

The 1974 NHS 400 Freestyle Swim Team



The Norwich High School 400 Freestyle Swimming Relay at the 1974 Intersectional Championships (States) achieved many 'first-time' accomplishments...The first NHS relay time to qualify for states, the first NHS relay team to set a sectional swimming record...the first relay team from Section 4 to win a state relay crown.

However, it was not the first time swimming as a relay for the four Norwich tankers. In a Norwich YMCA age-group swimming meet in February 1969 against the Geneva YMCA, Ken Mirabito, Bob Bowers and the Eaton brothers, Paul and Andy teamed up for their first time together in competition. A resounding victory in the (12 years old & under) 160 Freestyle Relay had to satisfy the young age-group swimmers for five more years. As members of NHS Hall of Fame Coach George Echentile's very successful YMCA and Junior High School 'Gladiator', and Norwich Elks Swimming teams in the late '60s and early '70s, the foursome swam hundreds of races, although they were never paired again until the eventual "state winning lineup" in March 1974.

While Coach Echentile's aquatic programing developed the young swimmers, a particular strong series of swimmers had emerged in the late '60s and into the '70s and '80s. The

swimming team of 1971-74 for instance, finished with 50 wins against 10 losses over that four-year period. The Tornado faithful will remember the leadership and excellence of those 1970s teams with leaders like Scott Mooney, Richard Hawley, Brad Jewett, Steve Miller, Scott Pannick and Tom Michaels. As Echentile's teams 'moved' to Section IV competition in the fall of 1972, the list of outstanding swimmers and divers grew – Kevin Diefenbacher, Bob and Mike Bowers, Kip Meade, Andy Finch and the Eaton brothers, Mel, Andy and Paul. Captain Rob Echentile joined David Bidlack, Hal Ebetino, Mike Stratton, Dave Symonds, Russ Chesebro, Ken Mirabito, Norman Lyster, David McDowell and George Simpson cast an all-star list of strong Tornado swimmers and divers. Always a strong sectional contender, Echentile led the 1971-72 NHS team to the Section III Class B title.

Relay leadoff man, Ken Mirabito became the NHS starting quarterback on the 1975 varsity football team. He also participated on AD and Norwich Hall of Famer Sam Elia's golf squad, playing to a low handicap. Always a team leader and captain, Ken displayed the character that a good leadoff man possesses. Power, speed and toughness and a fearless abandon that Echentile's squad could count on for the 1973-76

seasons. Ken made the finals in every sectional race of his four-year varsity swimming career, an amazing accomplishment. Mirabito was a member of the record setting NHS 200 medley relay team during his senior season that placed in the finals of the 1976 State Intersectional, finishing in eighth place.

Swimming second, Bob Bowers was a naturally gifted athlete, playing baseball and running cross-country in his younger years. From a young age, a strong all-around athlete, Bob was a very accomplished age-group swimmer. He won many YMCA, Norwich Elks and Tornado swimming events throughout his swimming career. Bob also captured the 1974 Section IV 50-yard free title during his senior year of high school. The Bowers brothers, Michael and Bob, always came 'ready to race'. Both could swim all four competitive strokes very well and both enjoyed tremendous success contributing to the great NHS teams of the early seventies. Sadly, both Bowers brothers, Mike and Bob, have passed on.

Senior Co-Captain Robert Echentile, son of Norwich High School Hall of Fame Coach George Echentile, provided great 'depth' to the NHS butterfly and freestyle events throughout his high school career. A sectional finalist during his junior and senior seasons in the butterfly and relay events. "Rob" contributed in a variety of ways, not only a point scorer, but also demonstrating tremendous leadership to the '73 and '74 teams. An integral piece to the championship freestyle relay throughout the season, the usually quiet and reserved captain proved to be an effective complement to his father's leadership abilities. The first to lead the Tornado during school and team spirit cheers, the youngest of George and Betty Echentile's four children was extremely popular with his teammates and friends. Rob's willingness to compete in any event asked of him did not go unnoticed by his Tornado teammates. Swimming as the "free relay's" alternate at the State Championships in West Point capped a solid high school athletic career, paving the way for a career as "Dr. Robert Echentile"- Veterinarian in Seattle Washington until his most recent retirement.

