

Coach John Pluta, 1989-2008



Whenever Mariano Rivera, the great New York Yankees relief pitcher, left the mound following one of his late-inning performances, his poker-faced demeanor never indicated whether he had emerged the victor or had been humbled by defeat. His facial expression and body language were always stoic-like; not at all mirroring the fist-pumping, rah-rah types who eked out a win, or the expletive-filled, glove-throwing tirades exhibited by many losers.

Rivera, who saved more games (652) than any other pitcher in Major League Baseball history, toiled 19 years for the Bronx Bombers, and is a lock to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame next summer in his first year of eligibility.

Much like Rivera, John Pluta's demeanor prior to, during and after a football game was every bit as stoic as the former Yankees hurler. He didn't berate his players, criticize the officials or heap unnecessary praise upon himself. Instead, he went quietly about racking up the best winning percentage of any Norwich grid mentor with more than three years of service. And, like Rivera, who will certainly enter the hallowed halls of Cooperstown in 2019, Pluta will take his rightful place among Purple greats when his plaque is unveiled during ceremonies at the eighth annual Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremonies this fall.

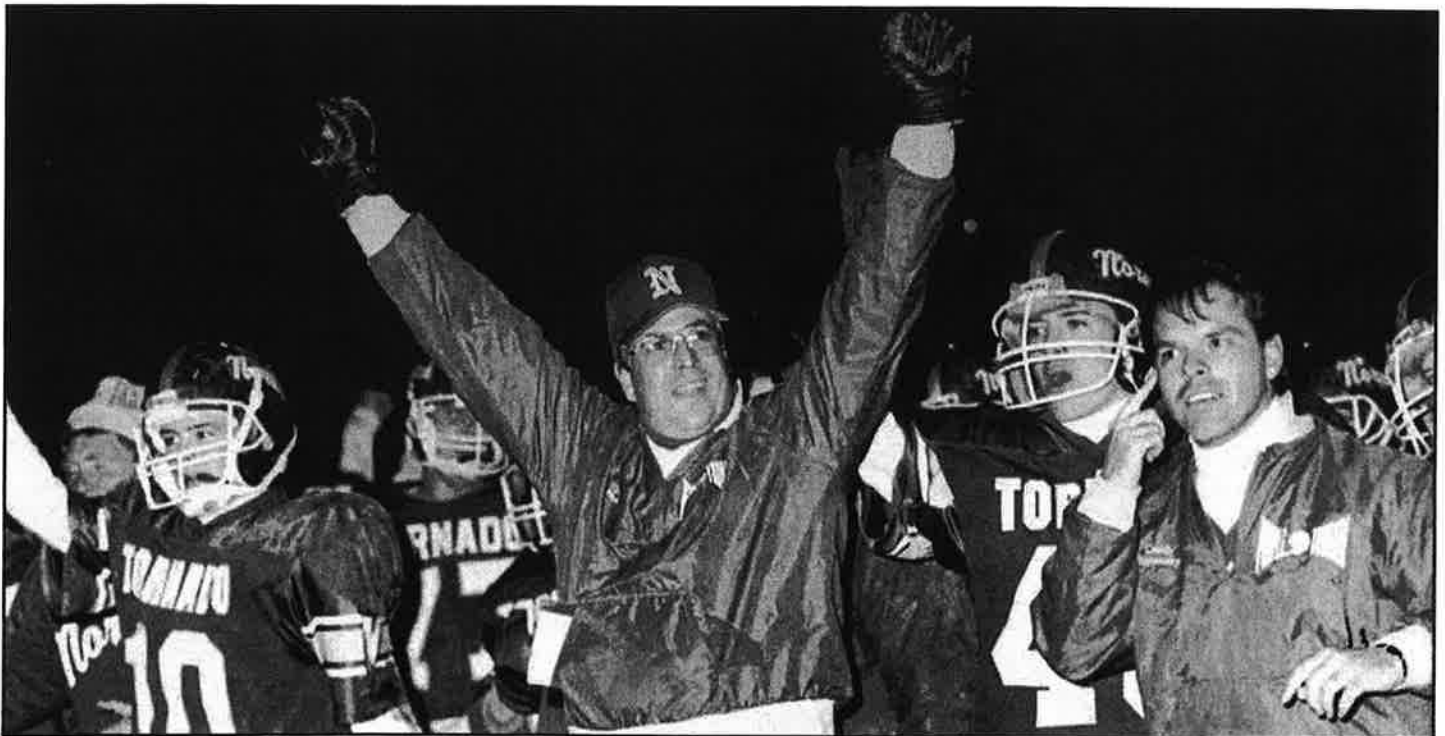
"His coaching style was tailor-made for a kid like me," indicated Chris Maynard, who quarterbacked the Tornado in 1992 and 1993. "He pushed you hard and he demanded that you always dug down for a little more, so that you were giving everything you had inside you during that given moment.

"But, he also made it fun. He showed us that we could have a great time while working hard, both physically and mentally," continued Maynard. "Many practices he could be heard quoting lyrics from popular songs of that time, while we grunted and groaned our way through calisthenics."

