

Sam Elia: Coach/Athletic Director (1946-77)



In 1965 Sam Elia was completing his 19th and final season as Norwich High School's highly successful wrestling coach, and he still had more than 10 years left mentoring the Purple's golf team in addition to overseeing the school's entire gamut of sports as Athletic Director.

And during that same halcyon year of 1965, a young British lad by the name of Ray Davies was penning the Top 20 hit *A Well Respected Man* for his quartet The Kinks. Although the song was a satirical look at the lives of well-heeled Brits, its title fit Samuel Francis Elia to a tee.

"He was a great coach, knew his stuff and gave it his all," said Don Manley, who wrestled under Elia from 1953-57, compiling a gaudy 67-2 record, and who, himself, was recently elected last year to the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame. "But, more importantly, he was the perfect role model, and that was scarce. He may have been the only role model I had as a young fellow."

Elia, who graduated from Norwich in 1932, lettered in golf, as well as playing football, basketball and baseball his senior year. Class statistics in the school yearbook listed his amusement as being gallant and his ambition to be a Notre Dame star. Well, he headed west after graduation but to LaCrosse State College in Wisconsin, rather than to Fighting Irish territory. There at LaCrosse, he not only graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education, but met the love of his life Dorothy Ranallo. Married in 1940, they remained in the Midwest while Sam took graduate courses at the University of Minnesota. Two years later, they returned to Norwich, where Sam began his livelihood in teaching. But World War II put a quick stop to that career and he spent three years in the Air Force before resuming his life in Norwich in 1946.

It was then that Elia assumed the reins of the Tornado wrestling program, taking over from Frank Giltner, who had inaugurated the program some 11 years hence. And in his very first season, without any wrestling experience behind him, Elia demonstrated the flair that would be his trademark for the next two decades as the Purple posted a 9-1 dual meet record en route to the Section 4 championship. The two of them will be honored posthumously on September 20 in Syracuse with their induction into the Upstate New York Chapter of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

"At that time, there were three pockets of wrestling in New York State – Long Island, the Watertown/Gouverneur

area and Section 4," noted long-time mat coach Jim Howard, who coached at Windsor in the 1960s, was the head honcho at Oswego State for 26 years and is a member of both the National Wrestling Hall of Fame as well as the New York State Wrestling Hall Of Fame. "And, Sam Elia was at the forefront in helping Section 4 become what it is today. He cared about the well-being of every athlete he ever touched and the entire Section 4 wrestling community. He was not in the game to 'win them all' but rather he wanted results that were better than the last time with no excuses."

But while Elia was at the forefront in the early days of Section 4 wrestling, his tenure there was short-lived as Norwich, which had been searching for a league with a solid base in all sports, opted to join the Iroquois League at the start of the 1952-53 school year. Based in Section

3, the new alliance featured six schools – Norwich, Herkimer, Ilion, Little Falls, Mohawk and Oneonta. And the Elia-led Tornado quickly adapted to their new surroundings, capturing the first seven Iroquois team championships.

During that seven-year run, Norwich compiled a 61-9-3 record, going undefeated at 10-0 on three occasions in 1952-53, 1954-55 and 1955-56. During a good part of those undefeated campaigns, Norwich ran off an impressive 29-match win streak that finally ended in 1957 when Ilion trimmed the Purple 24-18.

In addition to those seven consecutive league titles, the Purple matmen also raised the flag on two Section 3 championships in 1955-56 and 1958-59, the latter being one of the more improbable as Norwich sported only a 6-4-1 log in dual meet activity that season. And five other times, the Tornado finished runners-up in the section, usually to Watertown as there was no differentiation of classes then. All told, Elia racked up a record of 122-54-5 (.693) as head of the NHS mat brigade.

Tom Farrell, who wrestled on three of those undefeated NHS teams fondly remembers his mentor. "I first met Coach Elia when I came to Norwich High School from St. Paul's School in 1952. Because of my size – 4-foot-10; 78 pounds – I was referred to him by Coach (Kurt) Beyer.



