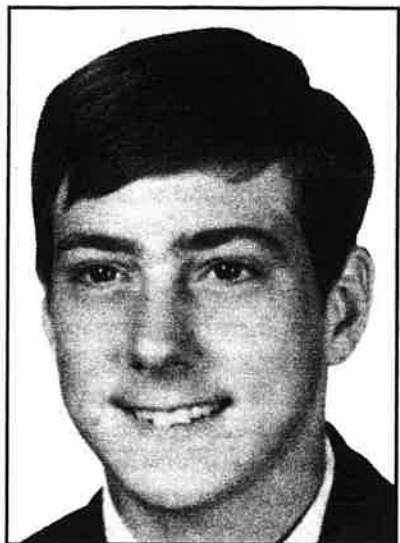


Jim Ward, Class of 1971



I am honored to be asked to write the introduction article about Jim Ward and his induction into the 11th annual Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame for the year 2023.

Jim and I grew up in the same neighborhood and were tennis teammates at Norwich High School. He was born in Norwich, the son of Marcella and Bill Ward. The Wards lived on the corner of Francis

Avenue and Elm Street in the southwest quadrant of the city. The neighborhood included important landmarks such as Perry Browne School, Alumni Field and the Conkey Avenue tennis courts. That last landmark was extremely important in the creation of Jim Ward's tennis career.

Jim's father, Bill, was a very good athlete in his own right, having been the starting shortstop at Middlebury College, not to mention a very good tennis player. Bill coached Little League baseball and naturally wanted Jim to participate. But Jim had a negative first experience when he struck out during his first at bat. That turned out to be his only baseball moment, unless you count pick-up games at Alumni Field versus the neighborhood gang. Jim decided he wanted to play an individual sport and tennis was it.

So, his parents decided to support him in every way they could. Jim was only 10, and his age was the first hurdle he had to clear. The person who supervised all tennis activity and the courts, themselves, was Charles Miers. He had a rule that you had to be 12 in order to participate in the city's various tennis activities.

Jim's father went to Mr. Miers and asked if his son could play even though he was not of the required age. Mr. Miers watched Jim hit and allowed him to join the tennis program. It was the start of his tennis journey. He recalled playing in what was then called the Norwich City Tournament as a 12-year-old against fellow Hall of Famer George Echentile. Echentile won the match 7-5, but Jim's competitive career had begun.

At this time, Jim's physicality needed to be discussed. Although tiny in stature, he was fast, quick and strong for his size. And he already had the strong mind and the ability to concentrate that is needed to be successful in tennis. As he got older, he got bigger and

stronger with each passing year.

As a younger player he was a human backboard, getting every ball back. As he grew, he became more offensive minded but still got every ball back. He grew to be 5-foot-10 and was extremely strong, especially in his legs and his right arm.

He worked tirelessly, constantly and virtually every day under the watchful eye of his father. Jim's older brother, Jack, was a very good player in his own right and helped him develop his game, in addition to being his NHS varsity coach his senior year.

His Norwich career began on the junior high team under Coach Milt McFee, and was immediately successful. To quote Coach McFee, "Jim is a real promising prospect." At this time another brick in his tennis foundation was laid. His father realized that if he was to reach his full potential, he had to compete a lot and not just against local players.

His father found age group tournaments and took Jim there to compete as often as possible. He wanted his son to face the toughest competition he could find. Jim also had the advantage of playing with state-of-the-art equipment, namely whatever tennis racket was the best at any given time. A perfect storm was brewing.

Jim's varsity career began in ninth grade and he immediately made his mark by winning the No. 1 spot on the team. This was an unprecedented achievement, because in the modern era of Norwich High tennis no one had achieved that ranking so young.

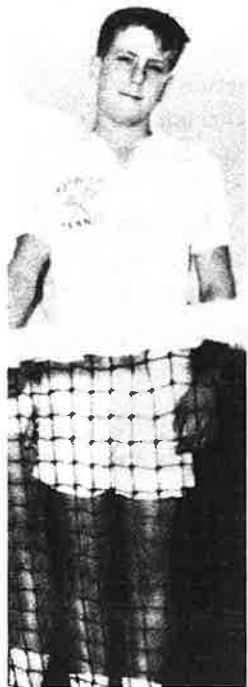
Records of his freshman year are sketchy at best, but Jim's recollection was that he enjoyed a winning season.

Then the legend begins. Over the next three years, Jim's regular season record was 39-2 in singles matches and 16-1 in doubles. His overall singles record, including postseason play, was 57-7. Those three regular season defeats came during his sophomore spring, as he went 21-0 in singles and 10-0 in doubles his final two seasons wearing the Purple & White.

