

My Sportsman: Kurt Warner

By Peter King

Sports Illustrated will announce its choice for Sportsman of the Year on Dec. 2. Here's one of the nominations for that honor by an SI writer. For more essays, click [here](#).

I realize it's presumptuous, because the sport I cover is football, and I've never met **Kevin Garnett** or **Michael Phelps** or any of the other great Olympians from a starry year. I can't sit in judgment of all of the candidates, because I don't know them or their cases for the Sportsman of the Year award. But I can stand on a soap box and argue for Arizona Cardinals quarterback **Kurt Warner** with the same fervor I did a year ago for **Brett Favre** when he won the award.

I take the Sportsman of the Year very seriously. There has to be something to the athlete who wins -- either in charisma, folk-hero status, non-sporting appeal or the ability to use his platform to make the world better -- that goes beyond greatness in the game he plays. Kurt Warner has greatness, of course. He's a two-time NFL Most Valuable Player who will be in contention for a third because of his superb (and surprising) play this year. But those qualities I listed a couple of sentences ago, the ones that a Sportsman has to have in addition to athletic greatness? Warner doesn't have one. He has all four.

In the seven years since Warner's last great full season he has been hurt and benched and risen to play great football and forgotten -- sometimes all in the same year. But in every place he has been he has been a people magnet, because he never allows Warner the athlete to define Warner the person. On the day Warner was benched in Arizona two years ago, the first thing he did when he left coach **Dennis Green's** office was seek out a Cardinals employee to comfort him about the diagnosis of the man's autistic son.

Warner and wife **Brenda** take needy, at-risk and/or Make-a-Wish families to Disney World for a week every offseason ... and they don't just pay for the families; they stay with them. He funded a recreation center in a children's hospital. When he and his wife go to dinner with their children they pick out one family in the restaurant, call the waiter over, and anonymously pick up the tab for them.

Story Highlights

- *The 37-year-old Warner has a shot at his third MVP award this season*
- *He beat out heralded third-year man Matt Leinart for the Cardinals' starting job*
- *Warner is an even better person than he is a player*



As good an athlete as Kurt Warner is on the field, he is an even better person off of it.

Bill Frakes/SI

Sportsman of the Year

›Vault: Warner leading Giants (10.18.04)

›Vault: Who is Kurt Warner? (10.18.99)

›React: Who's your Sportsman choice?

›Sportsman of the Year (1954-2007)

›2008 My Sportsman Archive | Gallery

The secret is, the family can never know who did it. It's all about being charitable for charity's sake -- not for the sake of being thanked or recognized for doing a good deed.

I asked Warner a couple of years ago if he could send a friend of mine, **Army Sgt. Mike McGuire**, heading up a platoon of men sweeping Iraqi roads for improvised explosive devices, an autographed something. McGuire is from St. Louis, and he loves Warner. So Warner autographed and packed up a mini-helmet and sent it to the war zone.

McGuire cherished it, and when he went home on leave or between tours in Iraq, he told wife **Pam** never to move it from his night table. "That helmet will always be near me," McGuire said. "Kurt's always going to be my guy."

I mentioned to Cardinals PR man **Mark Dalton** that McGuire was in the States this fall on leave, and if Warner could find a couple of minutes it would be great if he called Mike. So on the Saturday of his bye week Warner twice called the number that he was given. It was not a working number. Warner called Dalton, looking for another number. Dalton got him one. Warner called twice. The second time he left a message, saying he'd call back, but if he missed him, please tell Mike he said hello. That night, he missed McGuire again.

Five calls. On an off-day.

"Unbelievable!" McGuire said. "I can't believe I missed him, and I can't believe he kept trying."

"Kurt was disappointed he didn't have a chance to talk with Mike," Dalton said. With anyone else, I'd question that. Not Warner.

At 37, Warner went to training camp this year in Arizona to battle for the starting quarterback job with 2006 bonus-baby rookie phenom **Matt Leinart**. The odds were stacked in Leinart's favor, as they should be with a guy whom the team has paid \$16 million since he arrived in the Valley of the Sun. Warner won the job. What he has done with the job is fabulous, obviously, leading his moribund team to the verge of a rare division title and putting up the kind of numbers he put up in both of his MVP seasons in St. Louis.

One play typifies Warner's year: On the first series of the second game of the season, against Miami, he faded back to pass and a safety came in unblocked. From the slot, wide receiver **Anquan Boldin** was one-on-one with a Dolphins linebacker, a matchup that Warner knew Boldin would win once the safety abandoned double-coverage on him to blitz. Warner waited ... waited ... and waited a last split-second, knowing that he was going to get blown up by the safety ... and just before impact, lofted a perfect long touchdown pass to Boldin, who caught it in stride. Warner never saw it, having been leveled.

America loves a comeback story, especially with an athlete who's a better person than player. In 2008, that Sportsman is Kurt Warner.

Agree with this selection? Give us your pick for Sportsman [here](#).