

1919-20 / 1920-21 Norwich Basketball Teams



1919-20 Norwich Basketball Team—rear (l.-r.): Edwin “Buck” Burrows; Harold “Clone” Ryan, team manager Casson Hazard, head coach Frank Wassung, Glenn Carter and Johnny Gustafson; front: William Sullivan; missing: Robert Hultzen, Don O’Hara, Fred O’Hara, Ivan Peterson, Clarence “Jock” Taylor and Truman Young

1920-1921 Norwich Basketball Team—Standing (l.-r.): Clarence “Jock” Taylor, Fred O’Hara, George “Paddy” Rourke, Truman Young and Don O’Hara; seated (l.-r.): Lynn Halbert, Edwin “Buck” Burrows and Harold “Clone” Ryan; missing: head coach Johnny Barsha



Just 161 days after the “Big Four”—Prime Ministers Georges Clemenceau (France), David Lloyd George (Great Britain), Vittorio Emanuele Orlando (Italy) and President Woodrow Wilson (United States)—spearheaded the acceptance and subsequent signing of the Treaty of Versailles (June 28, 1919) and only 28 years since Dr. James Naismith had invented the sport, the Norwich High School basketball team embarked on its two-year journey to immortality. Along that storied way, the Purple cagers compiled a record of 40-2-1, winning the New York State Interscholastic Championship Outside of New York City in 1920, while finishing runners-up a year later in 1921. For their efforts, these long-ago hardwood heroes are part of the fifth induction class of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

Like the New York Yankees boasted the “Core Four” during their late-nineties success story, these two Tornado clubs were comprised of an “Iron Five” who saw most of the action. That handful was made up of Edwin “Buck” Burrows, Don O’Hara, Fred O’Hara, Harold “Clone” Ryan and Clarence “Jock” Taylor. Bill Sullivan, who captained the 1918-19 squad was the other main ingredient on the earlier team, while Lynn Halbert did likewise on the latter. Coach Frank Wassung, then in his fifth year at the NHS helm, opened the 1919-20 campaign, but midway

through the season Johnny Barsha assumed command and continued there through the following year.

1919-20

Although Norwich had sported a creditable 13-5 record during the 1918-19 campaign, Wassung must have been a little leery of the impending season as the Purple dropped three of its last four contests, two of which were to archrival Binghamton Central. But on opening night, December 5, the Tornado delighted the crowd that packed the YMCA gym with a hard-fought 22-21 triumph over the Syracuse University Reserves, who made the final count closer than it was with three late baskets. The O’Hara brothers did the bulk of the scoring with 14 points between them, while Ryan added the other eight. Burrows, who had transferred to Norwich from a western New York prep school early in the 1918-19 season, was splendid at his guard slot. As *The Norwich Sun’s* Perry Browne said, “Burrows played his usual good game, although not scoring any points, he played a wonderful floor game, breaking up play after play and getting the ball down to his forwards.”

With Ryan, who had scored 242 points for a 13.4 per game average the previous year, heating up the twines, Norwich easily outdistanced its next four opponents by a combined score of 172-52. In fact, the 6-foot-3 center, who poured in 32 points against Endicott, amassed 46 markers

more than the Purple's four foes with 98 points. Sporting an unblemished 5-0 log, Norwich hosted Binghamton on January 30 before what Browne wrote was "the largest crowd that ever packed the YMCA gym." Despite the huge fan base, the locals tasted defeat for the first time as Bingo, led by Van Atta's 17 points, won out 21-15.

At this stage of the game, Johnny Barsha, a Syracuse University athlete of intercollegiate fame and captain of the Orange quintet during the past season, took the coaching reins from Wassung, who had assumed the duties of Superintendent of Norwich Schools earlier in the year. Barsha, an All-American who is presently ranked No. 65 among the all-time greatest SU players, had helped lead Syracuse to a 16-1 record during the 1917-18 season, when the Orange were voted national champions by the Helms Foundation. In fact, Syracuse won 23 straight games before suffering its first loss, a 17-16 nailbiter to the University of Pennsylvania. In that game, Penn charted only one field goal as Quaker forward George "Mike" Sweeney went 15-for-16 from the free throw line. Sweeney would later go on to lead Penn to the national title in 1920 when the Philadelphians beat the University of Chicago.

