

## Don Chirlin, Class of 1953



Let's start this piece with a prediction by Bob Van Tine (The Norwich Sun Sports Editor and Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame 2013 inductee) prior to the school year. "When the curtain rings down on the 1952-53 NHS sports season, the name of Don Chirlin will be placed in the record books alongside the best three-sport athletes in the school's colorful athletic history. The lanky senior has won fame as a defensive halfback in football, a pivoteer in basketball and a smooth-fielding first sacker in baseball."

Don, who was born in Fulton on March 31, 1936, began his formal schooling in Calais, ME as a 5-year-old first-grader, because the school didn't have a kindergarten. Two years later in 1943, he arrived in Norwich when his father, Morrie, was transferred there to take over operation of The M.H. Fishman Co. store on South Broad Street. He got his start in competitive sports a few years later as a member of the YMCA junior basketball team. In his third year of "Y" ball, he was captain of the team, which ended up play with a record of 24-2 that included a victory over the West Branch Y of New York City. And, it was during this time that he teamed up with future NHSSPHOF mates Ed Ackley (2011), John Stewart (2012) and Ron Tyler (2014). This foursome would lead the Tornado to many victories, and the press dubbed them the "Whiz Kids."

Equally as important, though, was their coach - Van Tine. It was he who taught them teamwork and a winning spirit. Don summarily recognized his importance and admits, "that I couldn't have made it without him." In retrospect, no other class in school history had so many victories in so many sports as this group.

Just how impressive was this particular class, well consider that the three sports - football (8-0), basketball (20-3) and baseball (12-1) - that Chirlin took part during his senior year compiled a record of 40-4. And, when you consider that two other athletic endeavors that Don chose not to engage in, namely wrestling and track, produced another pair of outstanding marks of 10-0 and 7-1, respectively, you get the idea of why they were indeed the "Whiz Kids" of Norwich - much like their older "Whiz Kids" counterparts of Philadelphia who took the baseball world by surprise in 1950 by leading the Phillies to the National League championship.

"I played with some great Norwich athletes. Every team during my senior year was a champion," reiterated Chirlin. "I was a good player on very good teams, and became better because of all the athletes who played with me. I just hope I was as good a teammate as they all were to me."

As Don's senior athletic season began, the 1952 football team opened with a 39-0 whipping of host Whitesboro on Saturday, Sept. 20. Seven more one-sided triumphs followed, making it one of the best gridiron elevens in school lore. To date, it is the last unbeaten team in Tornado history. This team was a scoring machine; too, as it totaled 271 points during those eight victories, with Don tallying 30 markers on five touchdowns. That historic 271 total was three more than the 1924 Tornado club that also finished undefeated at 8-0. And, defensively, that Purple outfit yielded only 45 points as they allowed more than one touchdown only once, that being in a 45-18 thumping of Ilion at Alumni

Field on Oct. 18.

After two more easy victories over Cortland (27-7) and Syracuse Vocational (53-7), the season culminated against host Oneida on Saturday, Nov. 8. Oneida, like Norwich, was also undefeated (7-0), but that contest was completely dominated by the Tornado on both sides of the ball, with the Purple whitewashing the Indians 33-0. Prior to this humbling defeat, Oneida had yielded only 20 points. During the fray, Chirlin made an acrobatic grab of an Ackley aerial from 10 yards out in the fourth quarter, and added an interception during the second stanza that led to Stewart's third touchdown of the contest.

Even more impressive, though, were Don's defensive exploits throughout the year. Norwich's secondary was composed of Stewart at safety, Tyler at right halfback and Don at the other back slot. Throughout the season, this combination established records by allowing only 33 pass completions all season, while intercepting 23 - record-setting totals. Chirlin also ranked eighth in tackles with 40.

After cruising through their unblemished and record-setting football season, the Tornado cagers got off to an inauspicious start to the Purple's hardwoods campaign. Prior to the first of the year, Norwich split its first four games with close losses to New Hartford (44-49) and Saratoga Springs (46-50) sandwiched around Iroquois League victories over Ilion (62-46) and Little Falls (68-38).

