



Good deeds are Warner's focus

By Wayne Drehs

Updated: December 26, 2008, 9:11 AM ET

PHOENIX -- It's a chilly, wet December afternoon in the alleged Valley of the Sun and a mud-covered [Kurt Warner](#) is lost. He's just finished helping build an elementary school playground and is driving home to stuff Christmas stockings for more than 100 foster kids when his cell phone rings.

It's Arizona Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt, congratulating the 37-year-old quarterback for making his third Pro Bowl, his first as a Cardinal. Warner asks which of his teammates made the team, then reacts to his own good fortune with the enthusiasm of someone who is yawning.

"That's great ... thanks Coach ... I couldn't have done it without the opportunity ... see you tomorrow."

And just like that, the conversation is over, the career renaissance complete. Eight years since Warner came out of an Iowa supermarket to lead the St. Louis Rams to a Super Bowl title, he is once again one of the top quarterbacks in the NFL. Despite his struggles the past two weeks, Warner's on-the-field success has shined an even stronger spotlight on his off-the-field deeds, which, depending on your perspective, are either saintly or too good to be true.

It's the reason his wife, Brenda, refers to him as "Pollyanna," and his teammates' wives kiddingly call him "Jesus." But as the Warners will tell you, for every blessing there is a burden. Because for every person in the NFL who loves Kurt Warner, who puts him on a pedestal and believes we need more faith-driven athletes who spend their time and money helping others, there are those -- current and former teammates included -- who roll their eyes, keep their distance or simply feel uncomfortable around the quarterback.

On this day, at least Kurt Warner is lost. At least in the middle of all this selflessness, humility and utter lack of ego, the man is texting while driving, paying little attention to the road and can't remember if the path home follows I-10 East or I-10 West. Because otherwise, ugggh. Otherwise, this story might need to come with its very own barf bag. And Warner knows it.

"Kurt is a terrible driver. He thinks he has to pass every car he can see. He got away with it in St. Louis. He'd sign an autograph and be on his way. But here, with those speed cameras, let's just put it this way: He's had to revisit traffic school." - Brenda Warner

The Arizona Cardinals have just lost to the Minnesota Vikings 35-14 and Kurt Warner is limping. His throwing hand is wrapped in so much ice that it looks as if the quarterback has a massive club screwed into the end of his right elbow.

His body is bruised. His ego is battered. He wants nothing more than to get home to his seven kids, who range in age from 3 to 19. They don't like football, they won't know the score. But Warner can't leave University of Phoenix Stadium until he visits 30 guests from the Sunshine Acres Foster Home waiting for him in a stale white room across the hall from the Cardinals' locker room.

A half hour after the game ends, the quarterback walks into the room, sits down and apologizes that he won't be able to sign autographs because of his hand.

"I've been better," he says. "But it is what it is. How are you guys?"

Nobody responds to Warner, so he tries again.

"So who's ready for Christmas?"

Silence.

And that's when it becomes clear. Nobody knows what to say. Not after that game. Not after watching Warner underthrow some receivers, overthrow others and get treated by the Vikings as if he were their own personal tackling dummy. Sure, these kids are his guests, sure it's his foundation that gave them tickets and brought them to this room, to meet No. 13, but they're nervous, insecure and uneasy. They don't want to say the wrong thing. So Warner tries again.

"What's the problem here?" he asks. "You all look like you just lost a football game. You guys tired? Beaten up? You look like I feel. Why is everyone so quiet? Loosen up. Tell me about yourselves."

One boy asks Warner how old he is, a little girl asks what it feels like to get hit. And one of the chaperones, knowing Warner is without a contract for the 2009 seasons, asks how long he plans to play. Brenda interjects, asking for a show of hands as to who thinks her husband should retire. Two hands in the room go up.

Brenda's. And Kurt's.

"If he wants to walk away, that's fine with me," Brenda says. "I love watching him do what he was born to do, but at the same time, it's hard watching a bunch of grown men try to hurt your husband almost every day."

Warner later insists he hasn't made a decision about retirement and that it isn't exactly the right time of year to be reading into his future. Everyone wants to retire in December, he says. But one has to look no further than a hallway in the Warners' house to understand where football ranks.

There, atop a massive black safe in which the home's previous owners used to store valuables, the Pete Rozelle Super Bowl MVP trophy sits tarnished, dusty and covered in fingerprints. A replica of the Vince Lombardi Trophy looks much the same. A bunch of other trophies, commemorating everything from playing in the Pro Bowl to winning NFL Player of the Year honors, are tossed into the glorified box, with the door left open, less on display than just out of the way.