Andy Eaton, the younger of the two Eaton brothers, handled the third leg. He also participated on baseball and football teams as a youngster. A tremendously strong, long freestyle stroke swimmer, Andy won many age-group NY state AAU and YMCA state championships. Focusing on swimming during his high school years, Andy participated in three Intersectional swim meets, garnering a third, seventh and two 10th place finishes in individual events. In 1976, his 60-yard freestyle time tied the existing national high school record. Always a sectional medalist as a sophomore to senior, his versatility helped Andy set many NHS records in the water. Distance events, stroke events, sprints and relays, Andy broke all of the NHS school records except the 200 free, backstroke and butterfly events. He is one of the fastest and most decorated swimmers to ever compete for the Purple and White.

Anchorman, Paul Eaton inducted into the Norwich High School's Fifth Athletic Hall of Fame Class (2015), also

participated in track and baseball during earlier years. He is the only individual New York State high school swimming champion from Norwich High. Claiming two individual championships in different strokes (free and fly), Paul still holds the current school record in the 100-yard butterfly set in 1974. A pair of third place finishes at the 1973 state meet his junior season forecast a bright future for the soon to be state champion, Jr. College All-American and Big Ten finalist. Eaton went on to be named the Outstanding Swimmer at the 1975 National Junior College Championships competing for Alfred St. College. Transferring to the University of Iowa in 1975, Eaton was a Big Ten league finalist, IOWA record holder and 1976 Olympic Trials qualifier in two swimming events.

The 1973-74 edition of the Purple and White enjoyed a strong 11-3 record heading into the championship portion of the season. A second-place finish in the sectional championship meet the week before the "state qualifiers" forecast a strong conclusion to the season. Only the powerful Ithaca High's "Little Red" swimming machine prevented Norwich from winning the Section 4 Class A meet. Winning three sectional championship events, Paul Eaton in the 200-yard free and 100-yard butterfly and Bob Bowers in the 50-yard free, the Purple swimmers were poised to make a huge splash at the qualifiers meet.

A new "NYSPHSAA" participation rule enacted in 1974 allowed student-athletes to participate in three events at the "states" for the first time. At the present, the Intersectional Meet is a two-day affair, splitting preliminaries and finals with a night between. Not the case in 1974, all action was completed in one day during two sessions.

The SUNY Cortland pool bleachers were crowded and hot, at the state qualifiers, on the last Saturday of February 1974. A full house was on hand to watch the Section IV State Qualifiers. The combination of Mirabito, Bowers and the Eatons had somehow never paired again, since that age-group meet in 1969, in relay fashion, until that intersectional qualifying meet in late February 1974.

Surprising coaches and swimming fans alike, Coach Echentile assembled his two seniors and two sophomores for only the second time, at the qualifiers, hoping to challenge the "Little Red's" free relay of Ithaca HS. Ithaca was the sectional relay record holders, on top of the NY best times list and odds-on favorite to qualify and win the state championships. Only one team from each of the 12 NYSPHSAA sections qualified for the intersectional state meet. It was a "one-and-done" situation. Norwich team captain Rob Echentile was an integral part of the Tornado relay success throughout the season and into post season activity. However, in a strategic move, Coach Echentile replaced son, "Robby", with fellow senior, Bob Bowers as the relay teams' second leg.

Leading off the relay was NHS captain and team leader Mirabito, a sectional finalist in the sprint events as an underclassman. A strong 100 free leg showed Mirabito

leading the field, as he swam his best relay time ever. Senior Bob Bowers, the Section IV 50 free champion completed a perfect exchange and swam his best 100, furthering NHS's lead heading into the vital third leg of the relay. Sophomore, Andy Eaton showed why he was the Section IV 100 freestyle state qualifier champion, as he lengthened the Norwich lead, setting the table for senior Paul Eaton to anchor a surprisingly easy and stunning upset victory. Knocking almost eight seconds off the previous NHS record, the quartet broke the sectional record and bested all of the sectional teams qualifying for the state championships and qualifying as a third-place seed at West Point's Army natatorium, host of the 1974 Intersectional Championships.