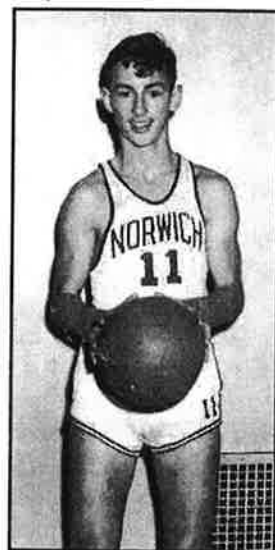
The changeover to 1953 was another story, though, as Norwich lost only once more during its final 19 games of the year. That lone defeat was to Herkimer, but the Tornado still locked up the Iroquois crown with a 9-1 log, thanks in large part to its regular-season ending 50-48 triumph at Oneonta on Feb. 27. In that close-fought tilt, Chirlin clicked on seven of his 14 field goals and was 4-for-5 from the charity stripe for a game-high 18 points. If that performance wasn't enough to dishearten the hometown Yellowjacket faithful, consider that he also pulled down 29 caroms - the second-best single game rebounding total in Norwich basketball history.

Following that Oneonta scrum, Norwich was forced to engage in six more postseason battles before securing the overall Section III championship. Triumphs over Oneida (55-49), Oneonta (51-43), Waterville (56-35), Richfield Springs (49-38) and Frankfort (61-50) were followed by an overtime thriller in which the Tornado shaded Watertown - a Class A entry - 43-40 in Colgate's Huntington Gym on March 27. Much like in the 1986 movie "Hoosiers," all classes competed as one en route to the overall championship.

Over the course of Norwich's 23 games, Don reached double digits on 14 occasions, with a season-high of 18 coming in that aforementioned 50-48 win at Oneonta. All told, he scored 256 points (11.1 avg.) and was awarded the Albert Foster Award as his team's Most Valuable Player.

"I might have been the MVP on a sectional champion, but this team was made up of many MVPs," reflected Chirlin. "Someone always stepped up to create a winning atmosphere."

Since Don began first grade at such an early age, he opened the spring baseball practice in 1953 as a bouncing 16-year-old senior. Chirlin, though, was a hardened veteran, despite his youthful appearance and age. He finished fourth in team batting with an average of .348 as the Purple captured the inaugural Iroquois League title with an 8-1 record. Norwich, which finished 12-1 overall, suffered that lone loss on May 20 at Oneonta



when back-to-back two-base throwing errors allowed the Yellowjackets to eke out a 3-1 victory.

Chirlin, who tied Tyler for the team lead in runs scored with 18, enjoyed his best day at the plate when he went a perfect 4-for-4, with a two-run double and a run scored when the Tornado whipped visiting Little Falls at Veterans Park on Saturday, May 16. While on the road at Iliion a week earlier, he cracked a 350-foot triple in going 3-for-4 with three runs scored as Norwich blanked the Golden Bombers 7-0. Don also finished his final NHS athletic campaign with eight stolen bases to tie Howie Ryan for second-best on the Purple nine, while fielding more than 100 chances at first base at a .939 clip.

As was mentioned earlier, Norwich was a phenomenal 40-4 during Chirlin's senior year as a football, basketball and baseball star. Not only did the teams play at a .909 winning percentage, but all three were champions. The gridiron outfit was the last undefeated eleven, and the cage unit and the baseball club both raised Iroquois League title banners, with the former adding a Section III championship to its resume.

"We were all three-sport athletes back in the 1950s, mainly football, basketball, baseball or wrestling," recalled Chirlin. "We were champions who played as a team. We knew how to play as one and we won. And, we had excellent coaches in Kurt Beyer (football), Jim Flynn (basketball), Frank Giltner (baseball) and Sam Elia (wrestling). If you traveled throughout upstate New York, we were respected athletes, coaches and teams."

Because of his young age, Don was able to play varsity football and basketball only two years each. As a junior, neither team reached the lofty standards exhibited during his senior year, but both were winners. The 1951 football squad went 5-2, while the basketball club of 1951-52 finished at 12-7. Baseball, which Chirlin lettered in three years, was another story as the Purple nine put the polish on an 11-1 season in the spring of 1952.

