

Fred Swertfager, '56



In the 1930s and 40s, childhood was a wonderful time for most children. However, for some, a viral disease commonly known as polio resulted in the often permanent loss of motor ability in the arms or legs, and for those whose ability to breathe was affected, death. Norwich, like other communities, saw several of its athletes crippled by the disease, which was thought to

spread in locker rooms and swimming pools. In 1946, Norwich's football season was cancelled after three games because of the polio epidemic.

Imagine what it was like for nine-year-old Fred Swertfager to awake one morning to face the physical, psychological, and emotional challenges of partial paralysis of his legs due to the dreaded disease.

By the age of ten years, Fred was fitted with large boots and special braces to aid his weakened legs. A deep feeling of self-consciousness filled him. He was embarrassed to be seen. This young boy loathed the very things designed to help him stand and walk. All he wanted to do was run and play with his friends. While falling asleep, thoughts of adventures in a make-believe world were replaced by a frightening dread of what tomorrow would bring.

Through support of his parents and neighborhood buddies, Fred continued to play ball. When it came time for Little League try-outs he was so self-conscious of his braces and boots he decided not to try out. However, his friends coaxed and encouraged him not to give up hope. So, he went to try-outs.

Fred was chosen by Ang Mirabito and Fenton Pooler, coaches of the Moose Club team. These men saw something beyond the boots and braces. They saw a determination to succeed. They saw an unwillingness to give in to monumental challenges. They also saw a raw talent that needed development.

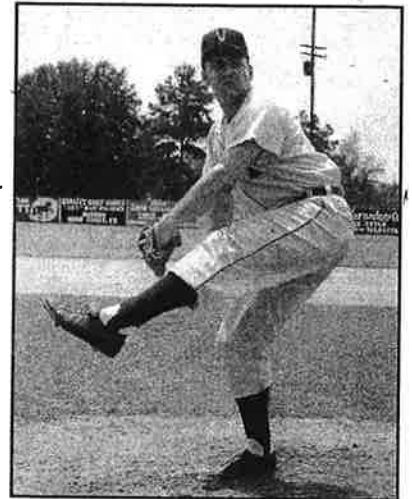
Coach Mirabito and Coach Pooler worked with Fred and soon learned the determination to succeed was stronger than they had sensed. They put him on the mound and his pitching career began. He pitched the first three games. After the third game he made a decision. He removed the hated boots and braces and threw them away. He told his mother he was all done wearing them. His determination grew and at the end of the season Fred pitched the Moose

Club to a Little League championship.

After Little League, Fred tried out for Kiwanis. He was chosen number one by one of his favorite coaches of all time, Don Collier. Coach Collier told his young team, "Boys, we are going to take a beating the first year, but we'll win after that." True to his words, the team "took a beating" that first year. Then, they won everything for the next three years.

Very early in Fred's final Kiwanis season it became clear his level of pitching was far superior to opponents' skills. Coach Collier arranged a meeting with Dewey Thompson and Bob Ryan, managers of the Polkville Giants. As a result of that meeting, Fred became the Giants' number one pitcher. The Giants played in a fiercely competitive town-team league. Many teams had paid professionals on their rosters. These men were in their twenties and thirties. Fred was fourteen years old.

After a successful summer of town-team baseball, it was time for high school. As a freshman, Fred threw a five hitter in his varsity debut win. He had impressive outings the entire season. He struck out ten batters in a one-hit shutout over Ilion. He threw another one-hitter versus Sherburne, striking out fourteen. He tossed a three hitter in a shutout win against Oneonta. He finished his freshman season with a win-loss record of 6-0, striking out 45 along the way.



*Fred at Detroit farm team
Valdosta*

In his sophomore year Fred registered his first no-hitter, this against Little Falls. His lone loss that season was against Oneonta despite giving up only three hits and striking out thirteen. He redeemed himself the next game versus Herkimer. He struck out fourteen in another shutout victory. He finished the season with a 4-1 record. He put up almost unheard of pitching statistics, with an ERA for the season of 0.637 and a WHIP (walks and hits per inning pitched) of 0.545. He averaged 1.68 strikeouts per inning and .09 walks per game.

