

## Coach Joe Grzibowski, 1960-1982



Brought on board to right a listing football program, Joe Grzibowski held his own in that regard, but forever etched his name in Norwich High School track and field archives as not only the sport's longest serving coach of 22 years – 35 if you add in his time heading winter track – but its most successful, as well.

From the early days of John F. Kennedy's 35th presidency to the second year of Ronald Reagan's tenure, "Griz" or "Grizi," as he was affectionately called,

stood tall – his 6-foot-4; 200-plus-pound stature making sure of that – as he oversaw five undefeated dual meet seasons in posting an overall record of 108-51 (.679). Those gaudy numbers have earned him a hallowed place as a member of the 10th annual induction class to the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

That handful of undefeated seasons spanned 13 years, from the days of Beatlemania during the mid-sixties to the Disco Era of the late seventies. The first of those unblemished duals occurred in 1965 (10-0), two years later in 1967 (7-0) another was rung up, and back-to-back gems came about in 1970 (8-0) and 1971 (9-0) before the curtain came down on perfection in 1977 (7-0).

In addition to registering those perfect spring campaigns, "Griz" directed his squads to five Section III Class B team crowns – three straight in 1965, 1966 and 1967, and 29 individual and relay team sectional titles, which were split between Section III and Section IV competition.

All of those accomplishments, though, did not come easy, as "Griz" inherited a track program that had not only low numbers but even lower expectations in having posted one dual meet victory (1-16) since 1957. In fact, since the demise of the Cortland Street track facility following the 1958 campaign, Norwich was forced to travel for all of its meets, because it had no local venue to participate on.

The latter was made known by The Norwich Sun in a Monday, May 9, 1960 article when it was written, "Norwich High School does not have a regular track to practice on and must run all of its meets away from home."

So, in 1961 with only one returning letterman from the previous winless spring, "Griz" and his charges moved to a new home at Veterans Park. Running, jumping and heaving the weights were all left to be done on the grassy confines of the baseball field's deep center field environs. That season and the one to follow produced only a pair of victories, both coming against Little Falls, but with the advent of the baby boomers things were about to change fast.

Over the past five seasons, Norwich had posted a dismal 3-26 record in dual meet competition. But with the coming of the 1963 spring, the sweet smell of Purple success began to permeate the air as heartily as the local lilacs. That year, the first winning one in the

last six, witnessed the Tornado with a 4-2 log and sprinter Tom Armstrong qualifying for the New York State meet as a member of the Section III medley relay team. Starting with 1963, Norwich lost only six meets over the next nine seasons. And between 1964-71, NHS was 49-4 (.925) in Iroquois League competition and 58-4 (.935) overall.

Besides finishing a strong second to perennial track powerhouse Iliion in Iroquois League play in 1964, Norwich's 880-yard relay team of Tom Roberts, Mike Ault, Melvin Winner and Mike Robertson wound up fourth overall at the state meet in Ithaca.

Robertson, who was only a freshman at the time and an integral member of those eventual three straight Section III Class B championships, remembers his four years under the tutelage of Coach Grzibowski very well.

"As members of his track teams, we were given encouragement when it was warranted, and instructions when we were in need. The discipline was there and for me, never questioned," recalled Robertson. "I, for one, felt a deep sense of personal pride when that big man put his hand on my shoulder and gave me that, 'Good job, Mike.' I never saw him argue with any official or opposing coaches. He wasn't that type of coach."

Success breeds success and with the accomplishments of 1964 and a brand-new track at the new high school on Midland Drive, "Griz" had no problem with numbers in 1965 as 72 boys came out for the team. Not only did that team produce the most wins (10) in school history, but established a myriad of records that stood for years.

Since meters have supplanted yards in regards to track records, Armstrong's performances in the 100-yard and 220-yard sprints will stand the test of time, unless a special racing event is delegated. Armstrong posted the second fastest 100-yard clocking in the state of 9.8 seconds to trail only Bill Henderson (9.7) of Syracuse Vocational. Likewise, Harold Burton's 51.8 in the 440 is secure until a special event is organized.

Don Cooper, meanwhile, established hurdling marks of 20.4 and 11.6 in the 180 low hurdles and 100 low hurdles, respectively. Both marks lasted five years until Dave Gantt broke the 180 mark with a time of 20.35 and tied the time in the 100 during the second meet of the spring at Little Falls. Another record that endured for half a decade was the high jump leap of 6-feet turned in by classmates Larry Moses and Winner. It, too, was bested in 1970 by Eddie George who went 6-feet; 1¼-inches in the first home dual of the year versus Herkimer.

