

Coach George Echentile



Fresh out of Springfield College where he had obtained a degree in physical education in three years, George Echentile first came to Norwich in 1949. Before that, he had served two years as a radioman-gunner in a Naval dive-bomber squadron during World War II, after graduating from high school in Leonia, New Jersey.

George's first job in Norwich was as Physical Director of the YMCA, a position he held from 1949 until 1953. Then he went to Lewiston, Maine, to serve as Director of Christian Education for the United Baptist Church. His religion has always been important to George, and while in Maine he took classes at the Union Theological Seminary.

In 1954, George returned to his old job at the YMCA in Norwich, supplementing it with a physical education position at St. Paul's School one day a week. In 1957, he became the phys-ed teacher at Gibson school, and in 1977 he transferred to the High School, where he completed a total of 29 years as a teacher. In a letter written for "Echentile Recognition Day" in May of 1987, Bob Kirkby, principal at Gibson for many of those years, wrote, "George is superbly organized, and a master at dealing with the student population. The morale was never higher than when he was employed here."

Norwich's first varsity swim team dove into the waters of the short Y pool in 1960, with Coach Echentile in charge. Practice took place at 6:00 a.m. every morning. Only George could inspire youngsters to trek to the Y for practice on cold, dark mornings five days a week. The new high school was opened in 1964, and several years later, the team was rewarded with a full-length pool.

As head of the City's summer recreation program from 1957 to 1984, Echentile helped raise funds for the new pool by organizing annual "Swim-a-thons," wherein swimmers of all ages swam 200 laps of the Kurt Beyer pool to collect money pledged by sponsors. In 1972, for example, \$7,000 was raised by 113 swimmers, led by top money-raiser Mike Quinn, and Mel Eaton, Kathy Eaton, John Miers, Betty Echentile, and 63-year-old John Lechner.

George also organized a state-wide Championship Swim Meet sponsored by the Norwich Elks Youth Activities

Committee. This meet was held annually at the Kurt Beyer pool on a July weekend, and each year drew 450 swimmers from all over the State. Jim Dunne, chairman of the Elks committee, said that, with so many events and age-groups, the meet required careful planning and execution that only George's organizational and leadership skills could provide. Always upbeat, never rattled, he made sure that everything went smoothly. In addition, he coached the Y summer swim teams, maintaining interest with camping trips and fun excursions—and driving the bus. These Y teams became the developmental program for both boys' and girls' varsity swim teams.

George continued to coach the NHS swim team until 1985, producing successful teams and outstanding swimmers, among them Paul Eaton, John and Jim Miers, Tom Brereton, Mel Eaton, Scott Mooney, Mark Mahoney, Ken Mirabito, the Jewett boys, Rick Marchant, Bob Bowers, Rob Echentile, Andy Eaton, Brian Mahoney, Bill Eaton, Norm Lyster, the Sheehan boys, the Casamento boys, diver John Stewart, Rob Kirkby, John Williams, Jim Dunne, Rob and Steve Smith, and others whose names should be included. In the 25 years that he coached varsity swimming, only 5 teams had more losses than wins. His overall record during those 25 years was 232 wins and 131 losses. A special committee chaired by Kurt Beyer petitioned the Board of Education, and on Echentile Recognition Day, May 16, 1987, the high school pool was officially dedicated as the NHS Echentile Pool.

In 1970, George, who had provisional certification in special education, chaired the swimming committee for the Special Olympics held in Oneonta. He stayed in touch with his swimmers and students by sending out a newsletter three times a year. When "his boys" returned to Norwich for a visit, they were sure to stop at the Echentile home to catch up on the events in their classmates' lives.

George was active in the First Baptist Church, teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, and advising the Young People's Group. In 1985 he was recognized at the National Camping Centennial held at the Y Camp. In 1970 he received the Honor Award from the NYS Coaches Association, and in 1980 he was named Man of the Year by the March of Dimes. He received the Outstanding Employee award from the City in 1984, and was chosen Teacher of the Year in 1970 and 1975. Some of his best teaching has been done by example. He was chosen by the Boy Scouts as the Distinguished Citizen of the Year in 2011.

An outstanding end on the Y Giants football team for

three years when he first arrived in Norwich, George is also proficient on the ukulele, and was the caller when The Foggy Valley Boys played a square dance. He also sang with the Midstatesmen Barbershop Chorus, was a member of the Norwich Youth Commission, a life member of the PTA, and a founder of the Norwich Ski Club. He and his wife Betty, who has been a constant partner in all his endeavors, have four children, Sandy, Martin, Christine, and Rob, six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

The last several years have been frustrating for George, as he has lost his ability to communicate as the result of a stroke. His joy at seeing one of his former swimmers and students, however, is unmistakable, and is always reciprocated. He is a Norwich treasure.

—Jim Dunne



George with swimmers Ken Mirabito, Paul Eaton, Rob Echentile, Bob Bowers, Andy Eaton taking Norwich pool water to the sectionals.