

Karen Snyder, '02



Karen Snyder was such a dynamic track and field athlete, it's easy to forget that it wasn't her first love. From the time she was about 5 years old, she was putting in many hours practicing and playing soccer.

"I started pretty young (playing sports), and I was fortunate (my parents) threw me into everything," Snyder said, 33, who now lives and works in New Hampshire. "Some of those sports stuck, and others did not."

Long before she graced the Norwich High School varsity track and well before she joined the NHS varsity soccer team, she competed at the club level as a standout defender for the Chenango Chargers. Usually, Snyder was last line of defense to protect her goalie. She would carry those many years of grooming into a standout four-year varsity soccer career for the Norwich Purple Tornado.

Snyder came up the soccer ranks with the same core of young ladies, and that group would ultimately jell into the program's defining team.

Snyder's senior season, the fall of 2001, stands alone as the Purple Tornado's best team performance in school history, and no team has come close to matching that 11-5 overall record.

Snyder played with some outstanding athletes, and again, she was the anchor of the defense at fullback, earning Southern Tier Athletic Conference all-star accolades following her junior and senior seasons, as well as her Norwich team's Most Valuable Player.

"We had a good contingent that all started playing together around the same age," Snyder said. "Our senior year, we had an excellent team. We had played so long together and had a lot of good talent."

During that season of distinction, the Purple ladies pulled off perhaps the greatest win in school history. Hosting perennial state championship contender Seton Catholic Central at Perry Browne Elementary School's Alumni Field, Norwich gained the program's signature win edging the Saints, 2-1 in a thriller.

Seton was virtually unbeatable that season, and went on to win a Class C state championship. But it was Snyder and the rest of the Tornado that earned eternal bragging rights as the team that beat the eventual state champion.

Snyder could have pursued a collegiate soccer career. Aside from her prodigious soccer skills, she was blessed with tremendous speed and strength.

That speed and strength served her well in the spring, and she proved a natural in just about every track and field event she entered.

Snyder said she discovered an aptitude for track and field during her elementary school days.

Toward the end of the school year, Norwich's elementary schools have traditionally held a track and field day where kids participated in a variety of running, jumping, and throwing events led by retired NHS physical education teacher Gloria "Scottie" Decker.

"It was one of the crazy days to have fun, but I kind of took it seriously," Snyder said, remembering back over 20 years.

Decker also coached track and field at the modified, junior varsity, and varsity levels at Norwich for over four decades, and Decker had a big hand in Snyder's development, particularly in the jumping events.

"She was a huge part of my high school sports career, especially in track and field" Snyder said. "...I think what made her such a great coach was that you knew that she truly cared about her athletes. It wasn't just about running faster or jumping harder for the sake of the team. I felt like she cared more about the value that participating in sports brings to the individual."

As a freshman newcomer to the varsity track and field team, Snyder was also fortunate to have NHS Sports Hall of Fame inductee, the late Katie Almeter, helping pave the way. Almeter was two years Snyder's senior, and was a school record waiting to happen every time she entered an event.

Almeter went to the state track and field meet each of her four high school varsity seasons culminating her career with a state championship her senior season in 2000.

Snyder, just a sophomore, was on the same track as Almeter that day, earning a third place finish in the state Class B finals at Liverpool High School with a mark of 16 feet, 9 inches in the long jump. She missed qualifying for Federation action by one inch, but one knew it was only a matter of time before Snyder would match Almeter's state championship.

In the history of Norwich athletics, before Almeter, there had only been one New York State Public High School Athletic Association individual state champion – Paul Eaton.

A year after Almeter's accomplishment, Snyder duplicated it becoming the second Norwich female athlete in school history to win an individual state title, capturing the triple jump's top spot on the Class B podium in 2001 at Nassau Community College with a leap of 36

feet, 11 inches. Not only did she match Almeter's state championship, but she gained full retribution from her previous year's (2000) disappointment in the triple jump when she fouled and did not qualify in the Section IV state qualifier at Ithaca.

During the next day's Federation competition, she finished sixth overall as the only "B" entry in the field of eight triple jump participants, as all the other girls represented "A" schools. She also matched her finish of a year ago with another third-place leap of 16 feet, 3 ¼ inches in the long jump.

That state championship victory was half a lifetime ago for Snyder, and she said she does not remember reaching the top spot of the podium as her primary motivator.

"It was more about getting certain distances, that drove things for me," Snyder said. "I was goal-oriented, and certainly at a meet, I knew where everyone was. In the moment I was competitive, but I don't know if I ever went to states thinking beforehand that I needed to go to states (and win)."

As one of Norwich athletics' pioneers in terms of individual success and reaching the pinnacle in one's sport, Snyder's selection to this year's Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame class validates what was clearly one of the all-time great careers in Norwich track and field history.

Her resume of accomplishments is staggering. Upon graduation, she held the NHS record in the triple jump (37 feet, 4 ½ inches), the high jump (5 feet, 2 inches), and was one leg of the record-breaking 400- and 1,600-meter relays. She still holds all of those records, save the 400-meter relay. Other members of the 1,600m squad were Almeter, Stef Alger and Erica Eddy with a time of 4:08.7, while the 400m team was Alger, Eddy and Jen Smith with a time of 51.1.