Maynard's teammate Matt Ryan, who anchored both the offensive and defensive lines during those halcyon falls, agrees. "It seemed easy to play for Coach Pluta. It was some of the most fun I've ever had in my life. We had a lot of success on the field; but, honestly, I remember more of what Coach Pluta gave me off the field. He somehow seemed to understand me, and he believed in me at a time when I needed it. He shared his own life stories, struggles and adversities. He recognized when I wasn't giving the effort I was capable of, and pushed me to put everything I had into it, no matter what the task. For that, I will always be grateful."

Besides the influence he had on Maynard and Ryan, Pluta's style of coaching must have been readily accepted by the rest of the Tornado players, as well, when you consider that he compiled a .630 winning percentage (119-70-1) for his 20 seasons as the Norwich head man. That won-loss ratio ranks the highest in the annals of Tornado gridiron lore for any coach with more than three years at the Purple helm (see accompanying chart on inside back cover). The only equal to Pluta is the legendary Kurt Beyer, who compiled a record of 125-75-9 (.625) during his 28 years (1930-57) of service to rank second in terms of success rate.

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A jubilant John Pluta raises his arms in victory after Norwich clinched the division title and advanced to the Section IV playoffs with a 42-19 triumph over Seton Catholic Central on Oct. 21, 1994.

Norwich's record under Pluta could have been even better when you consider that during the three-year stint between 2003-05, when the Tornado lost only eight games, six of those defeats were handed down by Chenango Forks, which won back-to-back state championships in 2003 and 2004, while finishing runner-up in 2005.

Pluta arrived on the Norwich scene in 1986 when he was hired to teach Social Studies. In addition to his classroom commitments, he assisted then head man Bill Congdon for three falls as a defensive coach. When Congdon, who Pluta called "the best game-day coach I ever worked with," left to begin studies in administration, the latter began a two-decade tenure in 1989. Besides his football duties, Pluta also was an assistant track coach at Norwich for 21 seasons.

"From the outset, I wanted to establish a sound defense every year. Offensively I knew what I liked—the trapping game and the Slot-I—both of which I used at Harpursville and my first year at Norwich," recalled Pluta. "I always admired what Dick Hoover did at Vestal and later what his son, Jim, did at Walton. And, a Vestal defensive coach named Abe Ferris had put together a program called 'The Vestal System of Football.'

"So, we took our players to a clinic staff meeting hosted by Jim Hoover. What they talked about clicked with me, because it could be used with any size and talent of kids. You didn't need to adjust from year to year, because it was a series of symmetrical football patterns."

Over the course of those next 20 campaigns, the Pluta-led Tornado won three Class B crowns in 1992, 1993 and 1999 and eight divisional titles in addition to recording a school-record 20-game winning streak during the 1992 and 1993 seasons. That '92 outfit, which matched the '93 club with a 10-1 mark, went as far as a team could venture in capturing a Regional championship with a 28-14 triumph over Section V's Hilton in Rochester—the year before the New York State championship playoffs began.

Following a loss to Binghamton in the 1992 opener, Norwich outscored its next 10 foes 311-59 as the Purple posted four shutouts and allowed more than one touchdown only twice. The streak continued throughout most of 1993, when the Tornado outscored the opposition 319-62 before they suffered a narrow 21-20 defeat to Chittenango as mounting injuries took their toll.

For his on-the-field successes, Pluta was named Coach of the Year in 1992 by the *Press & Sun-Bulletin* and Section IV, while being tabbed the 1993 Coach of the Year at the 29th annual Binghamton Coaches Clinic.

"It was great how respected our program was throughout the section and state. Even the Forks coaches remarked about the way we played the game," said an obvious proud Pluta. "We were both physically and fundamentally sound, and at all times respectful. I'm proud of all those young men whom I coached.

"Our offense was one of the best in the section for years," continued Pluta. "And, credit Coach (John) Martinson with our defense. We ran man-to-man a number of years, putting a lot of pressure on people."

Martinson, who assisted Pluta for all 20 falls, has nothing but praise to shower on his former colleague. "It's extremely difficult for me to put into words what my relationship with Coach Pluta was because it encompassed so much more than just football. First, and foremost, John was and still is a great friend. He possesses the

greatest attribute that anyone looks for in a strong friendship, and that is endearing trust. As coaches, husbands, fathers and men, John and I could trust each other with our deepest concerns about football and life, because they go hand in hand.

"Coach and I talked openly about every aspect of the program. He was a great listener and allowed me to be an integral part of the program. The greatest gift he gave me was that he allowed me to coach the defense, and treated me as an equal. John never questioned my calls. He allowed me to grow and mature as a coach



Head coach John Pluta (left) and defensive assistant John Martinson (right) during their early years walking the Norwich sideline. Pluta and Martinson worked hand-in-hand for 20 seasons.

through these experiences, the same way he helped foster the mental, physical and emotional growth of the many young men under his charge. He served as a role model and mentor for me in more ways than he will ever know."

