

## Johanna Schultz Dalton, Class of 1998



For nearly 20 years of the program's existence, Norwich girls' basketball was little more than an afterthought rather than a serious championship contender. The Purple Tornado ladies were not among the Southern Tier Athletic Conference upper hierarchy, not to mention the elite in Section IV.

The brightest spot on a rather sparse basketball resume was a single STAC division title in 1993-94.

Not even the Tornado girls' all-time leading scorer – and Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame member – Kelly (James) Huhrala could lift the program beyond more than a winning record.

Given Norwich's current stature as one of the preeminent basketball programs in all of Section IV, the question to ask is when did fortunes change? At the mesh point of past failure and future success were the teams of the mid-to late-1990s, and the star of those burgeoning teams was Johanna (Schultz) Dalton.

Johanna finished her four-year varsity career second on the school's all-time scoring list with 1,096 career points. She was a four-time Southern Tier Athletic Conference all-star, three-time Evening Sun Chenango County all-star, two-time All-Metro selection by the Binghamton Press & Sun Bulletin, and picked up numerous all-tournament accolades during her stint with the Purple Tornado.

She is also part of the 2023 Norwich High School Sports Hall of Fame induction class, an honor received precisely 25 years from her high school graduation.

Her basketball journey started outside her parents' house on Deiss Road off King Settlement Road, about four miles north of Norwich. She was one of 13 children to Mike and Jane Schultz, who instilled strong values and priorities in their children from the beginning.

"My parents expected three things," emphasized Johanna, who is now a registered nurse living with her husband in Auburn, NY. "First was spirituality and faith that gave us a compass; second was academics that was expected; and third was sports. If you were on a team, you had to be selfless – no trash-talking, just play hard."

That last mantra, the no trash-talking part, even applied to the intrasquad scrimmages between family members.



"It was pretty intense, and that barely explains it," Johanna said remembering the family basketball battles with her siblings. "It did not matter if you were male or female, or what your age was. We were all treated the same, so you better play hard and aggressive."

Those scrimmages served her well. She played on the school's modified basketball team in seventh grade under the tutelage of Amy Spittler. "She was my first coach and was amazing and inspiring," she said of Spittler. "Her coaching was very similar to Mary Halloran."

From there, she was promoted to the junior varsity level, where Halloran was serving as the junior varsity coach under head varsity coach Norm Kaufman.

"I was always in awe of her athletic skills when she played junior varsity as an eighth-grader for me," Halloran said. "I knew she'd be on varsity her remaining years."

As Halloran predicted, Johanna was elevated to the varsity level as a freshman in 1994. Her ascension came one season removed from the program's first-ever STAC division title. As was the wont of former NHS varsity coach Norm Kaufman, freshmen and sophomores new to the varsity level had to earn his trust in lieu of big minutes on the floor.

Fortunately, for Schultz, the transition went about as smoothly as one would expect. Her older sister, Mary, was a senior point guard and leader on the team along with Rhonda Mackmer.

"My sister was a great point guard and floor general," Johanna said of her sister. "I remember one time after a defensive rebound, I took off 100 miles per hour down the floor. I looked back at halfcourt to see where the ball was, and it was on my face."

That was one of the early lessons learned by Johanna. Her sister Mary delivered that pass, and Johanna remembers the team laughing after getting smacked in the face.

"I didn't realize that if you're open, my sister was going to find you," she said. "We had a lot of great players, and my sister and Rhonda took care of the whole team."

While Johanna can look back and laugh at that long-ago memory from her first season on the varsity team, she probably was wondering, at least initially, why she was on the varsity squad.

She saw little time on the floor early on, and did not score a point in her first three varsity games. She finally broke into the varsity scoring column in the championship game of the annual Norwich Pennysaver Tournament – seven points in a loss to standout Section IV program, Greene.

By midseason, she was in the starting lineup, and finished the



season reaching double figures, scoring in 11 of the final 13 games. The culmination of the season was a team-high 14-point effort in the Section IV Class B semifinals against eventual state champion Corning West.

Playing with an established veteran lineup, it was at that point she proved she was, indeed, capable of playing toe-to-toe against the best opposition the Southern Tier area had to offer.

Halloran summed up why Johanna was able to seamlessly adapt to the higher level of play. "Her ability to run up and down the floor, along with her athletic prowess, made her a threat on the offensive and defensive sides (of the ball)."

