

Warner Sets Example for His Family and the Cardinals



Left, Tim Parker/Reuters; Matt York/Associated Press

The Warners' story became known during the 1999 season when Kurt led the Rams to the Super Bowl. He is now in charge of guiding the Cardinals to maturity.

By KAREN CROUSE

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TYSONS CORNER, Va. — The restaurant game before an away game is one of [Kurt Warner's](#) favorites, a fringe benefit of being a well-paid football player that never gets old.



Andrew Grant

Arizona quarterback Kurt Warner, left, with his family. Clockwise, Jesse, 16; Kade, 9; Elijah, 4; his wife, Brenda; Sierra, 2; Zack, 19; Jada, 7; Sienna, 2. The children rotate going to each road game to spend time with Warner.

At dinner, Warner and his wife, Brenda, will sit back and watch as one or more of their seven children scan the dining area like a quarterback going through his progressions on the field.

Once they target a table, Warner, the Arizona Cardinals' quarterback, quietly adds that dinner tab to his own. At a steakhouse here last Saturday, a family of four received a free meal without knowing the identity of their benefactor.

The Warners cooked up the idea many years ago, after their food-stamp-cashing days were behind them and Warner had become the toast of St. Louis by leading the Rams to victory in the 2000 Super Bowl.

They thought it would be a playful way of instilling in their children the joy of giving. "We want our kids to grow up knowing that because of football we are so blessed," Warner said Wednesday.

He added: “We never want them to lose sight of what it’s really about. Our circumstances are not the most important thing. It’s what we do with those circumstances.”

Even when the 37-year-old Warner is apart from his family, the parenting does not end. He has been handed the responsibility of guiding the young Cardinals to maturity.

Off to their best start since 1991, the Cardinals (2-1) hit a speed bump Sunday against the Washington Redskins. In the fourth quarter, Arizona lost the ball on a tipped interception — Warner’s first turnover of the season — to set up the Redskins’ go-ahead score in a 24-17 victory.

Instead of returning home to prepare for their next test on Sunday against the Jets (1-2) at the Meadowlands, the Cardinals remained on the East Coast and practiced to reinforce lessons of focus and fortitude.

“We set ourselves up with the first two wins,” Warner said. “It’s important for us to go back home with a winning record.”

A critical phase in any football team’s development is learning how to win on the road, and it was clear, from Warner’s downcast demeanor on Monday, that he felt the team had taken a step back.

Rehashing the Redskins game with reporters in a hotel lobby, Warner spoke of being frustrated, of wishing for a do-over on the interception that came on a throw he said he was trying to make perfect when something simply catchable would have worked.

Warner spent the morning watching game film, and the memories of Sunday’s mistakes were fresh, almost raw. So were his feelings of impending loneliness. Before his news media briefing, Warner squeezed in a lunch with Brenda and two of their sons, who were returning to Arizona that night.

Every year Kurt and Brenda sit down with their five oldest children, ages 4 to 19, to choose which Cardinals trip each child will make. (The nearly 3-year-old twin girls are considered too young for the trips.)

The idea is to spend quality time with Warner during the season. For one weekend, one or two children compete against only football for his attention and not all their siblings and the public, too.

“Football takes Dad away,” Warner said, “and that’s really the biggest issue with them.”

Last weekend was 9-year-old Kade and 4-year-old Elijah’s turn. Their last meal here with Warner, on Monday, started with a refresher course in manners.

On the way down to the lobby to meet Warner, Brenda and the boys ran into the Cardinals’ second-year coach, Ken Whisenhunt, who stepped into the elevator and said hello. The boys grew bashful and did not respond, earning them a gentle scolding for being impolite.

After lunch, Warner was off to another meeting to formulate a plan to work around the Jets’ aggressive linebackers. Emerging two hours later, Warner made a beeline for the lobby, promising a television interviewer he would be back in a few, so he could steal 10 more minutes with his boys.

He wrestled with Elijah, hugged and counseled Kade, and held Brenda’s hand until it was time for them to leave for the airport. This weekend it will be daughters Jada and Jesse’s turn with Dad.

