

## Joe Binelli, Class of 1957



Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!

Superman was the star of the much-ballyhooed television drama "The Adventures of Superman" that ruled the airways between 1952-58. But Norwich had its own high-flying athlete during those halcyon days, too, namely Joe Binelli.

During the year that brought us Sputnik and the start of the space age, Binelli soared to record numbers in both track and wrestling as he paralleled George Reeves' portrayal of "The Man of Steel" during his senior year of 1957. And because of those achievements, Binelli, who also ran cross country, is being honored as one of the newest members of the 10th edition of the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

Anyone who was watching television during the mid-1950s knows that those opening words were the dramatic introduction to one of the most popular 30-minute enterprises of the decade. The plot of the show was that a strange visitor from another planet came to Earth and while disguised as a mild-mannered reporter named Clark Kent for the Daily Planet in Metropolis fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way.

Like Metropolis, Norwich had its own high-flying student-athlete. Binelli might not have been able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but it sure seemed that way when he was displaying his pole vaulting skills at the old track and field complex at Cortland Street Park. Binelli, who captured the New York State title in that event, was also an accomplished wrestler and cross country runner.

Combining super-human leaping abilities with bullet-like speed, Binelli was a double-edged sword for the Purple track team. During his record-setting senior spring, Joe, who competed bare foot, prevailed in 10 of 12 pole vault competitions, losing out only to Malcolm Kingsley of New Hartford by an inch at the Section III Class B meet and to a broken pole at the New Hartford Invitational.

Along the way, he established new records wherever he competed. On May 1, he set a new track record in Norwich's first dual meet of the season at Cortland, 17 days later he took first in a morning dual at Herkimer before setting a new Section III mark of 11-feet; 11¾-inches in the afternoon, and two weeks hence he easily bettered the previous Cortland Street track record of 11-feet held by Bob "Tex" Haynes (1950) and George Burgess (1951) with a leap of 11-feet; 11¾-inches.

All of those jumps would pale, however, to when he soared to uncharted territory during New York State competition on Saturday, June 8. There, Binelli solidified his name amongst NHS track greats with a 12-feet; 2-inch jump for the ages as he avenged

his earlier-season loss to Kingsley. That leap endured for 14 years until Sam Zagami bettered it with a jump of 12-feet; 4½-inches during a chilly dual meet with Little Falls on May 4, 1971.

Jim Edwards, a 1956 Norwich grad and fellow pole vaulter, recalled how much fervor Binelli had in trying to always better himself.

"He showed no particular talent in track at first as a pole vaulter, only average skill in an event that held a deep field of seven or eight Norwich vaulters. But he was a hard worker, practicing throughout the year, either at his home, the Norwich track (located at the current swim complex at Kurt Beyer Pool) or my backyard on Hale Street. He never stopped trying to improve. On occasion during the off-season, we would get the keys to the swimming pool shed where the pole vault equipment was stored, and continue vaulting almost every day when we could."

Binelli began his pole vaulting career using a bamboo pole that Coach Beyer obtained from former Tornado vaulter Burgess, who at the time held a share of the school record. Later, just prior to his senior spring, Joe purchased a new 12-foot pole made of Swedish steel, which enabled him to improve his previous best by nearly a foot.

"With that new pole, Joe showed dramatic improvement, but it is my belief he could have gone much higher if he had used the standard 14-foot pole, which he could have gripped higher," noted Edwards. "Pole vaulting was considerably different then, before the use of bendable poles. The old poles did not bend, and as a result the vaulter could not ride the bend in the pole. It was a different game."

Binelli, who began his track and field career as a sophomore, showed signs of what was to come during his junior spring. Besides clearing 11-feet for the first time with a winning jump at the Norwich Invitational on Cortland Street, he was the sole NHS winner during the annual Iroquois League championships in Oneonta.

As was noted earlier, his ability to post new pole vault marks was not his only track and field asset. Joe possessed speed, too, and in bullet fashion he stood tall in six of the eight 440-yard sprints he entered his senior year. And one of those blue-ribbon performances occurred during the Iroquois League meet, where his double victory in the pole vault and the 440 helped boost the Tornado to its first-ever league track crown.

"Joe loved sports, and he was good at all of them. I was a fast runner, but Joe was one guy I could never beat in a race," recalled his good friend and wrestling teammate Don Manley.

