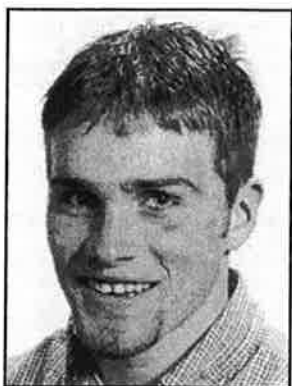


Jeff Parker, '97



Although he never wore a shield with a large red "S" on his chest, Jeff Parker embodied two of the three traits associated with 'Superman.' No, he didn't leap over tall buildings with a single bound, but like the fictional 'Man of Steel' he seemed to be "faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive" whenever he

donned the Purple and White, especially when he took to the Norwich football field.

A three-sport athlete (football, basketball and baseball) with eight varsity letters under his belt, Parker earned his spot in this the sixth induction class of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame with his record-setting performance on the gridiron. There, between 1994-96, he established the Tornado's all-time career rushing mark of 2,930 yards on 356 carries in 25 games, an average of 8.2 yards per tote and 117.2 yards per outing. The previous record of 2,652 yards had been held by Barry Benjamin, a fellow NHSSHOF inductee, back in 1980-82. And, that total would have been even greater had he not missed the final two games of the 1995 season due to an ankle injury.

"Jeff was a threat to go all the way every time he touched the ball. He, in one word, was explosive," recalled former Norwich football coach John Pluta. "He was a complete back – a tremendous combination of desire, explosiveness, speed, strength and instinct."

That explosiveness was compacted into a 5-foot; 9-inch frame that topped out at 180 pounds. But, like Superman, this mighty mite packed a punch with lightning speed and strength. In addition to that career rushing record, Parker scored 31 touchdowns and added 24 PATs for a tidy sum of 210 points or 8.4 per game. During the course of his three-year stint as the Purple's go-to guy, he compiled 100 yards or more 14 times, with three games being in excess of 200 yards.

"Jeff was not among our fastest players in practice, but he did not get caught on game days when he broke into the clear," noted Pluta, who nowadays is the defensive line coach at Morrisville State College. "In our quick dive game, he was the best we had. He understood the need to explode through the hole and nobody got into it quicker. He would disappear into the line and had an uncanny ability to make one cut, break a tackle at the second level and burst into the secondary."

The first of those 200-yard efforts came during his junior

year of 1995 when he went 16-for-217 in a 46-14 thumping of Seton Catholic Central on Oct. 7. He, however, saved his best for his senior campaign when he totaled 235 yards on 26 totes as Norwich blanked Solvay 14-0 in the Carrier Dome on Sept. 14, 1996, and proceeded to chart his best single-game performance of 32-for-267 in the Purple's hard-fought 28-23 triumph at Oneonta on Oct. 11.

And, those 31 six-pointers weren't short pops, either, as more than half – 17 to be exact – came from 20 yards or more. In fact, six of those long TD bursts were from distances of 50 yards or greater. Three of those gargantuan gallops occurred during his sophomore season when he broke off real estate runs of 80, 68 and 57 yards in respective victories over Waverly (46-6), Owego (35-6) and Seton Catholic Central (42-19). He began his junior year with a 64-yarder in a season-opening loss to Vestal, and put the cap on those distant dashes with TDs of 50 and 76 yards in those aforementioned respective triumphs over Solvay and Oneonta during his senior crusade.

Besides establishing the all-time career rushing record of 2,930 yards, Parker came narrowly close to chalking up the best single-season mark when he totaled 1,356 yards on 196 carries (6.9 per carry and 150.7 per game) during his final year of 1996. Despite gaining only 28 yards on 16 totes in the Tornado's season-opening 39-14 victory at Vestal, that sum was a mere 32 yards shy of tying Jason Morris, another NHSSHOF enshrinee, who posted 1,388 yards back in 1991.

That low yardage total versus the Golden Bears is deceptive, however, as the Vestal defense – remembering well Parker's 110-yard performance of a year earlier - keyed on him with several players throughout the game. While the speedy Norwich back played decoy, the attention he commanded allowed his Tornado teammates to find ample running room. The end result was that the rest of the Purple backs went 28-for-179 (6.4 yards per carry), with Jason Thomas (73 yards), James Manwarren (55 yards) and John Loiselle (31 yards) setting the standard in the 25-point triumph

Postseason accolades abounded for Parker as he earned All-Division and All-County honors in each of his three varsity seasons, while being named to the prestigious All-Metro team and The Evening Sun's Player of the Year following his senior campaign. But, in some way his first sojourn onto the gridiron as a Norwich varsity player may have been a foreshadowing of what the future had to hold. In that game, a 16-14 Tornado victory over Elmira Free Academy in the Section IV Class B championship, Parker wound up being a key cog in the triumph.

Just before halftime, quarterback Chris Maynard hit Charlie Wightman on a 24-yard scoring strike. Electing to kick the extra point due to the sloppy field conditions, the ensuing snap from center was awry but Parker, a freshman just up from the junior varsity to spell the injured Josh Morris, had the presence of mind to flip the ball to Wightman who was able to elude the EFA defense and score what proved to be the two-point winning differential.