Warner's Super Bowl ring is there, too. For now. It's an ongoing joke in the Warner family -- all the unique places the ring has popped up over the years. Like under the couch, in the pool.

Don't be mistaken. The man likes to win. Perhaps no one has been more irritated by the Cardinals' disappointing losses to Minnesota and New England in the past two weeks than Warner, who appeared visibly frustrated on the sideline during both games. Yet, his eyes are set on a bigger picture.

"People think that whatever happens on the football field should define me way one or the other," Warner says. "A lot of people say I can't believe you don't think more highly of yourself, two-time MVP, Super Bowl MVP, but it's like whatever ... It just happens to be what I do. I want to be defined by what I believe in, by who I am."

It explains how Warner can at least temporarily set aside the loss to Minnesota and be "on" for the kids from Sunny Acres. It explains why, before Warner leaves, he will rip the bandage off his right hand, push the bags of ice to the side, grab a marker and do exactly what he said he couldn't do: sign autographs. There will be smiles. There will be laughter. There will be pictures. And of course, there will be prayer.

"People think he's perfect, but as a dad, he's completely ignorant to everything a teenage girl is going through. He doesn't know how to deal with my fights with my boyfriend or any of my teenage issues or anything like that. Then he tells me I'm just a 16-year-old girl and I don't understand. He just demeans me as a stereotypical teenager. I can't stand that." - Jesse Warner, 16

Nine-year-old Isaiah Acosta wants nothing more than to speak, nothing more than to put into words what Kurt Warner means to him. But he can't. Isaiah is one of a handful of children in the United States who was born without a mandible. His chin is deformed, he breathes through a tracheotomy tube and spends much of his time attached to his mom, using her as human security blanket.



Mark Rebilas for ESPN.com

Isaiah Acosta's life was forever changed when he met Warner.

special-needs football clinic or a scholarship for a mission trip. Maybe it was a fresh start in what was once a flood-ravaged section of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Warner's hometown, or new winter coats for a struggling single mother and her three children in St. Louis. There are thousands of Isaiahs out there, people convinced that when Warner smiles, he's smiling at them. People who ask Warner for an autograph, expecting he'll always say yes.

"We have a rule that he doesn't sign autographs when we're out for dinner with the kids," Brenda said. "But sometimes, it's easier just to sign and smile than to say no 100 times. It's a blessing that God has put us in a position where someone wants a signature from us, but it's a burden that we constantly have to share our time with everyone else."

Just walk into Isaiah's home, see the boy look for Warner and then stomp his feet when he realizes the quarterback isn't coming and you get it. Being Kurt Warner comes with expectations. And every time he says yes or helps another family, the bar is raised.

"Sure, there are times where there's pressure that comes with all of this," Warner said. "But if there's any kind of pressure you want to be under, it's people expecting you to be a person of character."

Yet a couple years ago, when Isaiah joined Warner and his family on a trip to Disney World, he left his mom behind. For the first time, he let go of her hand and ran off, spending sunrise to sunset with the man he knew as Kurt. Together, they rode the rides, watched the shows, and when Isaiah had an accident, there was Warner, picking up the boy, whisking him to a souvenir store, slapping down his credit card and buying a pair of Mickey Mouse underwear so fast the kid barely knew what happened.

A few months later, back in Arizona, Warner surprised Isaiah by showing up at Chuck E. Cheese's for his eighth birthday. If you press Isaiah to talk about Warner, ask about the autographed jerseys, the overstuffed photo albums or the fact he makes his mom snap a picture of Warner every time they see the quarterback on television, the boy pulls out his computerized voice box and sums it up: "I like Kurt Warner. He is my hero."

Isaiah is just one child. His story is just one of thousands out there from people whom Warner and his First Things First Foundation have touched. Maybe it was through a trip to Disney World, maybe it was a newly furnished home, a

"The missing piece in this whole thing of me serving and giving back is that the reward is so much greater for me than it is for any of the people I've impacted. The perspective it gives me, the feeling it gives me inside when I know I'm doing what God called me here to do ... that's when I feel most alive."

"Kurt has absolutely no skills as a handyman. He tried to build a desk at the foundation once and we ended up with a crooked desk and a bag full of leftover pieces. And you know what he said? He told us they always give you extra parts. Umm, no Kurt. They don't." - **Marci Pritts, Executive Director, First Things First Foundation**



Mark Rebilas for ESPN.com

Warner takes his faith with him everywhere he goes, including on the football field.