"I'd like to be at home tucking my kids in," a wistful Warner said Monday, "but at the same time, this could be a huge benefit for us, for us to be together, to game-plan here, to stay out here and not have to make all the flying adjustment."

The Cardinals were off on Tuesday and Warner flew to New York with his teammates Matt Leinart and Larry Fitzgerald to take in a Broadway play.

Warner arranged for them to attend "In the Heights," a musical he knew was entertaining because he had seen it with Brenda. Leinart, a Southern California quarterback who wanted to be drafted by the Jets in 2006, had been to Manhattan a few times, but his idea of a night on the town had revolved around sports bars and nightclubs.

"I'd never been to a musical," Leinart said Wednesday. "I liked it."

Leinart's habits have improved as a result of having Warner around. They compete fiercely on the field, then compare notes on fatherhood. Leinart, 25, shares custody of his 2-year-old son.

"We're both competitive, but the good thing is we're able to put that part of it aside," said Leinart, who started 16 games in his first two seasons. "I want to play bad. I really do. I know my opportunity is coming. I get that."

This was supposed to be the year the Cardinals became Leinart's team for better or worse, through sickness and wealth. Whisenhunt anointed Leinart the starter after last season but promised Warner he would have a chance to compete for the job.

That was all the opening Warner needed. Like Brett Favre, the Jets' 38-year-old quarterback, he refuses to be flushed out of the league by a heavy rush. Warner threw for 23 touchdowns in 11 starts last season after Leinart was sidelined with a broken collarbone, then was the more consistent performer in training camp.

Warner was not going all Norma Desmond with reporters Wednesday when he said that he and Favre, who have five league Most Valuable Player awards and four Super Bowl appearances between them, had played some of their finest football over the last year.

Favre led the Packers to the National Football Conference championship game last season, and Warner, in his last 14 games, has completed 63 percent of his passes with 29 touchdowns against 17 interceptions. After fumbling nine times — and losing five — in his 11 starts in 2007, Warner made ball security a priority and has not fumbled this season.

"You realize in this business that a lot of people want to throw you out when you get old," Warner said. "But it's kind of like a badge of courage to say: 'I'm still playing. I'm still fighting. I'm still being able to accomplish things even at this age.'"

The paths of Warner and Favre first crossed in 1994 when Warner was invited to the Packers camp as an undrafted rookie out of Northern Iowa. He was greener than a cornstalk.

"I was overwhelmed," said Warner, who competed for snaps with Favre, Ty Detmer and Mark Brunell under the quarterbacks coach, Steve Mariucci.

"I don't know if Kurt remembers," Favre said this week, "but Mariucci asked him to go in on a particular play. He said, 'No, I'm not going in.' He wasn't ready."

Warner was cut after a few weeks, but not before Favre gave him the nickname Chachi, from “Happy Days.” Warner spent the next three years with the Iowa Barnstormers of the Arena Football League. During that time, he and Brenda, whom he met in 1992, got by with a little help from food stamps. They married in 1997, and Warner adopted her son and daughter. After playing in N.F.L. Europe in 1998, Warner caught on with the Rams, and the rest is a great American success story.

Warner said it was intimidating early in his career to compete with the Packers’ quarterbacks, but “the whole process helped me to gain confidence that I could play at this level.”

Mariucci, now employed by the NFL Network, recently interviewed Favre, who said they laughed about how far Warner had come. “He’s not afraid to go in now,” Favre said.

When Warner’s children found out before the season that he had been named the Cardinals starter, 7-year-old Jada complained, “Now you’re going to have those bruises again.”

Warner laughed when reminded of her words. “You know how kids are,” he said. “They have a flair for the dramatic.”

That is also true for quarterbacks who are kids at heart.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 2, 2008

An article on Friday about the creative family rules that the N.F.L. quarterback Kurt Warner and his wife, Brenda, use with their children referred incorrectly to her military background. Although she was indeed a marine, she was not an officer in the corps.