Robertson has vivid memories of when he first witnessed the blazing track exploits of Armstrong and Cooper.

"Both Harold (Burton) and I had easily won our junior high races, and then we were introduced to the likes of Don Cooper and Tom Armstrong. Our hearts sank, because those fellas were fast. But here is where Coach 'Griz' showed his merit. Rather than allow us to dwell on our inability to beat those guys, we were encouraged to do our best and just a little more, and soon we would rise to our potential."

Robertson and Burton did not disappoint as they continued their rise throughout their junior and senior track seasons to lead Norwich to its second and third consecutive sectional team crown. Robertson won the 180-yard low hurdles to boost the Tornado to a

one-point victory (40-39) over Oneonta in the 1966 event, which also saw Burton qualify for the state meet at West Point after placing third in the 120-yard high hurdles at Rome.

The following spring Robertson posted a double in the 120 highs and 180 lows to help the Purple edge out Westhill 40-35 in the Section III championships at New Hartford. That difference in victory was made a bit more comfortable by "Griz's" decision to enter Burton in both the 100 and 200 dashes rather than his customary 440, because you couldn't run another race if you competed in the 440. So, instead of six points for winning the 440, he chalked up eight for placing second in both the sprints.

"Under the guidance and training of Coach 'Griz,' I was often a three-time winner in every league track meet my senior year," noted Robertson. "But I remember once when I was younger, I wasn't trying my best. Heck, I wasn't trying at all. He approached me and said something along the lines of 'Quitting, are you quitting, Mike?' Well, before I could begin my excuse, he said that quitting is easy; it's for losers and he just never saw me that way.

"Well, maybe that was a coaching technique or maybe not. In any case, it drove into my heart and allowed me to go on to a decent career as a Norwich High School trackster," added Robertson. "I was once asked who were the most influential people in my life. I mentioned Coach 'Griz' for giving me the ability to never quit, something I had to rely on a few times in my life. Thank you, Coach."

It's hard to call back-to-back 6-1 seasons a letdown, but after that trio of sectional titles that's exactly what the Tornado trackmen had to withstand in 1968 and 1969. That bridesmaid role was short-lived, though, as the Purple responded with vigor in closing out its membership in the Iroquois League with respective unblemished marks of 8-0 and 9-0 during 1970 and 1971 action. In fact, between April 28, 1970 and May 25, 1971, the Purple prevailed in 17 consecutive dual meets, a record of success that stands to this day. And with regard to Iroquois play, Norwich compiled a 55-16 (.775) league record during its 11 years with "Griz" calling the shots.

Two integral pieces of those unblemished years were Gantt and Doug Wilson. Both played football under "Griz" and both established track and field records as well. Gantt, who as a senior co-captained the 1970 squad, broke Cooper's five-year hold on the 180-yard low hurdles record on May 26 in a decisive 76-55 away meet victory versus Ilion. He also matched Cooper's 100-yard low hurdles clocking of 11.6 in a NHS 91-40 triumph at Little Falls on May 1.

"Coach Joe Grzibowski was not only a great coach, but a great friend, too," said Gantt upon reflecting on his former mentor. "There have been several occasions when Coach Grzibowski and I would talk about our lives past and present. We spoke of our many challenges and successes, as well as our disappointments."

Wilson, meanwhile, now holds the longest standing Norwich individual track record with a heave of 54-feet; 9-inches in the shot put back on May 18, 1971. That toss eclipsed Bob Endries' mark of 53-11 established in 1954. Wilson also bettered the discus record of 143-4, set by Sterling Higley in 1949, with a flip of 149-1½ earlier that spring on May 4. That record was later broken by Doug Grzibowski – yes Coach Joe's son – with a gargantuan heave of 172-6 in 1985.

A humorous anecdote to Wilson's discus achievement is that his father, Pete, made a wager with Higley that Doug would break his record. When he did, the Wilson family received free cable

service for a year, as Higley was the founding president of Valley Video, Inc. Maybe Doug's father should have doubled down with Endries' dad, Nort(on), who was the store manager at the North Broad Street Victory Markets. A full year of free groceries could have been in the offing.