Four more lopsided triumphs followed that initial loss to Binghamton, so the stage was set for supremacy in the Southern Tier Basketball League when Norwich invaded the Parlor City on the night of March 5. Hundreds of Tornado faithful made the trip south—400-plus by rail alone, and fans of both teams were treated to a classic. Tied at 20-20 after regulation play, Ryan put the Purple on top during the five-minute overtime, with a free throw for his 15th point of the evening but Van Atta, who also had 15 markers, followed suit. The rest is best left to the reporting of *The Norwich Sun*.

"With the score tied at 21-21, the great mass of people were making so much noise that referee Weiss was unable to hear the timekeeper's whistle. Several seconds after the game had actually terminated, referee Weiss called a foul on the Norwich team which Van Atta turned into a point. Mr. Weiss cannot be blamed for this unfortunate incident as the crowd was making so much noise that he could not even hear his own whistle at times. However, the rules clearly state that the game actually terminates with the blowing of the timekeeper's whistle and not the whistle of the referee."

So, with Binghamton claiming victory and Norwich a tie—because of the lateness of the game (an 8:55 p.m. start) and the immense crowd—since play was halted, the ultimate decision was left to the druthers of the League Council. They found in favor of Norwich, so a third game with Binghamton was played on March 19, with the

Tornado dusting their hosts 15-10. That victory not only gave the Purple the Southern Tier League trophy presented by the Binghamton *Morning Sun*, but the right to represent the region at the aforementioned Interscholastic State Tournament in Syracuse.

Norwich, which stayed as guests at Alpha Chi Rho fraternity and was invited to the "Block S" banquet, trounced Alexandria Bay 28-8 at Syracuse's Archbold Gym. Ryan laid claim to half his team's points, while Sullivan and Don O'Hara added eight and six, respectively. The following day, March 27, the Tornado captured the coveted crown with a hard-fought 18-15 victory against Ilion. Again, Ryan was the main man with 14 more markers.

Needless to say, the citizens of Norwich were giddy with delight over the Tornado's success, and welcomed the conquering heroes with a massive parade. As was reported in *The Norwich Sun*, "Amid school yells, band music, clanging of bells, tooting of horns and sounding of factory whistles, the Norwich High School basketball team, victors of the state championship title, was welcomed home Monday noon from Syracuse in a noisy demonstration the like of which has not been witnessed in Norwich since that eventful day—the signing of the armistice.

"As the train bearing the victorious team pulled into the O & W station shortly after 12:30 there went up from the mammoth crowd assembled there to greet the victors yell after yell which sent a thrill through everyone gathered on the spot. The various members of the team were picked up bodily by their classmates and carried to a wagon, decorated especially for the occasion with the high school colors, and in which they rode from the station to the center of the city where a brief but fitting welcome was formally extended by Judge James P. Hill and Judge W.H. Sullivan in behalf of Norwich citizens, loyal supporters and enthusiasts of the team."

Following the gala gathering, the team was honored at the National Hotel with a dinner. A more formal get-together was convened a few weeks later on April 19 at the Eagle Hotel in what was to become the first of many "Block N" banquets. The varsity letter "N" that so many of us were awarded for athletic achievement was begun at that banquet so as to honor the championship cagers.

Ryan, who captained that championship team, accounted for more than half of the Purple's points, averaging 18.3 points a game. He rang up an impressive sum of 274 as Norwich outscored its opponents 492-210, for an average game score of 33-14. Ranking second for the Tornado was Don O'Hara with 102 points (6.8 ppg), while Burrows and Sullivan added 46 and 36 markers, respectively.

