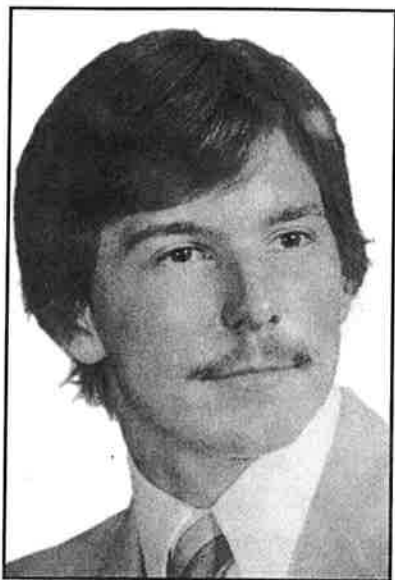


Tom "World" Seary, Class of 1981



Had Mr. Whipple been blessed with hands like Tom Seary he would have been allowed to squeeze the Charmin for as long as he wanted. And, if boxing great Roberto Duran had been similarly endowed, he probably would have begun tickling the ivories as a concert pianist instead of becoming the punishing Panamanian pugilist known forever as "Hands of Stone."

By now I think you've got the picture—Seary could catch and release a

newborn bird without it ever making a peep or getting into harm's way. And by soft I don't mean to denigrate and compare those hands to a baby's posterior, but to impress upon you that once an athletic ball was thrown his way, that object was to not only land gently in those outstretched palms, but with the assurance that nothing of this world was going to loosen it from his grasp.

That God-given talent enabled him to excel in all three sports he starred in as a Norwich High School athlete. A three-year letterman on the baseball diamond, Seary started two years each on the football gridiron and basketball hardwoods. Although an all-star in all three endeavors, it was his outstanding success as a football split end that enabled him to become one of the newest inductees into the eighth annual Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

"Pass catching came naturally to me," reflected Seary. "My father and I would go through drills and pass patterns. I would stand with my back to him and he would throw as I turned around to catch it. There were many nights where we had to quit for my father's arm was sore."

Over the course of his two-year gridiron career, Seary earned unanimous first team All-Southern Tier Athletic Conference (STAC) status twice, was dually selected an All-County pick by *The Evening Sun* both falls, was the only non-Class AA or Class A player named to Union-Endicott's prestigious All-Opponent Team and was selected to the All-New York State second team his senior year—all awards coming as a wide receiver. He also was tabbed a second team All-STAC punter, to boot, when he averaged 36.4 yards for his 24 punts. And, on defense he rang up four interceptions from his cornerback slot as a senior.

You might also label Seary a late bloomer. Having never played Pop Warner football, Seary began his grid career as a tight end and defensive end in the seventh grade under modified coach Dave True, after sprouting six inches that previous summer. After two years of modified action, Seary moved up to the junior varsity, where he was switched to split end and free safety by coaches Bill Spittler and Tobin Tansey.

"Both of those coaches made us all believe in ourselves, not only on the field but off of it, too," recalled Seary. "Because of their mentoring, we went from boys to men, as Bob Seger sang in his "Turn

the Page" ballad. And, my pass catching abilities really flourished under them, too. I possessed very strong hands, because of my days cutting wood with my father, and I could jump, as well. But, they taught me the proper positioning of my hands with my body."

As captain of that 1978 NHS jayvee squad, Seary helped lead the Purple to a 7-1 record and a co-championship in STAC. The Tornado's only defeat was by one point (13-12) to U-E. That was the prelude to a varsity career that saw Seary compile more receptions than any other Norwich receiver I have researched, all the while as part of a run-oriented offense.

During the course of his junior (1979) and senior (1980) falls, Seary pulled in 53 passes in only 15 games as injuries forced him to miss one game in each of those two autumns versus Utica Free Academy. A charley horse negated his services in 1979 when the Tornado triumphed 20-0 at Alumni Field, and a pinched nerve benched him in 1980 when the Purple traveled north for a 28-12 victory. To give you some idea of Seary's pass catching accomplishments, consider that prior NHSSHOF inductees Peter Burton (2015) and Charlie Wightman (2012) carded only 35 and 31 receptions, respectively, during the course of their three-year careers, which saw them play in 30 and 28 games, respectively.