Fred, in his junior year, continued to blow strikes past batters. His ERA was 0.757 and his WHIP was 0.541. He averaged 2.08 strikeouts per inning and .046 walks per game. He threw a no-hitter versus Herkimer while striking out fourteen. In an 86-pitch no-hitter against Ilion, he struck out eighteen. He struck out twelve in a

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one-hitter versus Oneonta. He struck out fifteen in a two-hit win over Herkimer. He finished the year with six wins, and his teammates elected him and fellow pitcher Charlie Townsend co-captains for the 1956 season.

Fred was again dominant in his senior year. He threw an extremely efficient 82 pitch no-hitter against Vestal striking out eighteen en route. He and Townsend combined for a no-hitter, with Fred pitching four innings and Charlie three. He struck out fourteen in a one-hit shutout over Oneonta. It was later changed by the official scorer



Fred in 1956

to a no-hitter, making 4½ career no-hitters. His high school performances enticed major league scouts to visit Norwich and Fred's family.

Fred was also an outstanding basketball player. In 1953, his freshman season, he set a new JV scoring record of 239 points. The only freshman starter, he received the Russell Skahan trophy as most valuable player.

As a sophomore, Fred became a starter on a varsity team dominated by seniors John Stewart, John Malady, Tom Swales, and Wes Aldrich. The team finished at 12-5 overall, tied with Mohawk at 8-2 for the Iroquois League crown. Van Tine named them "the iron five," and the league all-star team had Stewart on the first team, Swales and Aldrich on the second, and Malady and Swertfager, the only sophomore, as honorable mention.

In his junior year, Fred was joined by Bob Georgia, Charlie Townsend, and Ken Stewart coming up from the JV. Nonetheless, he led the team in scoring with 299 points, and received the Dr. Edwin Gibson trophy as most valuable player.

Fred's senior season saw Norwich win the overall Section III championship, beating the C-D winner West Canada 40-39 in overtime in the final game, and knocking off Watertown and Oneonta along the way. Seven sectional games were won, the last five by three points or less. Swertfager finished his varsity career with over 700 points.

Fred's baseball career continued beyond high school. Forsaking a full 4-year scholarship to Hartwick, where his uncle, "Mouse" Purdy, had starred for 4 years on Hal Bradley's basketball team, he was drafted by the Detroit Tigers. He pitched two professional seasons, and was working his way to the big leagues when suddenly a shoulder injury cut his journey short.

He signed with Detroit right out of high school. He spent the first year with Erie and finished the season with a 12-5 record including a one-hitter against Waycross.

The next season he went to spring training camp with the Major League club. He pitched the entire spring without giving up a run. A highlight that spring was his one-hitter against the Cincinnati Reds. He was assigned to Idaho Falls where he sported an 8-7 record before suffering the shoulder injury. In all, his professional record was 20-12.

Sitting with Fred today provides for a fascinating way to spend time. He can make time disappear by the way he paints mental pictures of players, team travel experiences and game situations. For instance he can tell you that as a young man two years removed from high school he stood on a mound and looked at his defense behind him. There stood Al Kaline, Harvey Kuehn, Ozzie Virgil, Tito Francona, Billy Martin and Dick McAuliffe. As he turned his attention toward his catcher his thoughts were, "Holy cow! What am I doing here?" Then he looked in at his catcher who just happened to be Jim Hegan, famed catcher of the "Cleveland Four" (Bob Feller, Mike Garcia, Early Wynn, Bob Lemon). Fred remembers that Hegan, known more for his rapport with his pitchers than his offensive ability, could see that Fred was nervous, and worked some of his magic to calm him down.

Another story involves Fred attending a Binghamton Triplets tryout, after hitch-hiking to Binghamton with a couple of friends. Bobby Richardson and future New York Yankee stars were on the Triplets roster. After warming up he threw his pitching session against the Triplets. After completing the session, he was summoned into the dugout by a scout. The conversation went as follows:

Scout, "We want to sign you."

Fred, "Wow!"

Scout, "We would like you to report to Nebraska."

Fred, "Sir, we have a problem."

Scout, "What's the problem?"

Fred, "I'm only a freshman in high school."

To continue writing the stories Fred so eloquently relates would not do them justice. Instead, talk with Fred. He will regale you with stories and bring you to tears with laughter.

Yes, Fred was dealt an unfortunate ordeal very young in life. He should be an inspiration to all of us. He never gave up hope. Equally impressive is his willingness to credit his parents, coaches and his never-to-be-forgotten childhood friends who stood beside him when he could not stand by himself.

—Steve Griffin