Warner has one hand on the steering wheel and the other buried in a carton of french fries when the conversation turns to how he's perceived. He knows what some people think -- that he's a do-no-wrong perfectionist who doesn't curse, doesn't drink and lives this straight-laced, holier-than-thou life.

And in a way, he understands. That's what happens when you talk about Jesus, mention God or explain your selfless ways by professing your faith. That's what happens when you pass out football cards that in bold, red letters proclaim: "Read The Bible -- Attend Church -- Pray to God -- Tell Others About Jesus." And that's what happens when, after winning the Super Bowl MVP award, you stand on the biggest stage of your life and begin a postgame interview by saying, "First things first, I've got to thank my Lord and Savior above."

June 20, 1996. That's the day the football cards that Warner hands out say he was "born again." Warner grew up in a religious family, but not until he met Brenda in college at the University of Northern Iowa, not until a couple of his Iowa Barnstormers teammates and she started pressing Warner on his beliefs, did he truly dig into the Bible searching for answers. What he discovered was a whole new life.

"Now he's reading that we shouldn't have premarital sex, we shouldn't drink in excess or be drunk," Brenda Warner said. "He's finding all these things and calling me on it. So we had to make changes. He wanted to get our lives right. He decided no sex for the year until we were married. Who does that? Who goes back? But he found that in the Bible and wanted to live that way.

"He made the decision that if he was going to do this, it would be all the way, it wouldn't be pick and choose like I was doing."

Since then, Kurt Warner has never wavered, building a reputation as arguably the most high-profile Christian in professional football. Sure there are others who share his beliefs and his desire to help others, but few with the platform of a two-time NFL MVP.

"I don't think anyone has a bad perception of me," Warner said. "Just a limited one. Everyone thinks I pretty much sit around and talk about Jesus all the time. But I'm normal. I'm just a guy. Yeah, I love Jesus and do things a bit different, but I have the same conversations and the share the same thoughts as anyone else."

Former Arizona teammate Josh McCown, now a quarterback with the Carolina Panthers, believes NFL players are split almost down the middle when it comes to Warner. There are players like McCown and Cardinals receiver and close friend Larry Fitzgerald who look up to Warner and are amazed by his faith-driven selfless ways. And there are others who simply aren't comfortable around the quarterback.

"I've heard it all," McCown said. "Holy Roller, Bible thumper. And then there are the guys who don't want to be around him because they feel like he's judging them, which is hilarious because people will say that and Kurt's never said a word to them. There are even fellow Christians who roll their eyes because it bothers them."

Said Warner: "I think a lot of times where people see they're insufficient or lacking in certain areas they feel they're being judged even when they're not. And they condemn themselves more than anyone else does. But that's part of it. That's part of this stigma, this preconceived idea of who I am."

This past summer, Warner invited his Cardinals teammates and their families to his home for a day of swimming and eating. Barely anyone showed up. Warner believes the perception, still after all these years, was partly to blame.

"When I asked Larry [Fitzgerald] what happened, he told me that everyone is afraid to come over because they don't know if I'm going to stand up on a podium and preach to them," Warner said. "They just think I'm going to jump up and down and introduce them to Jesus. But that's crazy. And the people who know me realize that's not who I am."

The poor turnout disappointed Warner, Brenda said. "We try to keep it normal so that people don't think we're a bunch of weirdos, but that perception is out there," she added. "We fight it every day."

He fights it in the locker room, where some teammates don't feel comfortable around Warner and giggle like little kids on rare occasions when he curses. They fight it in the marketing world, where Warner's agent struggles to find endorsement opportunities for a potential Hall of Fame quarterback with a pristine off-the-field résumé. And they fight it in the media, where Warner tries to walk the line of getting his message out to the public without alienating fans.



Mark Rebilas for ESPN.com

Moments of rest are few and far between in the chaotic Warner household.

During a visit to the "Oprah Winfrey Show" to honor Masters champion and fellow lowan Zach Johnson a couple of years ago, Warner purposely mentioned Johnson's faith in the second of three sentences, believing the show's editors wouldn't be able to cut the sentence and eliminate the religious reference. But when the show ran, the second sentence was gone.

"Anytime you mention Jesus or faith, people are turned off," Warner said. "I think it scares a lot of people."

McCown and Fitzgerald insist that Warner is a normal guy who talks about normal things, like sex. During an intense game or practice, it isn't unusual, they said, for Warner to unleash a "God damn" or a "Jesus Christ." And they said they've never seen the quarterback openly preach to a teammate in the locker room.