"I made it to Norwich High School in 1969 as a sophomore. I had no experience with track and field, other than what I was taught in gym class," admitted Wilson. "Coach G found out that I did not have a spring sport, after playing junior varsity football and basketball. He approached me in gym class and told me he wanted me to come out for track. I asked what events and he said the shot put and discus. I had never thrown a discus ever and had only thrown the shot put in the Perry Brown once-a-year track meet.

"I only knew the now-outdated "side-step" method of throwing and Coach G let me use that. I had some success and continued into the next spring with even a little more success," recalled Wilson. "During my senior year, I elected not to go out for basketball, and sought out Coach G, who was then in the first couple of years of coaching indoor track during the winter months.

"I told him I wanted a new style of throwing the shot put," continued Wilson, who not only established new NHS records in both the shot put and discus, but laid claim to the Section III Class B title, as well. "The glide was the only other method, as the spin was not used yet. I worked that winter throwing a plastic-coated shot put in the gym, and had great success in the spring.

"You see, I am thrilled at what I was able to accomplish, but it never would have been possible without Coach Grzibowski's tutelage, encouragement and positive attitude," praised Wilson in closing.

After the 1971 spring, the Tornado competed for one season as an independent before joining the Southern Tier Athletic Conference (STAC) in 1973. Modest success was achieved against larger schools during those initial three years, with the Purple producing a record of 17-13, and in 1975 Norwich won the STAC East championship, becoming the first NHS varsity team to claim such an honor. By losing four meets by only 32 points, the Tornado suffered through a 2-5 campaign during the bicentennial spring of 1976, but a return to majesty was just a year away.

Besides being crowned STAC East champions, the 1977 track and field contingent produced "Griz's" fifth and final undefeated season. Headlining the list of successes that year was the mile relay team of John Spilsbury, Tim Handy, Randy Christian and Jim Spilsbury, who established a new Section IV record of 3:22.3 in the sectional championships at SUNY Binghamton on Saturday, June 4. Jim Spilsbury also bettered Frank Ault's 880 mark of 1:58.4 from 1966 with a 1:57.1 clocking in the Cortland Invitational on Friday, May 20, a meet in which Norwich placed second to Ogdensburg out of a field of 20 teams.

"Mr. Griz was good at finding guys to fill all the events, so we could score points with depth," explained Handy. "I was one of those guys. I had not run track before that year, but he plugged me in as the fourth member of a strong returning mile relay team with the Spilsburys and Christian. As a neophyte, I had no idea what a good 440 time was, but Mr. Griz had a big smile on his face the first time he clocked me."

Prior to setting that new Section IV mile relay mark, members of the Norwich squad had to watch Jim Duncan of Elmira Notre Dame blister his way to a new sectional record of 48.9, breaking the

old time set in 1965. Duncan also ran the anchor for END's mile relay quartet, but Jim Spilsbury passed him down the stretch and denied the No. 1 seeded Crusaders another victory.

"Coach Griz was a big bear of a guy with a soft heart for his athletes. I think we all made him proud that year," closed Handy, who along with the Spilsburys and Christian placed fifth in the New York State Championships at Hobart College.

Handy would make one more trip to the state meet along with 880 relay mates Paul Zieno, Jeff Eaton and Christian. They became the final Grzibowski-coached relay team to qualify for state action when they won the Section IV title at SUNY Binghamton with a 1:31.6 clocking. Norwich prevailed when Christian held off the reigning sectional 220 champ, Dave Brady from Binghamton North, down the stretch.

"Coach Grzibowski was a towering figure with a commanding, no-nonsense presence," noted Eaton. "In addition to his ability to put guys in the right roles to optimize the team's overall point scoring, he certainly sent a lot of Norwich track athletes to sectional victories and on to compete in the state meet."

One last NHS athlete to reach the state championships under Grzibowski was Jeff Johnson, who set the present-day high jump mark of 6-feet; 8-inches, while placing fifth at Cornell University in 1982.

While the erstwhile lineage of Joe Grzibowski's track and field accomplishments detail why he is being honored with a plaque in the NHSSHOF, let's not forget why he put down roots in Norwich in the first place.

It was back on Monday, May 9, 1960 that The Norwich Sun sported a headline that read "Grazibowski (sic) New NHS Football Coach." After four straight losing seasons with a cumulative log of 10-21-1, it was decided to hire Grzibowski, who graduated from Syracuse University in 1950. Grzibowski, a native of Newburgh, played football and was a member of the crew team while at SU.

