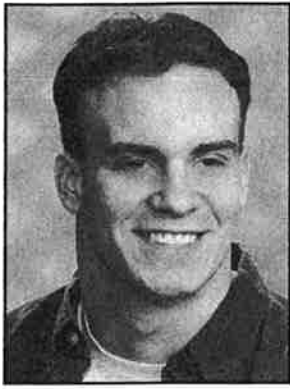


Jason James, '94



Sportswriters throughout the years have often used the term “grunt and groaners” to describe the athletic agony of wrestlers – not the WWF breed – during their respective matches.

Well, the closest Jason James ever came to being a grappler was if he encountered the mat game during a physical education class. But, do not be fooled, he was the epitome of a “grunt and groaner.” Whenever he left the playing arena of the three sports he participated in, you knew that he had been at the center of the action, due mainly to his tousled or torn uniform and his physical scars collected while in the fray. This never-ending intensity is why he is one of the newest members of the seventh annual induction class of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

As the starting fullback and linebacker on the Norwich football team, you could always tell that the 5-foot-11; 185-pound James hadn't been wasting his time while inside the chalk lines. His was the dirtiest and usually the bloodiest uniform at the game's conclusion, and his never-say-die effort certainly didn't go unnoticed.

Likewise, as his baseball team's mainstay behind the plate, he endured all the foul tips, wild pitches and collisions with the usual 'oh well' nature of an old stevedore.

And, although he didn't start on the Purple's crack cage unit, his take-no-prisoners approach as the invaluable sixth man earned him the respect of both teammates and foes alike. Hustling for loose balls, attacking on defense, diving and scrapping his way for rebounds and scoring at a respectable clip, James showcased his mettle every outing on the hardwoods.

“What set him apart was that he competed the same way in practice and games – all out,” recalled former Norwich head football coach John Pluta. “He gave no quarter and asked for none. Whether in practice or in a game, you better have your chin strap buckled because Jason was going to give you his best shot. No game or situation was too big for Jason because he prepared for it every day in practice.”

Mark Abbott, James' former basketball and baseball coach reiterated Pluta's comments. “Jason was an absolute pleasure to coach. He epitomizes what a Hall of Fame is all about. He came to practice every day, gave it absolutely everything he had and always put the team first. And, that says a lot, especially considering the amount of success he

was able to achieve. You never had to get on him to work harder because it was maximum effort all the time with him – a true warrior, a true champion and a great selection by the Hall of Fame committee.”

Having earned 10 varsity letters – four in baseball and three each in football and basketball – James considered baseball his best sport but football his favorite. “Every football game was an adrenaline rush for me, but I think I could have gone far in baseball if I hadn't torn my rotator cuff,” noted James.

With that in mind, football will be the first of his athletic endeavors to be dissected. With James at the center of attention on both offense and defense from his fullback and middle linebacker positions, the Tornado gridgers went a collective 27-4-1 (.871) over the course of three autumns. For his efforts, James was named a first team selection at linebacker to the New York State Sportswriters Association Class B High School Team and was selected the Player of the Year in Chenango County by The Evening Sun following his senior campaign. An All-Metro selection at linebacker as a senior, three times he was tabbed an All-County player and was a Section IV Division III all-star both his junior and senior years.

The late Dick Russ, former head coach at both Chenango Forks and Maine-Endwell put it rather succinctly following the 1993 grid season, “I'm terribly thankful that guy is graduating. He was the heart and soul of that Norwich team.”

That 1993 fall produced great numbers for both James and his Purple teammates. As the county's top rusher with 902 yards on 156 carries (5.8 avg.), James scored 14 touchdowns and one conversion run for 86 points, and eclipsed the 100-yard mark on four outings, his best effort of 143 coming in a 28-0 whitewashing of Seton Catholic Central on Oct. 8. And, Norwich (10-1) won its first 10 games before suffering a heartbreaking 21-20 defeat to Chittenango in a New York State quarterfinal game at Rome Free Academy on Nov. 13. In that final game James showcased his talents as he accounted for all of the Tornado's points via three touchdowns and a conversion run, with 120 yards on 23 totes in being named the game's Offensive MVP.

“He was one of the toughest runners we faced all year,” admitted Chittenango head coach Mike Schiedo following the game. “He's a strong, hard runner, and our kids commented on how hard he was to bring down.”

James recalled that game as two of his most memorable. “I gave it everything I had that night and Sports Illustrated had a picture of me (kneeling with his head in his hands)

in the middle of the field after the loss. The other game was when we went as far as we could in Rochester.”