"The best part of my game was serve and volley," noted Jim. "It enabled me to play to the best of my ability."

As a senior, he captured the Section III singles crown at Hamilton College when he straight-setted Stuart Strife of Ilion 6-1, 6-3, reached the regional championships at Colgate University and was named the Tornado's Most Valuable Player. The year before, as a junior, he wound up runner-up in sectional singles competition, but rallied to claim the intersectionals versus Sections II, IV and VII with a 6-3, 6-1 triumph over Warren Ludwig of Niskayuna.





Later that spring, he added to his post-junior year accolades. In early June at Utica's Parkway Courts, he was crowned the Jaycee Junior singles champion when he rallied to defeat Jan Kublick of Mohawk 5-7, 6-3, 6-4. Three weeks later, he teamed with Jim Hopkins of Utica to win the New York State Hard Court doubles title when the pair outlasted Schenectady's Bill Trice and Bruce Erhardt 8-6, 2-6, 6-3. And not to be outdone, as a young 16-year-old, he claimed the Junior Division crown of the Yahnundasis Clay Court Tennis Championship on July 25, 1970 when he toppled a trio of collegians – Bob Evans of St. Lawrence University (6-1, 6-1), Jim Hopkins of Fordham University (6-3, 6-2) and Cliff Cramer of Harpur College, the latter in a three-hour 2-6, 6-4, 6-3 marathon.

Because of those aforementioned accomplishments, Jim was invited to play at the National Juniors in Forest Hills in New York City, the site of the U.S. Open Tennis Championships.

After high school in Norwich, Jim attended the St. Thomas More School in Oakdale, CT before enrolling at SUNY Oneonta, where he played varsity tennis for two years. He later played on the pro satellite tour – much like Triple A baseball – and then taught tennis in the Catskills at Grossinger's and Kutsher's.

He eventually relocated to Texas in 1982, and began a 24-year teaching career within the Houston Independent School District at Francis Scott Key Middle School, where he taught eighth grade American History. He retired eight years ago in 2015. He and his wife, Barbara, still reside in Houston.

In closing, I want to talk a bit about my friend, Jim, and our neighborhood. Jim and I were pals since grade school. He took me under his wing, and his family took me to tournaments when we were junior high age. We both were on the tennis team for two seasons, and played doubles often in matches.

The tennis courts were not just a competitive ground but a social meeting place. Our neighborhood was a very rivalrous one and I believe how much we competed had something to do with future athletic successes. And for some reason, many tennis players lived in the area – the Colliers, the Stewarts and the Swertfagers to name a few.

Jim was the most dominant athlete in his sport in the neighborhood, more dominant than any of the rest of us were in our best sport. He and I played hundreds of sets of tennis, and I was humbled almost every



time. I could compete with everyone but him, and I wasn't alone. He would not only beat me 6-0, but let me get ahead 40-love a couple games and win five points in a row to take the game. But I kept on trying to get that one game in a set.

We were both in college in the summer of '73 when we got together and played. I was playing the best tennis of my life, after a season with the Broome Community College team. But Jim Ward was still Jim Ward. I was more competitive than usual and lost the set 6-3. I got three games in a set off Jim Ward, so I felt like I had won Wimbledon.

Of course, I had to tell anyone from the tennis community that I got three games off Jim Ward in a set. I was treated like a minor hero, because everyone knew what it meant to even get a game off Jim Ward. I call it my best tennis accomplishment ever.

I played various sports for 40 years and was pretty good. I have been trying to think of the best word or phrase that describes Jim Ward and his tennis career – ultimately skilled, thought-minded, relentless in pursuing his goal and cold as ice under pressure. But my mind goes to the word "great," because Jim Ward was a great tennis player. I don't use the word great lightly, but it fits Jim. The phrase that comes to mind is the best tennis player in Norwich history.

To me, the word great is a fact and the phrase is my opinion, and the opinion shared by many of Jim's contemporaries in the tennis community. In a nutshell, Jim Ward belongs in the Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame.

—John Swertfager



DOWN, DOWN THE FIELD

Down, down the field goes that Norwich team,
Just watch those boys take the ball for a score.
Down, down the field they go marching,
Fighting for the purple and the white.

Rah Rah Rah

Victory's in sight for that Norwich team,
Each mother's son knows that Bingo will lose.
So we'll fight, yes we'll fight, and with all our might
For the victory of Old Norwich High.

TO THEE OLD NORWICH

To thee Old Norwich, we pledge our hearts to thee.
Proudly our banner waves as a sign of victory.
As years go on, time goes swiftly rolling by;
We'll fight for the purple and the white,
And dear Old Norwich High.