"I was really nervous," admitted Parker, whose yards gained far outnumber his words spoken. "The snap was bad and I just kind of picked it up and ran for the end zone, but I spotted Charlie and tossed it to him."

His former coach, Pluta, remembers the incident all too well. "Heavy rains made the field virtually unplayable, and ball handling very tough. When the snap got away following our go-ahead touchdown, Jeff reacted with great instinct, scooped the ball and tossed it to an open Charlie Wightman. They proved to be the winning points, and we knew we had a special player."

Parker proved to be a special player in baseball and basketball, too. A three-year starter for the NHS nine, he gave then head coach Mark Abbott a foreshadowing of what was to come when he went 3-for-5 with a double, triple and three RBI in his first varsity game, a 17-4 thumping of Whitney Point on April 1, 1995. He would go on to finish the season with a .368 batting average (21-for-57) and nine stolen bases. After slumping his junior campaign to .260 but with 15 stolen bases, Parker finished with a flourish, hitting .344 (21-for-61) with 24 base pilfers to not only be voted his team's MVP, but to earn a spot on the STAC All-Division team as well. For his career, he hit a robust .327 (55-for-168) with 48 stolen bases.

"Jeff was asked to play a variety of positions – catcher, center fielder, pitcher – due to his exceptional abilities, and he successfully met each challenge for the good of the team," pointed out Abbott.

Abbott, likewise, had the pleasure to coach him two seasons on the Tornado hardwoods. There, after suffering through an injury-plagued junior year, Parker capped his Purple career with 210 points (11.7 ppg.) in 18 games. The senior tri-captain finished second to Jeff Gorski (34) with 30 3-pointers, and on nine occasions reached double digits. Three times he eclipsed 20 points, with his career-high of 27 coming in a 69-68 loss to Corning East in a sectional contest on Feb. 19, 1997. He also found time to dish out 53 assists, pull 50 rebounds and chalk up 40 steals in being named Norwich's Most Outstanding Defensive Player.

"Because of his relentless effort, Jeff was always assigned to guard the opponent's top offensive threat," explained Abbott. "No one worked harder than Jeff. He played with

tremendous desire and determination. Just look at his numbers and you can see the type of effort he put into every phase of the game. He just loved to compete from baseline to baseline."

His ability to compete may be the best way to describe Parker's persona. "Intensity is in my makeup. I always wanted to get the most out of myself and reach my ultimate potential," admitted Parker. "Just ask any of my teammates how intense I was before a game."

"I was not much of a workout guy. I just stayed pretty active in different sports," continued Parker. "I never focused on just one sport. I think one of the big problems in sports today is that young kids are only focusing on being a one-sport star. They should be more well-rounded."

Parker was obviously that – well rounded – and despite his gridiron heroics has a special place in his heart for the game of baseball. "Football was my best sport, but baseball is in my family's blood." Indeed it is as his father Jerry (1966), grandfather Bob Fahy (1930), uncles Tom Fahy (1961) and Jack Parker (1970) and great uncle Fred Fahy (1932) all lettered for the Purple & White (graduation years are in parentheses). Brothers Bob and Fred Fahy later went on to captain their respective nines at Syracuse and Colgate Universities.

Following graduation from Norwich, Parker went on to play football at Plymouth State College (NH), where he majored in Sports Management. Today he owns and operates Parker Homes, a company started by his late father 27 years ago, with its specialty business being the installation of seamless gutters. His father, besides being one of his family's gifted baseball players, was an integral part of Norwich's first-ever Iroquois League football championship when he helped lead the Tornado to a 6-1 record as an All-League lineman back in 1965.

Married to the former Jennifer Schmidt of Rochester, they are the parents of three children – Zack (9), Joey (6) and Teddy (2). With his team athletics behind him, Parker is now involved in hunting, fishing, snowboarding and four-wheeling. "The outdoors was and is my gym," said Parker, who I am sure, is as intense there as he was on the athletic field.

Former football coach Pluta best summarized Parker's life and nature. "Jeff was probably the fiercest competitor I coached at Norwich. He played the game with a tremendous passion and hunger. He not only hated to lose games, he hated to lose a play offensively or defensively. Jeff expected to score every time he touched the ball and he ran to score every play. His displeasure was often evident when he did not as he played hard every play, both sides of the ball. He was a 'put your arm around him' guy when you

Continued on next page

took him out of a game, because he wanted in every play and we needed to explain to him why when he wasn't.

"I love Jeff and I loved coaching him. It was not always easy, but his intensity, drive, talent and desire to be great were wonderful to be a part of. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to coach Jeff Parker, and thank him for all he did for Norwich football."

Given all the accolades found within this text about Parker, maybe those aforementioned tall buildings are indeed susceptible to his God-given talents, because in reality he did wear that letter "S" while at Norwich, a letter that not only stood for Superman-like achievements, but strength, style and sportsmanship, too. And, unrelated to Superman, Parker didn't need an alter ego like Clark Kent as there was no need to disguise who and what he really was/is – just a superb athlete and human being.

—*Tom Rowe*