That Rochester game James referred to was when Norwich finalized its 1992 season with its 10th straight victory in a 28-14 triumph over Hilton in a New York State Class B regional contest at the University of Rochester’s Fauver Stadium on Nov. 21. The road to a state championship had not yet been agreed upon, so the Purple finished the year at 10-1.

During that 1992 fall, James again played in all 11 games, gaining 597 yards on 130 carries for 80 points on 12 touchdowns and eight conversion points. His best game of the year came in a driving rain with ankle-deep mud when he amassed 144 yards, three TDs and two extra points in a 39-13 whipping of Chenango Forks on Friday evening, Oct. 9; a night that brought together the last two undefeated Norwich grid teams – 1937 and 1952 – on their respective 55th and 40th anniversaries in honor of legendary coach Kurt Beyer’s 85th birthday.

“We always feared James going in,” admitted Forks coach Russ whose perennially powerful Blue Devils were a collective 0-3 during James’ tenure. “We knew that he could hurt you but there wasn’t a whole lot that you could do about it.”

Over the course of his three years on the gridiron, James played in all 32 games, amassing 1,630 yards on 311 carries (5.2 avg.), and totaled 172 points on 27 touchdowns and 10 conversion markers. Defensively he rang up opposing runners with 353 tackles, the leading tackler each of his three varsity seasons. Rarely did he ever leave the field as he was the long snapper on punts and extra points, thus necessitating the NHS coaching staff to sit him out on kickoffs to give him some rest.

“My father instilled in me to do the best all the time, whether it was practice or a game,” noted James. “I tried to never take a play off. I loved carrying the ball, but I enjoyed it just as much when I put a good hit on someone. I liked to run over people, too.”

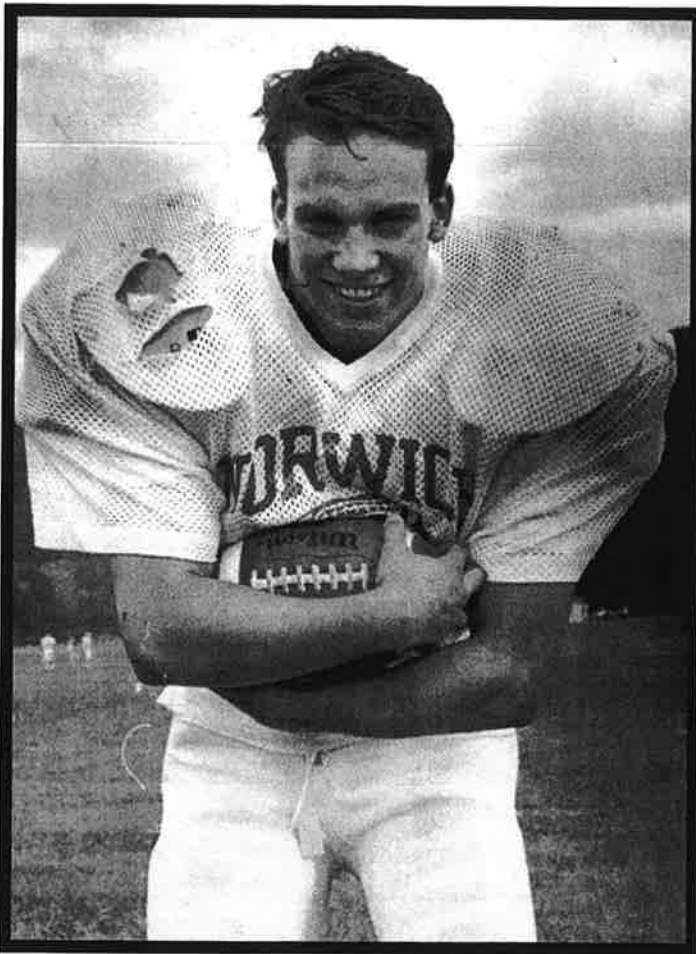
Pluta agreed. “He never took a drill off, and he played hurt. He was a never-say-die player and an outstanding kid with a great will to win. He had a heart as big as the day is long. His work ethic and leadership established him as a truly great football player.

“Jason was the most complete football player I coached. He was a great leader who expected the best from himself and his teammates,” continued Pluta. “He was a vocal leader who also led by example, and both coaches and teammates knew he could be counted on every snap of the ball. He was a tough, physical runner who could knock a tackler back or make one miss. On defense he was a smart,

punishing linebacker and a sure tackler with a nose for the ball.”

