewart, Fran Brennan, Tom Swales, Howie Ryan, Ernie Schraft, Tony Vellake. Top row: Asst. Coach Frank Giltner, Bob Tyler, Dick Call, Buster Gridley, Mgr. Mike Martin, Coach Kurt Beyer.

a team that had won 37 of its previous 40 games, including its last 11. In 1951, Whitesboro's undefeated team had given up points only once, to an Iliion team which was one of only two teams to defeat NHS. The headline in the *Norwich Sun* summed up the game: "Ackley, Tyler Star as NHS Crushes Whitesboro 39-0." Tyler intercepted three passes, including a 55 yard touchdown return, caught a 67 yard touchdown pass from Ackley and had two "quick kick" punts average over 60 yards. Ackley ran for two touchdowns in addition to his touchdown pass to Tyler. *Norwich Sun* sports editor Bob Van Tine's story of the game made mention of virtually everyone on the field for the Purple and gave special attention to linemen Bob Endries and Dick Bowers.

Week two brought a 20-7 win at Vestal over Dick Hoover's juggernaut, which the Binghamton Press summed up as "Too Much Ackley Brings 20-7 Loss To Vestal Bears."

Van Tine's sub headline in the *Norwich Sun* included this praise: "John Stewart, Pete Burns, Don Chirlin, Nick Elia Share Spotlight with Ackley and Help Norwich Prove Worthy of Bears Eminence; Norwich Defense Meets Several Stiff Tests; Bingo Central is Next on List; Win is 100th in Beyer Regime."

Before the season began, it was thought that the Binghamton Central game would be the key test for the 1952 team. Coach Beyer, with help from the NHS

Student Council, planned the first homecoming game in the history of Norwich High. The weekend would include a Friday night rally at the courthouse and a snake dance to Alumni Field for a bonfire and pep rally. In addition to Coach Beyer's and Captain Ackley's speeches, there were pep talks from Ken Stewart, star lineman circa 1930, John Kelly, captain of the 1943 eleven that laced Central 19-0 and Jerry Farnham of the 1937 Dream Team. Game day included open house at the high school with all alumni invited, a pre-game show at Alumni Field, a post game social hour from 6-8 at the school cafeteria and a dance from 8-12. And it was Homecoming for the team, too, as their first two games had been on the road.

The game lived up to the extensive hype that Coach Beyer and Sports Editor Van Tine had generated. We'll let Van Tine's headlines tell the game story: "Blue Bulldogs Muzzled 14-6 by Fighting Tornado Team" with the sub headline "Ackley, Schraft Are TD Makers; Line Plays Well" and then the sub sub headlines "Homecoming Throng Thrilled by Great Norwich Performance; Hero List Is Long; End Play of Bowers and Schraft Particularly Outstanding; Win, 101st in Beyer Reign, Is Result of Great Coaching Job and Team Effort: Central Score Comes in Closing Minutes; Oneonta Invades Alumni Field Next." Surprisingly missing from the extensive headlines was the perfect performance of point-after kicker, Anthony Vellake.

One of the ironies of this first homecoming in school history is that the Dream Team's season in 1937 occurred 15 years before the 1952's undefeated season. Thus, as the years went on and NHS celebrated homecoming in years ending in 2 and 7, it was always the 1937 that was chosen to be honored. The 1952 team, whence the tradition began, was unfortunately ignored.

The fourth and seventh opponents were Oneonta and Syracuse Vocational, by far the weakest two teams the Tornado would tackle. They were two games for the non-starters to gain a lot of yards, score a lot of touchdowns and make a lot of tackles. The arithmetic for the two games was 40-0 over Oneonta and 53-7 over Syracuse. One of the stars of the two games was Dick "Lujack" Call, whose nickname was derived from the 1947 Heisman Trophy winner, Notre Dame quarterback, Johnny Lujack. Bob Van Tine also had many nicknames for at least three other players: Anthony "Mr. Toe" Vellake, Ron Tyler was the "Blond Bomber" and he anointed Ed Ackley with several, including Ack Ack and Mr. Norwich. The Binghamton and Syracuse papers consistently referred to Ackley as The Amazing Ed Ackley.