"Forty one years ago, I took a teaching position in Norwich and started coaching JV football, as well. I was fortunate to have an athlete like Tom Seary on my football team – someone who had a positive attitude, strong work ethic and great ability," noted Spittler. "Unfortunately for Tom, we ran the veer offense, so we didn't throw the ball a lot. However, when we did throw, Tom was often the primary target. I watched him make amazing catches while on the junior varsity team and into his varsity career."

Echoing Spittler's words, what he accomplished as a sophomore on the junior varsity only grew more magnanimous when he donned the varsity moleskins. During the course of those aforementioned 15 games, Seary caught at least one pass in each of them, pulling in multiple aerials on 14 occasions. As a junior receiver, he compiled 25 receptions for 236 yards, three touchdowns and a pair of PATs to rank second in STAC receiving behind U-E's Gary Beddoe, who carded 32. A year later, however, he led the pack with 28 catches for 290 yards, two TDs and a trio of two-point conversions. Those 28 receptions easily outdistanced runners-up Dick Dino of Johnson City and Susquehanna Valley's Jerry Kimmel with 21 catches each.

"It's more his hands and his jumping ability," said former Norwich head football mentor Lou Palazzi in a post-season article chronicling his 6-foot-2; 200-pound griddler's all-star season. "I thought he was the best in the league last year, too."

Seary's most prolific games as a senior, when the Tornado compiled its first winning season in nine years of STAC competition, were when he chalked up five receptions each in contests versus Susquehanna Valley and U-E, and as a junior when he turned in a personal-best six catches in another tilt with the Sabers. But, late-game heroics on two other occasions proved to be his most memorable.

On opening day, Saturday, September 13, 1980 at Maine-Endwell, he was a two-way thorn in the sides of the Spartans. With less than four minutes to play, NHS quarterback Ben Guinn rolled out to his right and found Seary in the right corner of the end zone for the game-winning conversion and a 14-13 come-from-behind

Purple victory that proved to be the Tornado's first-ever win at M-E.

Prior to that conversion grab, Seary came up with a couple of clutch third-down plays. Moved to the slot position from his usual wide receiver role, Seary carried the ball for 15 yards and a first down on a counter play. Two plays later, Norwich was faced with another third-and-five situation just short of midfield, but Seary came up big again when he corralled a 23-yard strike from Guinn to keep the 92-yard, late-game drive alive. Later on, Jeff Aust pulled the Purple within one with a 10-yard run. If Seary's offensive exploits weren't enough to bring dismay to the M-E crowd, two plays following his conversion catch, he picked off an errantly thrown aerial from Spartan signal caller Randy Bullock to seal the win.

"Seary had a tremendous game today," said M-E head coach John Furey following that contest. "He was all over the field. Defensively, he was just fantastic."

In similar fashion the year before, Norwich trailed Seton Catholic Central 12-6 with 41 seconds remaining. Seary proceeded to catch both the tying touchdown and the subsequent conversion toss to pull off the 14-12 triumph.

Quarterbacking the Purple offense that day was Tim Whitney (2017 NHSSHOF inductee), and he remembers Seary's heroics very well. "One of my most fond moments was in my senior year when we trailed Seton 12-0 in the fourth quarter. We drove down around the 10-yard line and Tom made a great catch to make it 12-6. We held Seton on the next set of downs and got the ball back with less than two minutes to play. We converted on a few fourth downs, and eventually found ourselves in the exact same spot as our last drive. I recall looking at Tom and he flipped his head as if to say let's make it happen again, and we did. Now tied 12-12, we ran the exact play again for the two-point conversion, and Tom made it happen again. He definitely was the hero of the day.

"That day was indicative of how Tom played every game. He kind of reminds me of Dwight Clark (the former great receiver from the San Francisco 49ers). Unfortunately for Tom, we ran an option-based offense which hindered wide receivers. But, whenever we needed to throw, you knew who we were going to. He also was an excellent blocker and saved my butt many times."

