

## Paul Eaton, '74



Reporting on the 1974 NYSPHSAA Intersectional Swimming and Diving Championships, the following news article appeared in *The Evening Sun*, March 11, 1974, and was written by correspondent, Randy Harner:

*The Norwich team had to wait until the fourth event to see their teammate Paul Eaton in action again. When the time came Paul was ready. "Let's really go for it, huh? Ok?," the coach told of Eaton just as he was leaving for the starting platforms. "Let's really burn it Paul." And "burn it" Eaton did, as he out stroked the field to capture the crown with a time of 22.18. The race was the closest of the day as the second and third place swimmers touched with times of 22.43 and 22.49 respectively. "It must be my time (to win)" beamed an ecstatic Eaton. "It was my time," he kept repeating and Section 4 has its first state champion.*

*Paul had a few minutes to rest and wait for event six, the 100 yard butterfly final and then the tension started all over again. In the preliminaries Eaton had easily finished first but these were the all-important finals and the various coaches were saying, "Anything can happen." Something did happen and it was not the unexpected. Eaton took the final in 53.807 followed by a swimmer from Liverpool High in 54.30. "swimmers would come up to me and say, 'Norwich? Where the hell is Norwich?'" Well now they know roared the tired but unbeaten Bucky Eaton!*

*The Norwich team then had to wait through three more events to get to the final event of the day- the 400 yard freestyle relay, by far the most exciting race of all.*

*When the time came Ken Mirabito was in position nervously awaiting the piercing report of the starter's pistol. When the explosion came, the swimmers were off almost instantaneously. Mirabito completed the first leg in 52.36. The Tornado had fallen behind. Bob Bowers was next and he swam the distance in 52.00, but Norwich had fallen 10 yards behind.*

*But then Andy hit the water and his teammates roared as they saw him cut the deficit by half paving the way for older brother Paul. Andy had put in a blistering 50.46, his best time ever.*

*Now it was Paul's turn to show what state champions are made of. In the trip up the lane he gained ever so slightly but on the homeward leg he again "burned" the water and closed the gap. At the track it would have been a photo finish but*

*thanks to the elaborate electronic equipment used to time the swimmers the lighted results board showed the Tornado one tenth of a second faster than the second place team to take yet another state championship in 3:22.88.*

*There was pandemonium for the Norwich team and the section 4 contestants. Andy started the chant of "We're number one!" and soon the entire section four reps joined in.*

*"The kids did all!" shouted Coach George Echentile, "1974 was a good year" he beamed and no other coach at the entire West Point Military Academy could be any happier than George Echentile was at that moment.*

One would not have predicted three state championships if they knew Paul Eaton as a young age-group swimmer. Following older sister Katie to swim meets and endless practices, Paul was one of four younger brothers who toted their sweats, towels, and speedos throughout upstate New York and southern Florida. "My sister Katie was a major influence on my competitive career," Paul Eaton said. "She was very talented and she won many New York state YMCA titles and AAU events in the late 1960s. She was really great, the best in the state."

Younger brother, Andy Eaton, enjoyed success as well as an elite age-group swimmer, winning state titles in the freestyle and breaststroke on the AAU circuit. Success was always a stroke away for Paul as he often participated in age-group finals, but never winning a championship event.

After his family relocated to Pompano Beach, Fla. in 1966, Paul and Andy dove in over their heads on the famous "Mudskippers Swim Team" coached by the late Jack Nelson (Nelson coached the 1968 US Olympic team). "The swimmers were really skilled and very talented. It was intimidating," Paul said.

A thrilling highlight while in Florida was the time eight U.S. Olympic swimmers spent a week on the family boat while training at the International Swimming Hall of Fame located in nearby Ft. Lauderdale. Don Schollander, Murray Rose, and Carl Robie were among the Olympians who bunked on the Eaton boat.

Shortly after, a move back to Norwich and the friendly confines of the Norwich YMCA's 20-yard pool re-energized the Eaton family's competitive resolve. Swimming for Coach George Echentile's "Gladiator" junior high swimming team, Paul began to display the talent that forecast the future. "Mr. E, was a great motivator and he helped me believe that I could do some special things," Paul said.

The Gladiators traveled with the varsity Purple, while still a member of Section III. The successful NHS teams of the late '60s did not go unnoticed by the Eaton brothers.

"We were lucky to witness the growth and emergence of Norwich High into a Section III powerhouse under George Echentile's leadership," Paul said. "There were so many great athletes in the swimming program. Swimmers like Tom Brereton, Rick Marchant, Scott Mooney, Peter Heotis and the Jewett bothers and many others. They were a huge influence on impressionable young swimmers."

During Eaton's freshman campaign at NHS, the Purple tankers finished with a strong 13-1 dual meet record. At the 1971 Section III Championships, Paul finished fifth in the butterfly and third as a member of the free relay team. "We had a very good team, maybe the best in NHS history," Paul said. "Senior Scott Mooney was an incredible leader and an inspiration to all young Tornado swimmers."