"One day, before Joe was a member of the track team, we were at the track and one of the track guys was getting ready to practice the one-mile run. Joe challenged him to a mile race, and the track team member was insulted by his request to race him, after all he had been practicing for months. His attitude was 'who are you to challenge me.' But Joe was so persistent that the track team member finally agreed to the race. I watched in amazement as Joe won the race."

There's no doubt that Binelli's best sport was track and field, but close behind was wrestling. A four-year letterman, Joe teamed with best friend Manley to co-captain the 1956-57 grunt and groaners, who en route to a 9-1-1 record captured Norwich's fifth consecutive Iroquois League championship.

Binelli, like the Tornado team, laid claim to the 141-pound league crown with a 4-2 decision over Pat Nichols of Herkimer. And

two weeks later, he scored another decision over Watertown's Dick Lewis to capture his first Section III title.

Undefeated in Section III competition (17-0), Joe was named to the prestigious All-Opponents Team by Rome Free Academy. He and Manley were the only Norwich grapplers so honored. For his wrestling career, Joe compiled a 41-17-4 record (.709), while the Purple pinners went 37-3-2 (.925) during the same four-year stretch.

"While attending fourth grade at East Main Street School, our teacher, Miss Kelly, assigned Joe and I to work together on a class project. We became fast friends. It was a friendship that lasted all through the years," said Manley. "The following year, we convinced the school gym teacher, Miss Gennett, that we needed a mat in the gym so that we could practice wrestling. This dear lady listened and went to bat for us, so soon we had a brand-new mat.

"It was small but it worked, and Joe and I began our wrestling careers by practicing moves during our lunch hours," continued Manley, who preceded Binelli into the NHSSHOF in 2014. "Joe loved wrestling as much as I did. During those early years, we also taught ourselves how to do cartwheels, round-about, flips and how to walk on our hands.

"Joe and I wrestled all four years together in high school, and were co-captains our senior year," recalled Manley. "When we both won sectional titles, Joe came off the mat with a big smile on his face. His dream had come true, a dream that started on a little mat at East Main Street School when we were both in the fifth grade."

Three months later, Joe added the state pole vault championship to his athletic resume, and shortly after graduation, he enlisted in the United States Army. Following basic training, Joe became involved with military intelligence and, subsequently, attended linguist school in California, where he specialized in Romanian.

His first assignment was in Albuquerque, NM, and while there he was recommended to attend Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, GA. Graduating with honors at the top of his class, Binelli was then relocated to Wurzburg, Germany, where he remained for three years until he was deployed to Vietnam. It was there while engaged in aerial reconnaissance, that he was promoted to the rank of Captain and was awarded the Bronze Star.

Returning to the states from Vietnam, Joe moved on to Fort Dix, NJ, where he was a company commander. While at Fort Dix, he was notified that due to the pullout of Vietnam there was going to be a RIF (reduction in force), so he was released from the military in 1973. Once back home in Norwich, Joe settled in as a car salesman and joined the local Army Reserve, where he attended Drill Sergeant School.

After spending a few years as a drill sergeant in the reserves, he opted to attend Recruiter School and became an Army Reserve recruiter. A few more years passed, and Joe rejoined the Army in an active-duty role as a senior non-commissioned officer in the Syracuse area as a recruiter. While a recruiter, he received many awards, including two sapphire stars, which are the holy grail of recruiting as he was honored as the Northeast Region Recruiter of the Year.

Following a few more years in the area, Binelli was selected to be an instructor at the Army Recruiting School in Fort Meade, MD. While there, he was selected to be the senior non-commissioned officer in charge of the Recruiters Station Commander School. Joe

spent the remainder of his Army career at Fort Meade, retiring in November 1983.

Upon his retirement from the military, Joe returned to Norwich and reestablished himself in the community as a well-respected automobile salesman. He remained true to his Norwich roots until his death on Feb. 17, 2007 at Bassett Hospital in Cooperstown, after a long battle with diabetes.

Survived by three sons, Mike, Greg and Brian, Joe was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery.

Throughout his life, Joe Binelli kept pursuing a higher plateau, whether it was as a heralded Norwich High School athlete or as a much-decorated Captain in the United States Army. He may never have leapt a building in a single bound, but he certainly lived a life that you could call super(b).

The great American soccer player Mia Hamm may have summed up his time on earth the best when she said, "Celebrate what you've accomplished, but raise the bar a little higher each time you succeed."

—Tom Rowe