I wrestled at 98 in the Section 3 tournament that year and got dusted by some 98-pound giant. Coach Elia said, 'Good match Farrell.' I guess by that, he meant I showed up. He put me on a program to strengthen myself over the summer and said, 'wait until next year.' I went on to wrestle for Coach Elia three more years – two at 103 and one at 120. I won the Iroquois League tournament and took second in the sectionals my senior year, all because of Coach Elia.

"It has been said many times that everyone has someone in their developmental years that influences you and stands out in your mind forever. Outside of family, mine was Coach Elia. He became my mentor and friend for the rest of his life."

On a somewhat lighter note, former Norwich Sun Sports Editor Larry Kimball, who went on to become Sports Information Director at Syracuse University, writes in a March 21, 1958 column, "Levi Brown in 'The Rambler' (the Norwich High School student paper) may have hit upon a new reducing technique. He points out that 'worrying' Sam Elia lost 14 pounds during the wrestling season. Sam probably squirmed and twisted and turned as much as any of his talented young grapplers did in a match. Maybe any 'hefty' gents, who desire to shed a few pounds around the middle, should take up coaching the 'grunt and groaners.'"

At about the same time Farrell was graduating from Norwich, Elia's longtime friend, fellow Athletic Director and varsity coach (boys' basketball) Tony Drago was returning to his roots in Oneonta. Drago, who graduated from Oneonta in 1939, seven years after Elia's commencement, worked hand in hand with the Norwich mat coach to keep not only harmony between their two schools, at a time when much animosity existed, but to further their partnership when the Iroquois League disbanded.

"We attended many, many conferences together and usually roomed with one another," noted Drago. "When both our schools were voted out of the Iroquois League, we fought hard to keep both Oneonta and Norwich involved together. And we eventually achieved that goal when we were admitted to STAC (Southern Tier Athletic Conference) in 1972."

Although Elia and Drago both achieved much success during the winter season, Elia in wrestling and Drago in basketball, it was their interaction as golf coaches and ADs that solidified their lifelong friendship. While Elia was leading the Tornado to those three aforementioned sectional mat titles, Drago was doing likewise on the hardwoods, his most impressive season being 1959-60

when the Yellowjackets went 19-0. One of his starting forwards on that undefeated squad was senior Ron Crosby, who later changed his name to Jerry Jeff Walker. Yes, the same Jerry Jeff who penned *Mr. Bojangles* and palled with Waylon (Jennings) and Willie (Nelson).



Together, Elia and Drago, led their respective schools into the new conference and administered the implementation of Title IX directives, all of which exist today. Coach Elia, who guided Norwich athletes while under the national watch of seven United States presidents (Truman to Carter), began his career with the dust of WWII having just settled and retired with both boys and girls able to achieve their athletic dreams. Along the way, he motivated, inspired and compelled thousands.

"Sam's relationship with people was always great because they trusted him," pointed out Drago. "If he made a decision, he stuck with it because he always thought it out before acting. People respected his opinion. He was respected by everybody. I never had a brother but if I did I would have wanted him to be like Sam."

Howard, whose wrestling resume is a Who's Who, concurs. "He was a low-key individual who motivated by reason and common sense. He recognized that athletes had different personalities and needed to be handled individually, and yet waved the flag of you must be a team player. I am not sure he ever wrestled competitively but he studied our sport with firm fundamentals for success and guided his wrestlers to use their strengths and hide their weaknesses. He insisted that each match was a test of your intestinal fortitude but it was over with the final whistle and the closing handshake with eye contact."

Sadly, Sam Elia passed away on Aug. 29, 1997 at the age of 84, and his beloved Dorothy followed some 11 years later in 2008. They are survived by two daughters, Kathy (Majewski) and Nancy (Benton), both of whom live in the Rochester area.

Having had the honor of being coached, taught and in later life a good friend of Sam Elia, I beg Ronnie Milsap's pardon by taking a line from his 1977 hit record *It Was Almost Like A Song*. The words 'Once in every life someone comes along . . .' mirror my feelings exactly toward Sam Elia. My only regret is that I can't emulate what he always told his wrestlers and golfers at the conclusion of their matches – that is extend my right hand, look him in the eye and say, 'Congratulations Coach, there's no one more deserving of this recognition than you.'

—Tom Rowe