That freshman year, Norwich picked up 13 victories against eight defeats. From there, the Tornado tacked on more wins each ensuing season.

And Johanna came out red-hot as a sophomore, racking up three 20-plus point games in the first five starts, including a season-high 25 against STAC rival Owego. Norwich was poised for an even deeper playoff run than the previous year, until she suffered the greatest adversity of her young varsity career. In a narrow 70-69 victory over longtime power Seton Catholic Central, she suffered a torn ACL.



Her season was over, and although Norwich would win its next four before a sectional playoff loss to Corning West, the Purple Tornado's sectional title hopes dissipated with her injury.

"I had a clear concept of where we were going (as a team)," she remembered. "What was typical (of a person that age), I thought my life was over (after the injury). I remember thinking that somehow, I have to come back from this.

"It's funny how I have some flashes of memory. I remember the Johnson City coach coming

up to me. It was one of the first games after the injury and I was in street clothes. I was sad, but I was happy I could still be part of the team. The JC coach, he was such a great guy. He came over before the game started and said, 'you are going to be okay and you'll come out of this just fine.' I had no idea what he was talking about, but he believed I had the courage and confidence to come out of it."

Before the injury, Schultz was averaging about 15 points a game, nearly 10 rebounds, and 1.5 blocked shots per game.

With a knee brace now firmly a part of her uniform, Johanna was ready for the season-opener her junior season, less than 10 months removed from her injury. If the knee was bothering her, it did not show on the court at all. She won the early-season Pennysaver Tournament Most Valuable Player award, scoring 21 points and grabbing 14 boards in a title win over a powerful Bainbridge-Guilford club.

It was at this point that the only clubs able to negotiate the burgeoning NHS program were the absolute elite of the elite Section IV schools. Norwich won 15 games and lost six – two apiece to Vestal, Maine-Endwell, and eventual state champion Oneonta.

Johanna averaged 16 points a game, and with nearly 750 career points, she was on course to become just the second player in program history to reach the 1,000-point milestone.

That senior season, Norwich's varsity team was a must-watch appointment. Led by Schultz, and complemented by outstanding talent such as Jessica Sherman, Nancy Heiss, Erin Brooks, Kelly Halicy and several others, outcomes of games were foregone conclusions. The biggest question, at times, was if Norwich would eclipse the 100-point barrier. If not for liberal second-half substitutions by Halloran, in her first varsity coaching assignment, Norwich may well have become the first NHS girls' team to reach 100 points.

Despite getting no more than 2 ½ quarters of playing time in most games – and sharing the scoring load with many talented players – Johanna still led the team in scoring at nearly 16 a game.

Later in the season, though, Schultz and the rest of her squad played heavy minutes before a packed crowd in the Tornado's gymnasium against a powerful Maine-Endwell club. M-E had dealt Norwich its only loss early in the season on the Spartans' home floor. The return engagement was nothing less than a classic.

In the midst of a highly-competitive battle, Johanna eclipsed the 1,000-point barrier. That benchmark, though, was dimmed slightly as M-E would prevail in overtime, 69-65. Still, Schultz had a typical showcase performance against a premier ballclub, scoring 20 points in the loss.

Norwich lost just two more times the rest of the year on its way to a then team-record 18-4 season. M-E topped Norwich again in overtime in the STAC tournament championship game, and later, eventual state champion Oneonta squeezed by Norwich in the Section IV playoffs. That 53-44 win over Norwich, as history would prove out, was the closest any team came to beating the Yellowjackets.

"Johanna's senior year is one I have never forgotten," Halloran said. "The friendships and camaraderie of that team were a true blessing. They were an amazing group of girls and Johanna's leadership was a huge part of that. I can't believe it's been 25 years since her senior year as Johanna reminded me when I got a chance to catch up with her. It was such a privilege to be her coach."

Schultz was not heavily recruited by colleges as a senior, likely due to the knee brace she wore every game. So, with a scouting tape in tow, she sold her basketball wares to Colgate University, and she ended up playing for the Raiders her freshman year of college before giving up competitive basketball.

Looking back at 25 years in the past, she has nothing but the best of memories. "Playing high school basketball was one of the best experiences of my life. I had amazing coaches and teammates. They were not just good athletes, they were well-rounded people. High school was a special time, and it's where I peaked as an athlete."

—Patrick Newell