Now that the three-year history of his favorite sport – football – has been explored, next up under the athletic microscope is what James considered his best sport – baseball. A four-year varsity letterman, James earned All-Conference Southern Tier Athletic Conference (STAC) status as a catcher in both his junior and senior campaigns, while being tabbed an All-Division II pick his sophomore season.

During that stellar four-year career, which saw Norwich post a 42-35-1 (.545) record, James batted a hefty .375 (93-for-248) with 22 doubles, six triples and four home runs, while scoring 66 runs and driving in another 54. He also found time to steal 35 bases.



“Jason was a dominant player in STAC his senior year as a catcher, pitcher and outfielder, but mostly as a hitter and baserunner,” pointed out former NHS coach Abbott. “He was very aggressive at the plate and had great instincts on the bases. He was just a tough, hard-nosed player.”

That senior year Abbott alluded to was indeed stellar as James hit .507 (34-for-67) with 10 doubles, three triples and two home runs to go along with 22 runs batted in, 26 more runs scored and 18 stolen bases, while striking out only five times. At the forefront of that all-star season was

a 5-for-5 performance in a 13-9 victory over Binghamton under the lights at MacArthur Park on April 22. Besides smashing a three-run homer, driving in seven runs and scoring three others, James came on in relief of Ron Brooks to record the win by giving up just two hits over the final 3 2/3 innings of play.

Although the starting catcher for most of his Tornado tenure, James more than ably held his own when he was called upon to toe the rubber. As a spot starter over his final three springs, James recorded a hard-luck 7-8 record as he often fell victim to an offensive malaise on the part of the Purple bats. Twice as a senior he lost one-run decisions to Chenango Forks (2-1) and Johnson City (1-0), while suffering a 3-0 defeat at Ithaca as a junior.

Prior to his eye-popping .507 batting average during his senior season when he was named co-MVP with his cousin, Charlie Wightman, James hit .354 in 1993 and .349 as a sophomore. The team's MVP as a junior, James compiled another perfect day at the plate on April 5 when his 3-for-3 performance with a double, triple and four runs scored to go along with one inning of perfect relief enabled Norwich to thump Sidney 13-2.

The versatility of an athlete like James is evident when the final sport on his resume is basketball – one in which he played a key role in helping Norwich to back-to-back New York State Public High School Athletic Association Class B championships and one Federation title. The Tornado, which at one time ran off 37 consecutive triumphs, were a collective 56-2 (.966) during James' final two years. All told, the Purple posted an enviable 72-7 log (.911) when James was on the hardwoods.

As the all-important sixth man or first player off the bench, James fit comfortably into any position he was called upon to play. For his career, he scored 291 points on 40 three-point field goals, 57 of the two-point variety and was 57-for-89 from the charity stripe as he played in all of Norwich's 79 games during his three-year varsity career. He also grabbed 70 defensive rebounds, pulled 66 more offensive caroms, came up with 82 steals and dished out 207 assists – the latter of which ranks 11th all-time in Purple hoops history.

"Numbers don't really tell the story with Jason's effectiveness as a basketball player," explained Abbott. "He was a valuable reserve over the course of three seasons who played both guard positions. He handled the ball well and could shoot it pretty good, but it was his heart and toughness that increased his value.

"He was a tenacious defender all over the floor who never backed down from any challenge. He could, and willingly would, guard any position on the floor and rarely

got out hustled or out muscled for a loose ball or a rebound," continued the former NHS mentor. "And, when he wasn't on the floor, he was always encouraging his teammates from the sideline and staying involved in the game and in what was going on, so that he was always ready to play."

Following his stellar years at Norwich, James played both fullback and linebacker for two years at Hartwick College in Oneonta and caught one season on the baseball team when he compiled the team's second highest batting average.

Elected to the Section IV Hall of Fame in 2012, James has been employed by Pro-Tel (Professional Teleconcepts, LLC) for 15 years and is presently the company's Wireless Distributor Antenna Systems Manager.

Former football coach Pluta may have put James' athletic intensity in a nutshell when he recalled how the gridiron star prepared for a game. "One of my lasting memories of game days during Jason's career was pre-games in the locker room before our walk to the field. I would be addressing the team and I would hear the sound of Jason getting sick. I knew he was ready, so I knew we were ready, too."

Whether there was much grunting and groaning during that pre-game time is conjecture, but one thing is most certain – there was considerable consternation on the opposing sideline following the usual Tornado victory and those grunts and groans by the Purple's grid rivals were a resounding result of the hurt Jason James had just put on them.

—Tom Rowe