Seary's final reception of his Norwich career was a 6-yard touchdown toss from Tom Porack in the season finale at Oneonta on Saturday, November 8, 1980. Like Whitney, Porack remembers Seary's worth on the football field.

"I didn't catch up to Tom on the football field until I was a junior and he was a senior. He had already made a name for himself in the conference as a premier split end with those great hands he had," said Porack. "I was a backup quarterback that year, but when I had the chance to throw the football, he was my first target. All you had to do was get the pass anywhere near him and he came down with it. He probably would have caught a lot more balls that year had we not been teammates with another Norwich Hall of Famer, Barry Benjamin, who was running the football all over every team we played."

If Seary made a name for himself with his glue-like hands on the gridiron, he helped many of his baseball teammates from suffering ignominy when he saved errantly thrown balls from their infield positions. Best known on the diamond as an all-star pitcher, Seary manned first base when he was not toeing the rubber.

"Tom had a real competitive streak and didn't like to lose," recalled Porack. "He either pitched or played first base, and me

being a catcher, I got to work with him in many games and see that competitiveness up close. He had a great pair of hands at first, and it took the worst of all throws from the infield to get by him."

Called up to the varsity as a sophomore, Seary's impact on the Tornado nine was almost immediate. On Saturday, April 21, 1979, he outdueled future major leaguer John Pawlowski of Seton Catholic Central 1-0 with a sparkling four-hitter in what was Norwich's first win of the spring. And, it was sometime following that game that he was tagged with the nickname "World" in direct reference to the World Series by teammate Asa "Ace" Decker. Pawlowski, meanwhile, was drafted by the Chicago White Sox in 1985, fresh out of Clemson University, and went on to pitch two seasons for the Pale Hose. He currently is the head baseball coach at Western Kentucky University.

During Seary's senior baseball campaign, Norwich enjoyed its best record (10-8) in six seasons. Once again consistency was his forte as he compiled a 2.94 ERA (11th in STAC), while batting an excellent .301. In addition, he led the team in doubles, tied for the lead in triples and was third in hits.

His junior spring was even better, even though the Tornado stumbled to a 6-12 log. With Norwich having lost its first nine games of the season, Seary proceeded to win three of the next six triumphs as the Purple went 6-3 down the stretch. For that 1980 season, Seary went 3-2 with a 2.88 ERA and 32 strikeouts and only six walks in 34 innings pitched. At the plate, he swung the lumber at a robust .367 clip to finish second in both RBI and hits.

Seary likes to credit three individuals for his baseball success. He notes that Little League coaches Don Reynolds and Eric Wahlberg taught him the basic fundamentals of the game, and that Dave True gave him the necessary guidance and mentoring as a young sophomore on the big time varsity.

All success, however, starts with the individual, himself. And, Tom Seary had plenty of perseverance. Having relocated to the Norwich area from La Jolla, CA (12 miles north of San Diego) in 1970 when his father became CFO of the aerospace company GLA/Simmonds Precision, the Seary family took up residence on a 300-plus acre plot in Preston. Without many neighbors, if any at all, he was forced to improvise.

"At the beginning of summer, I would receive a new wooden bat. Since I didn't have any neighbors within a couple of miles, I would spend hours a day hitting rocks in the fields and throwing a tennis ball against the utility barn door for fielding drills. By summer's end, that baseball bat looked like a long toothpick," recalled Seary.

While success in football and baseball came easily to Seary, he had to work hard to achieve his basketball accolades. "Both football and baseball came a little more naturally to me," admitted the three-sport star. "Because I had to work at basketball a lot more, it meant that much more when I did well."

That hard work paid off his senior season when he averaged 13.7 points per game for second place on the Purple, led the team with 96 defensive rebounds, 35 assists and only 28 turnovers, while adding 24 steals.

"The thing that was most gratifying about Tom was that his intensity in practice was always as high as it was during a game," said the late NHS cage mentor Ken Stewart following the 1981 season. "He always tried to do what I would ask of him, and you can't expect anymore of a player than that."

