

The 1948 NHS Tennis Team



1948 Undefeated tennis team:

Front, Coach Charlie Miers, Dick Mattice, Frank LaCava; back, Captain Ken Beckwith, Dick Darling, Charles Stewart.

That the 1948 Norwich HS tennis team would finish the season undefeated did not come as a complete surprise. All five starters from the 1947 team, which went 5-4, were returning. But Norwich had never gone the whole season without a loss, mainly because they played home-and-home with Binghamton Central every year, and had never prevailed in a single match.

In his pre-season article, Perry Browne predicted, "Should win at least eight of the 10, and may finish undefeated. Chances of annexing the sectional title are excellent." There was little doubt which team challenged Browne's optimism.

Charles O. Miers arrived in Norwich in 1930, and started coaching tennis in 1932. He was the only tennis coach Norwich had ever had, and would continue until 1963. Charlie also ran the City's summer tennis program, so was able to spot talent and aptitude among the youngest players, and encourage them until they reached high school.

The #1 player in 1948 was Dick Mattice, only a junior. As a freshman and sophomore, he had won the Section IV doubles titles, first with Bob "Pinky" Myles, and then with Charles "Stub" Stewart. Stewart had been captain of the 1947 team, as a junior, and would occupy the #2 spot for 1948.



Mattice

The #3 player, and captain for 1948, was senior Ken Beckwith. Ken was a three-year veteran on the squad, who had lived in McDonough until starting high school. Filling the fourth spot was Frank LaCava, and #5 was Dick Darling. Others on the squad were juniors Don Hall and Bill Handy and freshmen Dick Flanagan and Jim Acenowr.

Most matches would be a total of seven points, with each of the starting five playing singles, and then some combination of them for two doubles matches. Ties were virtually impossible. As the season commenced at the beginning of May, the schedule called for home-and-home meetings with Binghamton North, Binghamton Central, Oneonta, Cortland, and Utica Free Academy.

It was not that schools such as Sherburne and Oxford did not have tennis teams, but Athletic Director Kurt Beyer and Coach Miers

scheduled the best teams in the central NY area. Miers's record going into the 1948 season was 61 wins and 54 losses.

The first match of the season was against Binghamton North, and was played on the Norwich Alumni Field courts. Each of the Norwich singles players won his match in two sets. His team's obvious superiority caused Miers to tinker with the doubles pairings, with Dick Darling and Jim Acenowr teamed up in the first, and Bill Handy and Don Hall in the second. Both doubles teams lost, but Norwich won its first match, 5-2.

Early May saw three weather cancellations, two with Oneonta and one with Cortland, making the second match actually played a road trip to meet the Purple's old nemesis, Binghamton Central. Not only had Norwich never beaten Bingo, but no team had ever beaten Bingo in tennis.

After a fairly easy victory by Purple ace Dick Mattice at #1, Stub Stewart lost in 3 sets to Gitlitz of Central. At #3, Captain Ken Beckwith lost to John Bloom in two close sets, 6-4 and 8-6. Bloom was the son of Dr. Sol Bloom, former Norwich and Syracuse star athlete. Dr. Bloom was present at the match, and rooted for his old Alma Mater, in spite of the fact that his son opposed the Purple.

Close play continued as Frank LaCava evened up the score at 2-2 by defeating Decker in two deuce sets, 8-6 and 11-9. At #5, Bingo took the lead again when Dick Darling succumbed to an experienced senior. For an account of the doubles, we accede to the talented pen of the inimitable Perry Browne:

At this point, it appeared as if Central would continue their 17-year mastery over the Purple, who seemed tightened up and were not displaying the smooth, relaxed type of ball so prevalent in their play generally. Norwich needed both doubles matches in order to win.

Mattice and Stewart, doubles kings of the section, tied the match by easily defeating Gitlitz and Bloom, 6-1 and 6-3. The Purple duo was at its best and won with smashing, aggressive, and impressive play.