Following his Syracuse graduation, he spent four years at Baldwinsville before taking over the varsity reins at Nyack in 1954. During those six falls there, he compiled an impressive 25-6 record, winning the Rockland County League title in 1956 and finishing as co-champions in 1954 and 1959. While at Nyack, his players nicknamed him "The Bear" because his name sounded a lot like grizzly (bear).

One of "Griz's" players during his early days in Nyack was Roger Brown. Brown, who graduated in 1956, went on to fame in the National Football League as an all-star defensive tackle on both legendary "Fearsome Foursome" quartets. Playing for the Detroit Lions from 1960-66, he joined with Alex Karras, Darris McCord and Sam Williams to form the original group, and after being traded to the Los Angeles Rams, he teamed up with Deacon Jones, Lamar Lundy and Merlin Olsen from 1967-69. He played in six Pro Bowls and was named the NFL Pro Lineman of the Year in 1962.

Dave Gantt recalls the time Coach "Griz" invited him and others to his home during the Christmas season. "His early days at Nyack were special times. He invited several of us to his home one Christmas Eve to meet (Roger) Brown and his wife. It was a wonderful experience. Coach Joe Grzibowski was a genuine and honest individual. I am thankful to have had him in my life. He still is!"

A little over three months after that erroneous headline appeared in the local paper, though, tragedy struck the new coach when he and his wife, Beverly, were involved in a head-on crash on

Bear Spring Mountain just southeast of Walton as they made their way to Norwich. Coach Grzibowski was treated and released, but Beverly suffered three serious fractures to her skull, jaw and wrist. She eventually succumbed to her injuries, after spending five days in a coma at Albany Hospital.

That personal setback could have buried any man, but "Griz" was on the front lines for the Tornado's first day of practice on September 1. With only seven returning lettermen and 42 other grid hopefuls, he had some poignant words for his new troops.

"Starting right now, from Monday through Friday, you will not enjoy practice. You are not supposed to enjoy practice. It is hard work and we will be hard on you, but for a good reason. It will be okay with me if I only have 11 boys for the opening game if they have guts, and I'd rather have 11 players with guts than 55 without guts."

Assisting "Griz" that first fall were Tom Lloyd, who came along from Nyack, Al Maruszak and Walt Shonosky. And that initial season was nothing to cheer about as the Purple won only one game out of eight. Improvements came slowly as the next three years brought respective marks of 2-5-1, 3-4-1 and 4-2-2.

But the records were deceptive, because "Griz's" teams were playing great defense. The 1961 unit yielded more than two touchdowns only once, the 1962 team lost three games by one point each – all four by a grand total of 13 points and the 1963 club posted Norwich's first winning record since 1955. That latter 11 racked up five defensive shutouts, including Chenango Valley which hadn't been blanked in 18 years and ultimately went on to victory in the remainder of its games, and Iroquois League champ Mohawk, which had to settle for a 0-0 standoff.

After a 2-6 campaign in 1964, which witnessed the Tornado lose four of those games by 32 points, Norwich took off during "Griz's" final two seasons. The 1965 edition went 6-1 in winning the Iroquois League title for the first time since the league began in 1953, and it defeated arch-rival Oneonta for the first time since 1956 with a scintillating 13-12 triumph on the Yellowjackets' home field. The following fall, Norwich shared the league crown with Frankfort-Schuyler and Oneonta, after ringing up a 7-1 record.

All told, Norwich football under Joe Grzibowski went 25-26-4 (.490), while going 21-18-3 (.538) with two championships in Iroquois League circles.

Following his retirement from teaching, "Griz" was an avid hunter, fisherman and much-respected archaeologist. Sadly, this larger-than-life gentleman died on July 30, 2007 at the New York State Veterans Home in Oxford following an extended illness.

Surviving are his wife Wynifred and four sons Jeff, Matt, Chet and Doug. He was predeceased by his daughter, JoAnn, and his first wife, Beverly.

Because of his Paul Bunyan-like physique, Joe Grzibowski was an intimidating figure to many, especially the ones who didn't really know him. But to the thousands of student-athletes who played for him over those 42 seasons, he was more like a guardian angel, because he always encouraged and guided his players, while always looking out for them on and off the field.

Players and students at both Norwich and Nyack called him "Griz" because of that bear-sounding name, but Joe you could have been the spokesman for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes instead of Tony the Tiger, because you were truly "Grrrrreat."

—Tom Rowe