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Other members of that championship squad who were not mentioned include Glenn Carter, Johnny Gustafson, Robert Hultzen, Ivan Peterson and Truman Young. Gustafson and Young would also letter the following year as did George "Paddy" Rourke.

1920-21

With a state championship trophy in its coffers, expectations were high for the Purple as all five starters returned the following year. While Norwich had played just 15 games, including the infamous tie with Binghamton, during that title run, its schedule nearly doubled as hopeful opponents wanted a crack at the champs. After a close 17-14 victory over the Colgate Ox Club in its season opener, Norwich ran roughshod over its next nine foes, outscoring them 441-121.

And like his team, in general, Ryan picked up steam after scoring only seven points in the season lidlifter. During that nine-game juggernaut, the NHS center tickled the twines for 212 points, with career-high outings of 47 and 43 coming in victories over Elmira Free Academy (90-24) on December 17 and Johnson City (89-2) 13 days later. Those 47 markers, which were lost to antiquity until research on this article began, represent the all-time Norwich single-game record, edging out John Stewart's 45 in a Feb. 5, 1954 contest against Little Falls.

Over the remainder of the regular season, Norwich was tested only four times as the Tornado headed into state quarterfinal play 25-0. Owego's small confines forced the Purple to rally for a 17-12 victory on January 14, a quick and well-conditioned Utica Free Academy quintet kept the NHS edge at 16-13 five weeks later and a raucous crowd of more than 500 enabled Cortland to stay close until falling 24-20 on February 26.

None of those triumphs held a candle to the twin killings of Binghamton. With the battle cry of "Hold Ryan—and Beat Norwich" cascading throughout the packed Bingo gym, regulation culminated in a 13-13 standoff before the Tornado prevailed 19-14 on the strength of a 6-1 overtime edge. And, when Binghamton made the return trip to Norwich, the outcome was again in doubt until the very end. With a crowd in excess of 1,000 crammed into the third floor City Hall court (the present-day fire station)—Norwich was forced to abandon its YMCA digs for a larger venue to accommodate the ever-growing spectator base—the Tornado were a hobbled crew when they took to the hardwoods. Don O'Hara and Taylor were both suffering with an attack of the gripe earlier in the week, while Ryan was ailing from a hard cold on his lungs. Despite those maladies, the Purple ran out to a 16-11 lead

at halftime and withstood a ferocious charge by the visitors for a 21-19 triumph, which gained them their second straight Southern Tier title.

Playing without the services of Taylor and Halbert, Norwich rallied at Johnson City to close out the regular season unscathed with a 29-24 triumph. A no-show by Drum Hill of Peekskill resulted in a forfeit triumph in the opening round of state competition in Syracuse before the Tornado disposed of Batavia 33-23 in a March 31 semifinal tilt. Ryan was once again the ace of the Purple aggregation, scoring a game-high 19 points before fouling out late in the second half. The advent of April, though, brought no championship bouquet as the Sherrill quintet from Oneida County took it to the locals from the outset, winning 22-15. Although Norwich attempted twice as many shots, they were either wide of their mark or rolled harmlessly off the rim.

As one of the Tornado's most enthusiastic rooters put it, "It was the new sweaters. They should have worn their old good-luck shirts, and I told them so."

Still, Norwich outscored its opponents 934-428—a per game victory margin of 35-16—en route to that impressive 27-1 record. Ryan, like he had done the previous two seasons, led the scoring brigade with 451 points (16.7 ppg), while Don O'Hara added 167 (7.0 ppg) and Halbert 146 (5.4 ppg).