The match now depended upon Captain Beckwith and Frank LaCava, who were opposing Central's number one and four singles men. In a torrid, exciting struggle that see-sawed back and forth, the Norwich duo won the first set, 7-5. In the second, they trailed 4-1 when suddenly Captain Beckwith steadied and displayed superb tennis to lead an uphill battle that terminated in a 10-8 win and Norwich High's first tennis triumph over Binghamton Central.

Two days later, on May 18, the Miersmen made another trek down Route 12 to oppose North, the team they had handled easily on the Alumni Field courts two weeks earlier. The euphoria from the Central conquest had no effect, as the Tornado won easily 6-1, in spite of the absence of LaCava. Darling moved up to #4, and Don Hall lost the only point at #5.

The next week brought two 7-0 shutouts, one over Oneonta and the other over Utica Free Academy. In the former, only LaCava was extended to three sets. Against UFA, although the score would indicate an easy whitewash, the scores were close in three of the singles matches, with only Mattice and Captain Beckwith having an easy time of it.

As May and the regular season wound to a close, Norwich knocked off return bouts with UFA and Oneonta by the same 7-0 scores, and then gave up two points in a match against Cortland. In preparation for post-season play, Coach Miers rested Mattice and Stewart in singles, with Beckwith, LaCava, and Darling each moving up two spots and winning. Don Hall won at number 4 and Bill Handy lost at number 5, both using all three sets. In doubles, Mattice and Stewart barely broke a sweat, while Darling and Jim Acenowr gave Cortland its second point in three close sets.

The remaining obstacle to an undefeated season was the return engagement with Binghamton Central. Although some of the individual results were reversed, the final score was the same as the first meeting: 4-3. Winning singles matches were Mattice, Beckwith, and LaCava, while sectional champs Mattice and Stewart sewed up the doubles. Captain Beckwith, who had bowed to John Bloom a few weeks before, was able to turn the tables on the son of Norwich great Dr. Sol Bloom. In doubles, however, Beckwith and LaCava, who had won at Binghamton, were upended, evening the match at 3-3. Last to conclude was the undefeated doubles team of Mattice and Stewart, who won the first set but lost the second – causing much trepidation among the Purple fans, since they had never lost a set in their entire scholastic career.

Perry Browne explains the remainder of the match: “Rallying in true championship fashion they blasted the foe 6-3 with an uncanny display of tennis brilliancy in the final set to give Norwich the point, the match, and an unbeaten season.”

The unbeaten season included 53 singles and doubles matches won and 11 lost. Individual records for the five lettermen were: Mattice, singles 8-0, doubles 8-0; Stewart, 6-2, 8-0; Beckwith, 8-0, 6-1; LaCava, 8-0, 5-1; Darling, 7-2, 0-2.

Postseason, Coach Miers entered four of his players in the Colgate Invitational Tournament, which included over 60 players representing 15 schools from Sections III and IV. Hoping to take the team title, he sent his unbeaten doubles combo, Dick Mattice and Stub Stewart, while entering Captain Ken Beckwith and Frank LaCava in the singles. While Mattice and Stewart won the doubles championship, Beckwith and LaCava both had the misfortune of meeting the eventual finalists in the quarter-finals, resulting in a third-place finish for Norwich as a team. Final team scores were Syracuse Central 43, Binghamton Central 40, Norwich 33, UFA 9, Ithaca 8.

To wrap up the 1948 season, the Section IV tournament was held on the Alumni Field courts on Saturday, June 12. The lineup changed, with junior Dick Mattice playing singles, and Captain Ken Beckwith and 1947 captain Charles Stewart doubles. Both ended up playing Binghamton Central in the finals.

Mattice swapped baseline shots with Sivvers of Bingo in the first set, and lost it 6-2 – the only set he lost all year. Stung by the affront, he took the net, using aggressive, smashing play to take the match and the singles crown, 2-6, 6-0 and 6-4.