Pluta, who began his football coaching duties at Harpursville, where he was an assistant for seven years (1974-80) before taking over the head reins for the Hornets from 1981 until his subsequent move to Norwich in 1986, credits long-time Maine-Endwell coach Tom Green with supplying the needed direction for him. Green, who coached the varsity boys' basketball team for many years, was named the Section IV Coach of the Year in 1990 and was later inducted into the Section IV Hall of Fame in 2006.

"When I was in junior high and my early high school years, Tom was a physical education teacher and modified coach," noted Pluta. "He showed a lot of belief in a young guy without a lot of confidence at the time. He was a stern taskmaster, but he taught me to believe in myself as an athlete."

Pluta, who was born in Afton, later matriculated at Manlius Military Academy from where he graduated in 1970. Four years later, he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Studies/Elementary and Secondary Education from SUNY Oswego, and began his teaching and football coaching career in the fall of 1974 at Harpursville. He was a defensive assistant for the Hornets for seven years, and was head coach for five years (1981-85) until coming to Norwich.

"We didn't win a game those first two years, but we steadily improved and were 7-2 in 1980 when we nearly won the 1980 Susquenango East title," indicated Pluta. "I learned a lot about coaching early on from Stub Smith and later Dan Parsons. Those years at Harpursville prepared me for my years at Norwich,

especially coaching against such long-time and successful men like Tony Abbott (Oxford), Dave Kelly (Delhi), Steve Leahy (Unatego), Ron O'Connell (Deposit) and Steve Rice (Bainbridge-Guilford)."

Even though it has been 44 years since Pluta first patrolled the sidelines at Harpursville, and a decade since he steered the Norwich football flagship, he is still involved with the sport. Since his retirement as the Tornado's head coach, he has been the defensive line coach at Morrisville State for the last 10 autumns.

"Terry Dow (Morrisville's head coach) once asked me if I ever thought about moving on to the next level. But, I didn't give it a lot of thought at the time," recalled Pluta. "The following year (2009) a coaching position (defensive end/tight end) opened, and he asked if I would like to interview for it. We went to Florida over Christmas and my family and I discussed it.

"For the last two years at Norwich, I was out of the classroom as I became Dean of Students in 2006, so it was a good time in my career to move on. I still wanted to coach, and this gave me the opportunity to answer the question whether I could do this at another level. I had a great run, and I left the program in the hands of a great teacher—John Martinson."

Dow, who headed the Morrisville program for 16 years and spearheaded the move for the Mustangs from the Junior College ranks into NCAA Division III classification, is currently an assistant coach at Colgate University in charge of tight ends and halfbacks.

Looking back, Pluta is proud of that aforementioned 20-game winning streak, but is equally gratified by the way his teams competed every week. "I hated to get beat, but I couldn't tolerate losing. My success came because we had good kids, and I'm proud of all of them. You know the hardest thing young kids need to do is to make older people happy."

Needless to say, John Pluta made many people happy during his 20-year career at Norwich; not only because of his won-loss record, but because of the way he went about achieving those numbers.

"He was very goal-oriented and thus our teams were motivated by achieving the goals that we collectively set at the beginning of each season," explained former quarterback Maynard. "I also admired his

approach to the game, which basically was, 'If we execute our system to the absolute highest level, then it doesn't matter what the other team does, because they can't beat us.'

"Most importantly, though, Coach Pluta taught me about trust and integrity. I looked up to him because he was a devoted husband and father, who had a passion for life. I still draw from the many lessons he taught me on and off the field."

Pluta and his wife of 44 years, Ginny, have one daughter, Elizabeth, and one granddaughter, Lei Lani, who is four.

Ryan, one of the anchors of Norwich's fabled offensive and defensive lines, concurs. "Coach was a true role model for me. Even now, I think about the advice he gave me. His classroom was always open, and it always felt comfortable to stop in and say hi, talk football or life in general. He provided much needed guidance and counsel surrounding my college decision, and I know he did the same for many others."

As poignant as the remembrances of Maynard and Ryan are, Pluta's long-time assistant defensive coach Martinson, may have captured the true essence of the man.

"I was one of the luckiest men in the world to have had the opportunity to have walked the sidelines with him for the majority of his coaching career. The lessons he taught me, his staff and his players are invaluable," praised Martinson. "Coach Pluta's demeanor in times of great difficulty was always that of poise, intensity and focus, and that is what is needed when things don't go your way.

"Coach prepared for every aspect of the game. He followed Roger Staubach's quote, 'Confidence doesn't come out of nowhere, it's a result of hours, days, weeks and years of constant work and dedication,'" continued Martinson. "But, most importantly, he exhibited tremendous character. He was a man of his word."

Just like the many accolades that surround Mariano Rivera, the subject of character—the greatest of all personal attributes—gets mentioned an exceedingly number of times when one speaks of John Pluta's legacy. And, people, no matter what their lot in life may be, can't hope to be thought of by their peers any better than that.

Touché, Coach!

—Tom Rowe



Norwich coach John Pluta (left with ball) congratulates his team after the Purple defeated Maine-Endwell 26-7 on Nov. 9, 1991 to claim the Section IV Division III crown, the first title for the Tornado since 1970. Looking on are lineman Tom Stoddard (center) and assistant coach Lee Supensky (right).