NHS easily avenged the 1951 loss to Ilion, romping to a 45-18 victory. Van Tine's headlines heaped praise upon linemen Elia, Gridley and Endries in addition to top scorers Ackley and Tyler, with Chirlin, Brennan and Schraft getting lots of recognition. A very tough Cortland squad was the Tornado's sixth consecutive victim in a 27-7 tussle. One highlight was that late in the game a 15 yard touchdown pass from Francis Brennan to Ernie Schraft was nullified by offsetting penalties. Undeterred, Brennan threw a touchdown pass to Lujack Call on the next play. Others to make Van Tine's headlines were Ackley, Elia, Gridley and Endries.

The season finale was a dream match-up of two undefeated teams. Oneida's seven wins had come by a combined tally of 147 to 20. NHS had outscored its opponents 238 to 45. One of the Tornado's goals was to score at least 31 points so that they would top the record of 268 set by the undefeated 1924 outfit that featured NHS Sports Hall of Famer Tommy Manning. That seemed unrealistic for two reasons. First, Oneida's defense was really good, surrendering only three touchdowns the entire season. Second, Oneida had scouted most of Norwich's games, learning the personnel and tendencies of the Purple's potent offense.

Offsetting the knowledge that Oneida's extensive scouting had gathered was the fact that Norwich knew that Oneida's scouts had seen them play every home game. Thus, when Beyer and Ackley had their Friday night skull session to devise Saturday's game plan, it was decided that

Ed would make two major changes in the normal play calling routine. First, when it was the usual situation for the quarterback keeper that Ackley usually called inside the ten yard line, that Ed would fake a run and hand off to John Stewart going the other way. Secondly, the Tornado would throw the ball a little more than they normally did. Their plan worked to perfection. Norwich's first three touchdowns were scored by John Stewart; the first a 55 yard pass from Ackley and then line plunges of two and three yards. The fourth Tornado touchdown was a ten yard pass to Don Chirlin, and then Mr. Norwich scored the touchdown that set the scoring record on a 38 yard run off a fake pass play. That completed the scoring at 33-0, and the undefeated season, the last one in school history.

How good was the 1952 Norwich Tornado Football team? In addition to dominating all eight opponents, six of which were very good teams, the team members went on to excel in other sports. Ron and Bobby Tyler, Swales, Stone, Stewart, Schraft, Chirlin and Ackley were stalwarts on a 20-3 Section 3 Basketball Champion squad. Golden, Gridley, Horan, Stewart and Vellake led the wrestling team to an undefeated season and second place in the Section 3 Tournament. Jim Horan also was an Inter-sectional champion in a precursor to today's state wrestling tournament. Bob Endries set a shot put record that stood until 1970.

The post season brought further accolades to some Norwich gridlers. Ackley was chosen for the Syracuse Herald-American's First Team AND as their Captain and Standout Scholastic Gridder. Nick Elia was a Second Team choice and Dick Bowers was selected for Honorable Mention. Bear in mind that the Herald-American's team was drawn from about 300 schools covering an area from the Canadian border to the Pennsylvania border and ran east and west from Albany to Rochester.

At the team's Annual Banquet Ed Ackley was chosen for the Luke White Trophy as the Most Valuable Player and Dick Bowers was presented the John DiStefano Memorial Trophy as the outstanding lineman. John Stewart and Pete Burns were named captains for the 1953 team.

Which football team is the best in NHS history . . . 1937, 1924, 1993, 1952? Well, that's why God invented bars and adult beverages. Sports fans from all eras can discuss at their own peril. One thing is certain—guys like Ed Ackley, Ronnie Tyler, Toots Mirabito, Lew Newton and legions of other wearers of the Purple would be great players Anytime and Anyplace!

—Pete Smith and Ed Ackley