"He's a devout Christian, but it isn't like he forces it on anybody," Fitzgerald said.

McCown believes Warner has changed since St. Louis. "He's learning to share his faith without having to talk about it as much," McCown said. "Instead, he leads by example."

Warner said he leads by carrying his Bible with him to every news conference. He leads by being one of the hardest workers on the team. And he leads by treating every single person -- a first-round quarterback or Brenda's ex-husband -- with respect.

"Who does that?" Brenda said. "Who's friendly to their wife's ex-husband ... He is."

To Warner, that's his way of preaching.

"By understanding what my priorities are and never wavering, that's how you influence people," Warner said. "It isn't standing on my chair with a Bible and yelling out scripture or condemning people for being sinners. It's about living your life with a certain sense of excellence. And when people start to scratch their heads and wonder what it is that makes me different, that's when I tell them the answer is Jesus. And then I let him do the hard work."

"When Kurt's upset with you, he's not somebody you want to be around. I try to get as far from him as I can. And he'll still find me on the practice field and absolutely chew me out. He's not going to mince words. He's going to be brutally honest, whether it's something you want to hear or not." - **Larry Fitzgerald**



Mark Rebilas for ESPN.com

Warner wasn't content just to go through the motions while helping Riverbend Prep with its new playground.

Rain is pelting the windows of Riverbend Preparatory Academy in Phoenix as a representative from Home Depot briefs Kurt Warner on what he needs to do to help finish the school's new playground. The answer: not much.

Just go outside, pitch in for a few minutes and then you can get out of the rain, sign a few autographs and shake a few hands, the woman tells him. But Warner isn't having it.

"Look," he says. "I'm here to work."

The woman apologizes. "Most guys, you know, on a day like today, wouldn't want to get their hair wet."

Warner, of course, isn't like most guys. He, his wife, his family, his teammates, they've spent the past four days insisting he's normal. They helped compile a list of all the things that make Warner flawed and human, like everyone else.

Warner himself points out that he sings "American Idol" on the Wii with his kids. He listens to hip-hop in the locker room. One Thanksgiving a few years ago, he says, a group of teammates taught him how to dance to the hip-hop song, "Walk It Out."

And he can never escape the everyday roller coaster of being a father of seven. There's the fourth-grader who hasn't turned in his past three book reports, the 16-year-old who just found out she got accepted into NYU and the 3-year-old who is tugging on his pants begging for money to stuff into her change purse.

Yet every time the Warners go out to eat, they ask their kids to select one family in the restaurant to anonymously buy dinner for. They ask their kids to tell them the eye color of any guests to their home, making sure that they've made eye contact when introducing themselves. There are 38 pictures of the Warner kids that cover the walls of the family home gym. Warner won't go on an extended vacation with Brenda because he can't stand to leave his kids for more than a couple of days.

And then there are those 106 overstuffed Christmas stockings lining the entryway to the Warners' home, filled with socks, toothbrushes, lotions, Tic Tacs, chewing gum and \$150 gift cards.

No matter how much people argue, Warner is not your usual guy. Not in the era of me-first, fan-last athletes. Not with guys like Adam "Pacman" Jones, Terrell Owens and Plaxico Burress roaming around.

So why do some people shake their heads when they hear about the good things Warner does for others? Why does the hair on their necks stand up?



Mark Rebilas for ESPN.com

The kids at Riverbend Prep appreciated the work Warner and others put into building their new playground.

to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

But for Warner, this fairy-tale story of grocery boy to Arena League quarterback to NFL star has always been about so much more -- whether you've ever realized it or not.

"It's so hard for people to grasp and understand that it's not about going to the Pro Bowl or winning an MVP," Warner said. "It's about trying to do something that impacts the people around you. And that's what I try to do every single day is have an impact on everyone around me.

"So if and when I'm done and you ask someone about Kurt Warner and the first thing they mention is the kind of person I was, that's when I'll be happy."

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"I think a lot of people relate to athletes who make bad choices because it brings the athlete down to their level," McCown said. "It helps them feel good about who they are and what they're doing.

"On the other side, when you hear the stories about Kurt, here is someone squeezing the most they can out of their life. And at the end of the day, that causes all of us to look in the mirror. And I think sometimes we don't like what that mirror looks like. So it's easier to rip on the things Kurt does than change yourself."

Whatever the explanation, someday soon, Warner will retire. You'll hear about the touchdown passes, completion percentages and questions about whether he will be elected