

Bob Van Tine, '39



The guidelines for the NHS Sports Hall of Fame provide for the induction of someone who is neither an athlete nor a coach, but "who has contributed to Norwich sports in an exceptionally outstanding way over a period of several years." They also state, "It is anticipated that few will qualify in this category."

Bob Van Tine is one of that few. His contributions were as a sportswriter for

the *Norwich Sun* and as a coach at the YMCA. Those two jobs, however, do not adequately describe his influence on a decade of Norwich kids growing up between 1945 and 1955. In addition to being a writer and coach, he was a mentor, role model, teacher, advisor, and friend to not only those he coached, but to all the kids who were involved in the Y.

Van's education as a writer had two parts. He learned everything he could about sports, and he emulated his hero and mentor, Perry Browne, the sports editor of the *Norwich Sun* during the 1930s and 40s. Bob graduated from Norwich in 1939, having been the sports editor of the NHS Hi-Tribune, and, when he returned from his Army service in 1945, he joined the Sun as a sportswriter. There, he continued to learn from Browne, while establishing his own style.

While the focus of the Paper in those days was on Norwich as opposed to the whole county, there were more sports to cover, and Van was required to be prolific. There were bowling leagues at several locations, two softball leagues, two semi-pro baseball teams, a semi-pro football team, a women's softball team (the Norwich Bluejeans), Kiwanis baseball, the YMCA-sponsored men's church basketball league, and of course, Bob's main interest, the varsity and JV sports of Norwich High School. Although usually under deadline pressures, the articles were judiciously done, with credit given by name; however, if someone missed the game-winning shot or struck out to end the game, it was "Norwich" who missed the shot or the pitch. He said that the first lesson he learned from Perry Browne was "never to criticize or injure through publicity a high school athlete."

In 1950, Perry Browne was named managing editor of

the Sun, and his first act was to promote Van Tine to sports editor. However, Browne died suddenly of a heart attack on March 1, 1951, at the age of 49. A few years before, he had modified his daily column, "Sports Slants," to read "by Perry Browne and Bob Van Tine." In his eulogistic column the day after Browne's death, Van Tine wrote, "The proudest moment of our life came when he asked us to share this space with him, a compliment which will never be matched."

In addition to encouraging Norwich's athletes through the newspaper, Van Tine started a basketball program at the Y for junior-high boys. Called the Y Juniors and Junior Reserves, the teams became the developmental program for the NHS JV and varsity. The Reserves were more or less the second team, so that everyone got to play. The teams practiced two days a week, with games on Saturday afternoons, playing teams from other communities with similar programs. The result was several years of outstanding basketball teams at Norwich High School. Most of the Y Juniors teams progressed as a unit



Van with Y Juniors—back: John Stewart, Barry Simmons, Howie Ryan, Ernie Schraft, Wes Aldrich; front: Bob Endries, Larry Owens, Don Chirlin, Tom Swales

from the Y to JV to varsity, and so played together for 6 or 7 years. When the 1952-53 Norwich varsity won the sectionals, the closest Van came to acknowledging any credit was when he wrote, "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."

What's more, the records of Van's teams were outstanding. In 1949-1950, the Juniors won 24 and lost 2; in 1950-1951, they were 18-6 and the Reserves were 16-2. Van not only coached the teams, he arranged the schedules, found cars and drivers for out-of-town games, bought the uniforms, and made sure that the boys kept up their scholastic responsibilities.

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Some boys attended church for the first time, in order to join the group that had Van for a Sunday-school teacher. He was also an advisor for the Chenango Boys Hi-Y Club, which was rejuvenated by Stan Georgia in 1952, and made sure that the organization fulfilled the leadership role that it was expected to and was not just an excuse to get out of the house on Monday evenings. Because of Van Tine's influence, and Kurt Beyer's success in providing a myriad of sports to choose from, most boys aspired to be on at least one team. Van made sure that each sport, and the names of most of the players, appeared in the pages of the *Norwich Sun*.



Van with Y Juniors—back: Jack Stone, Nick Elia, Ed Ackley, Tom Swales; front: Don Chirlin, Ron Tyler, John Stewart, Barry Simmons

Bob's knowledge of all sports served him well in his writing. Although he was most involved in coaching basketball, he also helped organize and coach Kiwanis baseball and neighborhood Pee Wee baseball, in the days before Little League came to town. Because he was the official score-keeper for most varsity games, he was able to provide the statistics which helped athletes move on to the college level.

Van also arranged trips for the boys to see college and professional games, usually in New York, where they might also take in Coney Island. Season-ending banquets sometimes featured special speakers, such as Yankees "Moose" Skowron and Gene Woodling, or former Norwich and Syracuse star Dr. "Sol" Bloom. At the 1951 banquet honoring the Y Juniors, which included Bloom as guest speaker and Judge David F. Lee as MC, Van himself came in for a special tribute, receiving a check from Stan Georgia and a jacket from his players. Deflecting credit from himself, he called upon the captains, Anthony Hill, Martin Leahy, Fred Swertfager, and Ken Stewart, to speak.

Sadly, in 1956, Bob Van Tine left Norwich to return to Kearney, Nebraska, where he had been stationed during The

War. He became sports editor of the Kearney Hub, and for the next 20 years organized and coached teams there, just as he had in Norwich. In 1975, during one of his summer visits back to Norwich, Van was again honored at a testimonial, organized by Marylou Stewart and held at the Elks. He was presented with a certificate of appreciation by Norwich Youth Commission chairman Jim Dunne. The mood was light, with good-natured kidding. Someone mentioned that Bob was a staunch backer of Ed Ackley, captain of the undefeated 1952 football team. "I thought the Paper was The Ed Ackley Gazette," he said. At the end, though, something serious had to be said. "This will always be your home," Bob was told. "I've always felt that way," he responded.

Later, after Bob's time in Nebraska, Norris Anderson, columnist for the world-circulated *Football News*, began an award that went to the sports figure who contributed the most to his community, and Van Tine was the first recipient. "He does more for kids in sports than any man I know. He goes right up there with heroes who help kids, like Bob Griese and Larry Little. He spends his own time developing their character and his own money to see they get the best." Anderson also quoted Larry Csonka as saying, "I'd like my boys to compete in a town that has a sports editor like Bob Van Tine."

It is appropriate that Bob Van Tine is being inducted into the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame at the same time as George Echentile and the 1952 football team. Bob and George worked closely at the Y, and were co-advisors to the Hi-Y Club. And Bob's answer when asked what sport he enjoyed covering the most, was, "The 1952 Norwich football team that went undefeated was the most enjoyable thing I had to cover. I covered the 1971 national champion Nebraska Cornhuskers, but I enjoyed covering the high school in Norwich more. It was people you knew, people you grew up with."

Bob Van Tine passed away in Kearney, Nebraska, on June 3, 1977, at the age of 56, after suffering a heart attack. The editor of the *Kearney Hub*, in an editorial the next day headed "Bob Van Tine: His Memory Will Live On," said, "Bob was deeply touched two summers ago, when his home town of Norwich, NY, presented him a certificate of appreciation for the work he had done with youth of that city more than 20 years earlier." Let us hope that he would have been deeply touched by this honor, more than 55 years later.

—Marylou Stewart and Jim Dunne