That spirit carried into Eaton's sophomore season as the Purple captured the Central New York Class B Section III title. A-third place finish in the butterfly and medley relay Paul at the sectional championships capped a strong 11-3 won-loss record.

The top two butterflyers in New York state prevented Eaton from competing at the 1972 Intersectional State meet (only two swimmers per section per event qualified - no qualifying times during those years).

In late 1972, NHS entered uncharted waters joining the STAC in Section IV. The opposition may have changed, but the NHS swimming "wave" kept moving forward at a record pace. Winning 15 of 18 dual meets, the Purple tankers not only finished second in the Class A sectionals, but multiple swimmers qualified for the state meet for the first time. Current NHS swimming coach Kevin Diefenbacher and Michael Bowers joined Eaton at the Intersectional Championships held at Syracuse University.

Qualifying first in the 50 free and the 100 Butterfly morning preliminaries, Eaton settled for a pair of third-place finishes in the state finals. Still a stroke away from a major championship, Eaton decided to enroll at the swim-conscious Mercersburg Academy for his senior season.

After one semester at Mercersburg, Eaton rejoined his NHS teammates. While coach Echentile and teammates welcomed him back to familiar waters, the rest of New York state schoolboy swimmers were not as excited. Finishing as team runners-up in Class A again and an 11-3 dual record, NHS was primed for a memorable championship conclusion.

In a strategic move, Coach Echentile entered Eaton in his specialty, the butterfly, and an unfamiliar event, the 200 freestyle at the sectional championships. Challenging the "super-soph" sectional record holder, Dave Singley of Ithaca High, Eaton pulled off a thrilling upset in a stroke-for-stroke finish. Winning the butterfly and 200 free events

for double sectional titles set the stage for the Intersectional qualifiers.

At the state qualifiers, the Norwich mermen had a major breakthrough qualifying Eaton in his two specialties, Andy Eaton and Bob Bowers qualified in individual events. Joining Bowers, Eaton and Eaton was sophomore Ken Mirabito in the 400 free relay. In possibly the greatest upset in NHS swimming history, the foursome bested Ithaca High's state-leading relay knocking the "Little Red" out of the state meet. It was Norwich High's first relay to ever qualify for a state championship.

In 1974, the NYSPHSAA Swimming Championships were a one-day event (presently a two-day affair). Swimming an exhausting six times, Eaton finished unbeaten giving NHS its first state NYSPHSAA state champion and Section IV's finest hour. "The relay race was as exciting as any that I ever participated in," Paul said. "Ken, Andy and Bob all had their best splits ever, and we won by a fingertip. We were on cloud nine as we celebrated at West Point's natatorium. Later, a team walk to 'Inspiration Point' left a life-long lasting memory."

Success was not limited to Eaton's years at NHS. Attending Alfred State College for his freshman year of college, Eaton won three NJCAA national championship events, setting national records in each, named First team All-American, and claiming the 1975 NJCAA Swimmer of the Year. Eaton also qualified for the 1976 US Olympic Swimming Trials in the 100-meter freestyle and the 100-meter butterfly. Besting a Mark Spitz pool record was "icing on the cake." Eaton was named to the Alfred State College Athletics Hall of Fame in 2014.

After one season at Alfred State, Eaton followed his coach Glenn Patton, transferring to the University of Iowa. A Big Ten Conference finalist, Eaton set Iowa school records in multiple events, and participated in the 1977 NCAA DI National Championships. As his competitive career came to an end in 1978, Eaton was voted an Iowa team captain, an honor that he calls personally significant. "To garner the respect of my Hawkeye teammates was very meaningful and rewarding to me," Paul said.

Joining the Hawkeyes' coaching staff handling the sprinters for the 1979-'81 seasons, Eaton coached Iowa's first Big Ten champion since 1956 in the 50 freestyle. The Hawkeye swimmers flourished during Eaton's years culminating with a Big Ten championship during the 1981 season besting Indiana University's 21-year stronghold on the title.

As a high school swimming coach, Eaton produced 14 NISCA HS all-American swimmers, and multiple state champions in Iowa and Florida. After a three-year stint as

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the head coach of The University of South Dakota men's and women's teams (NCAA Div. II "Top 20") Eaton "came home" to become the coach of the Norwich YMCA Dolphins, where he directed multiple "top ten" teams, two state champions and numerous team record holders. "It's a bit ironic that during my years at the Norwich Y, I really learned how to teach swimming at the grass-roots level," Paul said. "To see the pure joy on a youngster's face when they mastered a new skill was personally rewarding."

Currently employed at Kerry Ingredients in Norwich as a specialist in the logistics department, Eaton misses the excitement of competitive swimming. "I enjoyed the swimming people, parents and kids but it was time to move on," he said. "Having three special swimming families (Eatons, Echentiles and NHS teammates) growing up meant a great deal to me. We made great things happen, together!"

Eaton is married to the former Agnes Smith of Norwich, and they have four children, Bridget, Matthew, Catherine, and Connor.

—*Agnes Eaton*