Snyder was also a dominant performer in the long jump, but it was the triple jump where she truly excelled.

In the most elite competitions Section IV had to offer at the time – the STAC Championships, Section IV state qualifier, Class B meet, and the prestigious Maine-Endwell Rotary Invitational – over the final three years of her career, she amassed 11 first-place finishes out of 12 possible outcomes in triple jump action; a fourth her only blemish, because of a foul in that aforementioned 2000 state qualifier.

And the Rotary and state qualifier meets were exclusive of school size, too, meaning Snyder beat the best of the best the area had to offer, and she did it year after year. Three times she was named the Outstanding Jumper at the Rotary meet, sweeping the triple and long jumps as a

sophomore, junior and senior, while placing fourth in the high jump her final two springs.

Although she did not match her state title won as a junior, her senior spring was truly remarkable. Besides the Rotary victories, she swept the triple and long jumps at the STAC Championships and Class B meet, and blew away



Coach Scottie Decker and Karen

the competition in the state qualifier at Binghamton with a winning triple jump (37 feet, 4 ½ inches) nearly three feet better than her closest adversary. Her undefeated senior campaign came to an end at the state meet at Rush-Henrietta High School when her mark of 35 feet, 10 inches was second best to Krista Kerr of Babylon (36 feet, 8 inches).

After graduation, Snyder continued to excel on the collegiate level at Cornell University. She exceeded her high school personal-best in the triple jump by over three feet reaching 40 feet, 6 ½ inches, which was the second-best mark in school history for the Big Red at the time of Snyder's graduation.

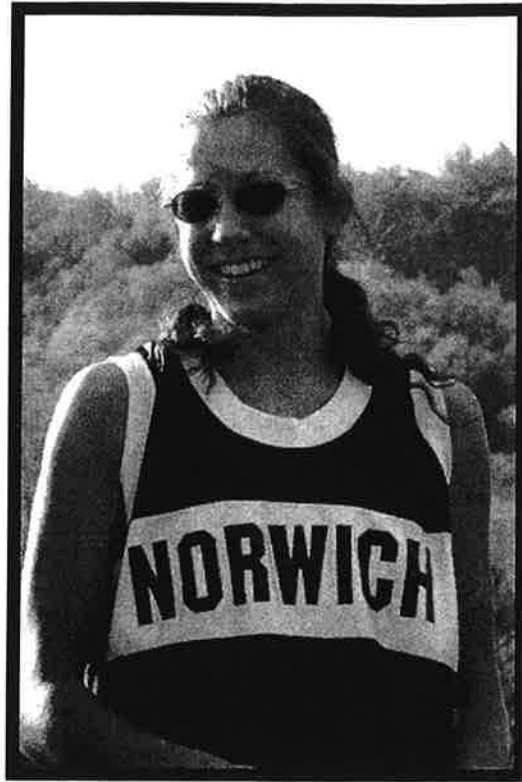
Snyder also eclipsed her best high school long jump leap by over two feet, reaching 19 feet, 11 ½ inches. That was an outdoor school record for Cornell at the time, and she graduated with the school's second-best all-time long jump.

Still, Snyder was always partial to the triple jump.

"I did all of the jumps, but I seemed to have a natural talent for the triple," she said. "It's a fun, quirky sort of event. With the long jump, you have to hope for a good takeoff. With the triple jump, it's very technical, and you have to work throughout the whole jump."

Just prior to the state qualifier her junior year, Snyder, who was chosen Athlete of the Week three times by *The Evening Sun*, spoke of how an injury forced her to alter her jumping style. Playing in a recreational indoor soccer league on March 18, 2001, she was kicked on the right ankle, rolling it over and resulting in a severe sprain. Ice packs were administered immediately and she underwent physical therapy.

With the spring track season just around the corner, she had to make some changes in her approach. Instead of planting off her right foot, Snyder switched to her left. It was a concession to her injury, because bearing full weight on the injured ankle was unbearable. It took some time getting used to the new format, but when that Class B state title was hers, it was all worth it.



Norwich coach Scottie Decker never doubted Snyder's ability to bounce back. "She went through a lot of different curvy roads and managed to come out of all of them. Karen always worked well under competition and always came through when she had to."

Snyder made her name in Norwich sports lore for her performance in individual events, but let's not forget, she was a willing participant in record-breaking relays, and she relished those opportunities to perform as part of a group.

She has taken that overall team approach to her career, often drawing on the lessons learned from participating in competitive sports for nearly 20 years.

"I couldn't imagine going through my high school and college years without sports," Snyder said. "In sports, you're working toward goals, and in life, you have to make sure you're working toward those goals. (Working at a company), you have to work together (like sports), and you have to figure out how we, as a team, can accomplish those goals."

As she did in the sports arena, count on Snyder reaching those life goals as well.

—Patrick Newell