Chirlin again proved his mettle on the gridiron from his defensive halfback slot, as the Norwich secondary allowed its opposition to complete only 13 of 74 aerial attempts for a dismal 17.6 percent success rate. As a whole, the Purple defensive backs compiled 16 interceptions – the best in Beyer's 22-year regime. Individually, Don enjoyed a stellar showing in the Tornado's 7-0 victory at Cortland on Saturday, Nov. 10, when he picked off two misplayed Cortland passes.

In the Monday, Nov. 12 edition of *The Norwich Sun*, Sports Editor Van Tine wrote, "Add to the list of defensive heroes the name of Don Chirlin. The lanky junior defensive halfback was a tower of strength, particularly against passes and his masterful pass defense work explains why Cortland was able to complete only two out of 20 passes."

As a junior cager, meanwhile, Don finished second in scoring with 135 points (7.1 avg.) to team leader Ackley's 179 markers. He also reached double digits six times, with a season-best 18 coming in a 67-66 triumph at Oneonta on Feb. 29.

When the spring baseball season arrived, Chirlin was still limited to a substitute role in either centerfield or first base during the Purple's first four outings. He won a starting position during the Tornado's fifth game, and obviously enjoyed his new-found home as he hit safely in seven of Norwich's final eight games. During that run, Don swatted the horsehide at a .364 clip, which included a solo home run in a 3-2 triumph over Vestal on Saturday, May 24 at Alumni Field and a two-run triple four days later when the Tornado spanked the Marauders 8-1 at Sherburne. For the year, Chirlin went 8-for-27 (.296) at the plate.

Having earned seven varsity letters, Chirlin never played on a losing team. His three-year baseball career produced a 32-7 log, while his two seasons each in football and basketball were met with similar success with respective marks of 13-2 and 32-10. All told, Don played in 96 games for Norwich, with the Tornado posting a most-impressive 77-19 mark (.802) during his tenure.

Since high school graduation came just a mere three months after his 17th birthday, Don's family decided that because of his young age, prep school would be both scholastically and athletically advantageous for him. Subsequently, he enrolled at Manlius Military Academy, and continued his winning ways there for two years. During his final year, he was team captain in both football and basketball, playing under future West Point grid coach Tom Cahill, who coached the Cadets from 1966-73. From Manlius, he headed farther north to St. Lawrence University in Canton. Again, he excelled as a team player and captained the football and basketball squads during the 1958-59 seasons, eventually graduating with a B.A. in Sociology.



*At St. Lawrence*

Chirlin initially considered coaching as a career, but after experiencing classroom teaching, he decided upon the latter as his life's profession, obviously a wise choice for anyone who had the luxury of having him as their teacher. That career road began in Barker, NY, a medium-sized town located between Rochester and Buffalo, where he taught social studies and coached the junior varsity basketball team for three years.

The year 1962 was a troika trove of personal treasure for Don, as he and his wife, Sally (nee Child), welcomed their first child in late June, only a few weeks after receiving his M.A. in Secondary Education (Social Studies) from the University of Buffalo and was later hired by West Winfield to not only teach but to head the boys' basketball program in the fall. Chirlin stayed at West Winfield for five years until he returned to his roots – Norwich – to start the 1967-68 school term. He remained there as a social studies teacher, junior varsity and freshman basketball coach for many years and jayvee football coach for two seasons until his retirement in 1991.

During his 24 years at NHS, he was honored as Norwich Central Schools Teacher of the Year in 1979, as well as having a pair of Archives – 1971 and 1976 – dedicated to him. Besides those school honors, the Chenango County Bar Association presented him with the prestigious Liberty Bell Award in recognition of his never-ending community involvement during Law Day Celebration ceremonies on Monday, May 16, 2016.

If all of that wasn't enough to be proud of, Don and Sally recently celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. Residents of the Town of Norwich, they are the parents of two adult children – Christine (Bloomington, MN) and John (Albany, NY) – and four grandchildren.

"The athletic career that started with Bob Van Tine at the local YMCA allowed me to play sports and graduate from Norwich, receive a B.A. from St. Lawrence and an M.A. from the University of Buffalo. And, all of that, in turn, led to a 32-year teaching career."

Still active as an avid golfer, Chirlin currently is a member of the Norwich School Board. But, he still loves to talk about those halcyon days of long ago when he and the other "Whiz Kids" helped make the early 1950s "The Golden Age of Norwich High School Sports."

—Frank Benenati