Decorum and tradition were readily evident at the West Point pool that first weekend in March 1974. High School teams from Buffalo to Long Island were freshly "shaved and tapered" and eagerly awaited the day's action as booming cheers rang out loud and clear in the spacious US Military Academy's, 'Olympic Pool'. While all competing NY high schools were on point that weekend, it was the Norwich Purple Tornado swimmers who proudly marched to the pool bulkhead, sporting purple sweats, dumping Norwich YMCA pool water from a "20-yard" purple painted jug and proudly singing our National Anthem with emotion and gusto!

Coach Echentiles's 'water show' had been unleashed on New York and coaches, teams and swimming fans were thrilled and impressed at the Norwich showing during the preliminaries. Stunned and bemused observers were awed as the Purple dominated the state morning preliminaries. NHS had qualified three number one seeds, in 11 of the swim and diving events heading to the evening finals. Qualifying first for the finals were Paul Eaton in his two specialties, the 50 free and 100 butterfly, and the 400 free relay of Mirabito, Bowers and the Eaton brothers. Swimming against a powerful state leading foursome from Plainview HS in Section VIII (Long Island) in heat #2 of the preliminaries, the Purple foursome completed a clean sweep, upsetting the field and qualifying for the evening finals as the number one seed. A short rest and nourishment provided a few hours of recovery and then the all-important evening finals.

The Purple and White swimmers and fans had plenty to cheer about during the finals. Paul Eaton remained undefeated in competition winning the 50-yard freestyle and the 100-yard butterfly in Section IV and NHS record times Norwich High School had its first state swimming champion, and an enthusiastic and upbeat confidence was shared by the Norwich delegation in the team staging area and with the fans and families in the stands. Momentum, team spirit, a pair of state titles and the Purple jug had pushed NHS to the final race of the state championships, the 400 Freestyle Relay.

Based upon the morning preliminary times, it was anyone's race as the Liverpool High quartet and the Jamestown High's relay teams, were hot on the Tornado heels. Words of encouragement steadily grew from whispers to shouts from teammates and fans as the final event was called to the starting blocks. The underdog Purple and White were now the 'hunted' and the foursome of Mirabito, Bowers, Eaton & Eaton shed the bright purple sweatsuits, and nervously paced about in the staging (heat bench) area, adjusting swim caps and draw strings.

Swimming in lane three, the middle lane of the competition course, the official starter called the six leadoff swimmers to the blocks. Sophomore Ken Mirabito, following a similar strategy used at the sectional qualifying meet sped to his best time ever to keep the Tornado close to the leaders. Liverpool High had led the first leg, but Mirabito performed exactly as Echentile predicted. Bob Bowers, kept the Tornado relay close to the lead as he also swam his fastest 'split' ever. Expectedly, the Tornado stayed at the feet, in close distance, of the other finalists. All six high schools were very tight and it was still anyone's race to win. "Super soph" Andy Eaton swam a most inspiring third leg as he closed the gap against the leading Liverpool High. The younger Eaton completed his leg with his best time ever and the 'table was set' for senior two-time state champ, Paul Eaton. Eaton did not disappoint, completing a thrilling come-from-behind swim, touching out the Liverpool and Jamestown relays in a "photo finish".

The Norwich foursome just missed setting a new school and Section IV record that they set just hours earlier. But it was enough to claim the first relay championship for Norwich and the Section IV team. The electronic scoreboard provided an instant read out result. A one-tenth of a second winning margin proved to be the closest race of the championships.

Pandemonium, uproar and sheer joy erupted from the Norwich delegation. Andy Eaton roared the "We're Number One" chant and soon the entire Section IV team joined in. An exhausted Paul Eaton was pulled from the pool by his teammates and the celebrations continued on for quite some time. It was a momentous celebration for the underdog Norwich team, and the fans rewarded them with several minutes of ovations and cheers.

While the early March weather was cold and snowy during that Saturday in West Point, after the competition, the team marched out to "Trophy Point" overlooking the expansive Hudson River on the Army campus. Several moments of silent reflection and 'exclamations of belief' melted away the strict discipline and decorum that a visit to West Point can demand. However, for the Purple and White, the sun was shining very brightly! Norwich High School had its first state swimming champions and the glow was all buoyant as the boys headed home to Norwich...

—Paul Eaton