Rated even against the Bingo duo of Gitlitz and Bloom, Stewart and Beckwith provided similar excitement before winning 7-6, 3-6, and 6-4. In the third set, they rallied from three games down to close out the match, giving Norwich the sectional team title with 47 points. Binghamton and Cortland tied for second with 20 points each.

The sweep of the sectionals was icing on the cake for the unbeaten 1948 tennis team. The key to their success all season was having five good players, not just one, or two, or three. According to Frank LaCava, “We had great camaraderie on that team!”

The Monday evening after their Saturday sweep was the annual Activity Dinner, at which letters for spring sports and special senior awards were presented. When it came Coach Miers’s turn, the tennis team received a standing ovation. In an eerily oracular pronouncement, Perry Browne stated, “Captain Beckwith and his mates have recorded a brilliant chapter in the archives of their school. They have a permanent place in the school’s Hall of Fame!” Seventy years later, we now make it official.

Dick Mattice was undoubtedly one of the greatest tennis players to ever wear the purple. The son of the Norwich police chief, he grew up across from the Alumni Field courts, along with Charles Stewart and Ken Beckwith, who lived within a stone’s throw. As a freshman, he played on the same team as senior Ed Nelson, another great Purple racquetman.

Each of them won a sectional title in either singles or doubles in each of their high school years, providing Norwich with sectional tennis titles for seven straight seasons. As a senior in 1949, he continued to be unbeaten. Stewart, Mattice’s doubles partner for two years, says, “Dick was so good, he made me good!” Dick also captured the sectional singles championship in badminton in 1949. He passed away in April of 2007.

Charles Stewart, known as “Stub” during his school years, was the first of several generations of great Stewart tennis players. Having served as captain of the 1947 team, his quiet leadership had been recognized. His picture in the 1948 Archive was accompanied by, “Our choice for the perfect senior boy.” He was an honor student, secretary of his senior class, and winner of the Bausch and Lomb award for achieving the highest scholastic record in science subjects. He went on to become a pharmacist, and presently lives in Trumansburg with his wife Joan.

Captain Ken Beckwith, also a senior, was a three-year letterman who was active in the band, intramurals, and Boys Athletic Council. After graduation, he worked at a couple of jobs before serving in the Army from 1951 to 1953. Ten years after graduation, he lived in Dallas with his wife Peggy and worked for a steel company, and five years later he was still there, working for a different steel company. He passed away in January of 2006 in Henderson, Texas, at the age of 75.

The third senior, Frank LaCava, was pictured in the 1948 Archive with the following comment, “Charlie Spivak’s only competition.” For you youngsters, Charlie Spivak was a talented trumpet player and band leader, well-known for entertaining the troops during WWII. After graduation, LaCava obtained a degree from the Eastman School of Music, and served four years playing in the Air Force Band during the Korean War. He then became band director at a high school in Texas, obtaining advanced degrees in music, until he had the opportunity to become a securities analyst. He currently lives in Dallas with his wife of 66 years. He stayed in touch with teammate and fellow Texan Ken Beckwith until Ken’s death.

The fifth letterman was Dick Darling, a junior. He was elected captain of the 1949 team, and led them to victories in the first two matches, until he fractured his ankle and was lost for the rest of the season. The 1949 team lost the rest of their matches, in spite of Mattice’s success at #1. Darling became a physician, serving first as a Captain and Chief of Pediatrics at Chanutte AFB in Illinois, then practicing as a pediatrician in Rochester. He presently lives in retirement in Baldwinsville, where he occasionally responds to a challenge on the courts from one of his four sons.

Coach Charlie Miers continued to coach tennis until 1963, retiring as the longest-serving coach in Norwich history. He taught English, history, and driver training, and was advisor of the Hi-Tribune, the Booster Club, and started the local chapter of Quill and Scroll, a national journalism honorary. He and his wife Elinor raised four boys in Norwich, all of whom were good tennis players.

Although there were other good teams and sectional champions under Charlie Miers, the only team that had that special combination of five great players who brought Norwich an undefeated season was the team of 1948.



Dick Mattice and Dick Darling pose with cheerleader.