(Continued next page)

For his final hardwoods season, Seary reached double digits in 18 of the Tornado's 21 games, with a season-best 23 coming in Norwich's finale, a Class B sectional loss to top-seeded Waverly. Another 20-point outburst, though, proved to be his shining moment. With 14 of those 20 markers coming in the second half, Norwich defeated Vestal 59-45 on January 9, 1981 for the Purple's first-ever triumph of a STAC Division I foe.

Besides being a STAC and Chenango County all-star in all three sports and a second-team state football pick, Seary was the recipient of the prestigious David Lee Award as the Outstanding Norwich Athlete in 1981. He also was named the Chenango County Athlete of the Year. But, awards do not really reveal the person he was when on the Tornado athletic plain.

Whitney, who quarterbacked Norwich during Seary's junior year, remembers his demeanor well. "All the way up until I graduated, Tom had always been relatively quiet. His quietness, though, didn't hinder his competitiveness. He was not only competitive, he was consistent in his approach to athletics."

And, Porack, who is a year younger than Seary, echoes Whitney's words. "What I remember most was Tom's good-natured demeanor and him never losing his cool during a game, even when things weren't going well. It's great to see his contributions to Norwich athletics be recognized with this honor."

Despite all those kind words, Seary was able to deliver a small bit of sarcasm every now and then. "As a receiver going across the middle on a slant or curl, I would catch the pass, get hit and then help the defender up off the ground—usually with a very polite 'nice hit,'" Seary recalled with a glimmer in his eye and a smile on his face.

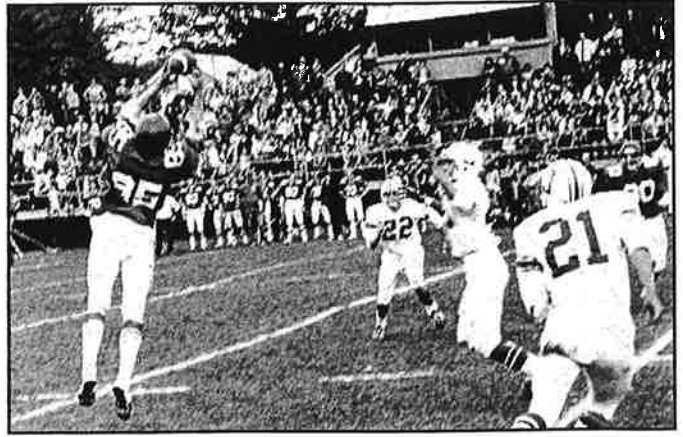
Following his halcyon days at Norwich, Seary matriculated at Mansfield State College in Pennsylvania where he played football as a wide receiver. Locally, he continued his diamond heroics by playing American Legion baseball and fast-pitch and modified softball. During the 1981 American Legion District 6 playoffs, he hurled a no-hitter against Cortland for Norwich Post 189, and he was a perennial all-star at first base for Norwich Shoe/Devine-Wilson in local fast-pitch endeavors from 1981 until the Chenango Valley Softball League's demise in 1992. Two years later, he was named a second team All-American on the SM Kats modified squad out of Binghamton, following play in the national tournament in Spokane, WA.

He is presently employed by Chobani LLC as a Senior MRO Purchasing and Inventory Manager.

His youngest daughter, Cassidy, is expected to give his presentation speech, if fall athletic scheduling doesn't interfere. She is currently a junior first sacker—like dad—on the SUNY Binghamton women's softball team. While at Norwich, she earned 11 varsity letters and etched her name in local, state and national levels for her performance on the softball diamond on Monday, April 18, 2016. During a 21-5 shellacking of Chenango Valley, she cracked three home runs—two of which were grand slams in the same inning—and drove in 10 runs.

With a performance such as that a couple of idioms come to mind, namely "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" and "she's a chip off the old block." But, personally I think the hit song from the Broadway musical "Gypsy" is more apropos—(It's A) "Small World" (Isn't It).

— Tom Rowe



Tom Seary extending to pull in one of his patented catches during Norwich's 6-0 victory over Owego at Alumni Field on Oct. 4, 1980. Seary had three receptions for 38 yards on the day.