Epilogue

While Norwich's two-year run at the state title resulted in a gaudy 40-2-1 log, its three-year mark, with Ryan at the forefront, was 53-7-1 between 1918 and 1921. The lanky center amassed numbers that still rank among the best ever seen by a Tornado cager. His career total 967 points ranks fourth behind only Bobby Lazor (1,442), Nick Brunick (1,197) and Charlie Wightman (1,145), while his 47 points against EFA in 1920 edges out John Stewart's 45 in 1954—a mark that had been purported to be the school's best for decades. In that EFA contest, Ryan tallied 20 two-point field goals for the best ever for a Purple marksman, his career 321 two-pointers ranks fifth as does his senior year total of 451 points in a season and his 18.3ppg during his junior season is 12th best.

Don O'Hara and Taylor, both of whom played key roles on these feted squads as freshmen and sophomores, helped keep Norwich's fortunes rolling during their final two seasons. With new hardwoods coach Lew Andreas calling the shots, the Purple were 16-4 during 1921-22 and made it back to the state tournament in 1922-23 with a 16-3 log. There they were upended by Masten Park of Buffalo 23-13. Taylor, who also played football and baseball, was dubbed

the greatest athlete in Norwich High School history upon his graduation in 1923.

Andreas, meanwhile, coached one more year at Norwich, registering a 14-3 record during the 1923-24 season. His three-year cage mark was 46-10. In addition to his basketball duties, he coached football for three falls (15-5-1 record) and was the high school Principle. Following his tenure at NHS, he moved on to his alma mater Syracuse, where he led the Orangemen until 1950, compiling an outstanding 358-135 mark (.726), which included a 19-1 record during 1925-26 when SU was named national champions by the Helms Athletic Foundation. Andreas also coached the Syracuse gridders for three falls as the Orange went 15-10-3 from 1927 through 1929, and served as Director of Physical Education and Athletics from 1937 until his retirement in 1964.

Wassung, who started the proverbial ball rolling in 1915 after graduating from Hamilton College, remained at Norwich for 22 years. Having assumed the duties of Norwich Superintendent of Schools midway through the 1919-20 season, when Barsha took the Tornado reins, he remained in that position until 1937, when he left for Garden City on Long Island. While still affiliated with Norwich, he penned the school's Alma Mater in 1921 as a dedication to that year's graduating class. He also was instrumental in forming the present-day New York State Public High School Athletic Association. In 1921, Wassung met with Daniel Chase, Supervisor of Physical Education in the State Education Department, to plan a statewide organization that would bring consistency to eligibility rules and to conduct state tournaments. The aforementioned NYSPHSAA was formally conceived two years later in 1923.

After his short, but championship, stay at Norwich, Barsha, a Phi Beta Kappa grad from Syracuse, returned to 'The Hill' to earn his law degree. He was the father of long-time WSYR-TV newsman Jerry Barsha.

Although not physically involved with either team, well-known local druggist Burdett "Dash" Hubbard was an important financial cog for the Tornado cagers. As was pointed out earlier, school systems did not budget for travel and the like back then. Hubbard saw fit to not only foot the bill for the long train rides throughout the state, but paid for the hotel and dinner bills, as well.

Life at the beginning of the third decade of the 20th century was infantile as to what it would be even a few years later. The Volstead Act, which ushered in Prohibition, was in full swing and would not be repealed until Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, Warren G. Harding had just been sworn in as the 29th President and was years removed

from being tainted by the Teapot Dome Scandal, George Herman "Babe" Ruth was heading north after breaking spring training in 1921 en route to what would be his greatest season, Al Capone was just starting his Chicago crime career and people like Jack Dempsey, Gertrude Ederle, Harold "Red" Grange, Bobby Jones, Bill Tilden, Gene Tunney and Johnny Weissmuller had yet to make their names synonymous with the "Roaring Twenties." It was a far different time than today, but like their successors from the back-to-back championship squads of the early 1990s and the recent triumphs achieved by the present-day Purple cagers; these Norwich lads from nearly 100 years ago instilled school spirit in their classmates and an enormous sense of civic pride in the hearts of the city faithful.

—Tom Rowe

