

First Things First

Kurt Warner, NFL Network & First Things First Foundation

Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay

Lindsay: Would you mind sharing a little bit about your background, where you came from and some of the things that you learned about character and leadership along the way?

Warner: I came from a town in Iowa, and if you go back to my upbringing, there is just something about the Midwest. There is something about the values of the Midwest – hard work, earning everything you get, doing things the right way, respecting the people around you, and respecting your father and mother. Some of the fundamental values that I think are integrated into the Midwest is where my foundation really started. Obviously, I had the dream to be a professional athlete from the time I was very young. It was just something that I chased and using those values, character you might say that I developed in my upbringing, I went full force to chase after my dream. It wasn't always smooth. I was like a lot of guys that through high school, everything was great and it looked like there was a possible path to play professional football. Once I got out of high school though, everything kind of went haywire. Only one scholarship offer. I went to college and sat on the bench for four years. Finally, I got to play my fifth year and was able to turn it into an opportunity as a free agent with the Green Bay Packers. However, I got cut by the Packers. Then I spent a couple of years trying to figure out where else I could play. Nobody seemed to want me. That was during the time that I ended up stocking shelves at a grocery store just trying to make ends meet. I was hoping another opportunity would come along.

I played Arena Football and played in Europe for the National Football League before finally getting another opportunity when I was 27 years old with the Saint Louis Rams. From there, it kind of took off and as they say, the rest is history...going to 3 Super Bowls, winning a Super Bowl Championship, winning a couple of MVPs, before retiring from a 12 year NFL career.

Kurt Warner is a National Football League (NFL) Hall of Fame (2017) quarterback, who spent 12 years with the St. Louis Rams, New York Giants, and the Arizona Cardinals. He had great success on the field with multiple NFL MVP awards, two Super Bowl trips, and as a Super Bowl Champion and MVP. He had a unique path to the NFL with time spent in the Arena Football League and NFL Europe after being initially cut by the Green Bay Packers. He now spends his time as an analyst for Fox Sports and leading the First Things First Foundation.

Up to that point, it was some ups and downs and ins and outs, but I think there were so many things that I learned during that time. I think our experiences often times, show you who you really are. Or they go a long way in refining who you want to be and how you want to carry yourself and the character by which you want people to see you. You start to understand the values that you think you have. You start to understand whether those are true to who you are or those were things that just sounded really good when things were easier and going your way. When the rubber hits the road a little bit and you start going through trials, struggles, and challenges, is that who you really are? I think that's one of the things that when we go through the trials, struggles and challenges, we really find out who we are and we get a chance to examine ourselves and figure out if this is who I want to be? Regardless of what happens. Regardless of where I end up. Regardless of whether I end up playing in the NFL or not. Those experiences and challenges really refined the person that I was so when I finally did get to the NFL, I was the person that I wanted to be. I was able to carry myself, on that platform and in that spotlight, in the way that I wanted to carry myself. I'm not sure without some of those trials and struggles and searching, I would have been the same guy. I think it's easy to look back and go, "yeah, I would have been and it would have been great if I had seven, eight, or nine more years," but I don't think we really know that until we go through certain things and we come to a true understanding of what life is all about. How we want to carry ourselves and what kind of leader we want to be.

So, even though it wasn't perfect and it wasn't smooth, or it wasn't exactly how I dreamed it when I was younger, I'm very grateful for the path that I took because I think it made me into the person I wanted to be when I finally got there. I'm not sure everyone gets that opportunity and I think you see people go in different directions. Or maybe never make it to begin with, because they didn't have some of those things that really strengthened who they were and the resolve

that they had. To be able to really fine-tuned their values and things that they could use to ultimately have success in the field that they are in.

Lindsay: Do you have an example of a time that you were tested or an event where you said, that was a defining moment for me in terms of not just espousing those values, but an opportunity for you to live what you believed?

Warner: I think an easy one for people to relate to is going from an NFL training camp to working nights in a grocery store stocking shelves. Being on the precipice of achieving your dreams and goals to finding yourself in a place you never thought you would be. Struggling day after day and questioning everything. I think that was a great opportunity for me to really find out what I was made of. I think the first part is that it is so easy in life to blame our circumstances or blame other things for why we are in a particular place or why we can't achieve our dreams. I think it would have been very easy to find myself in a grocery store and just sit there and go, the reason I am here is because so-and-so couldn't see my talent. Or so-and-so didn't give me a chance to play in college until my fifth year and kind of pawn that off on a lot of other circumstances.

I think a couple of things that period of time did was first of all, this idea of hard work that I think we throw around so often. I just tweeted something the other day about how I can't remember the last time I asked someone if they were a hard worker and they told me no. We all think we are hard workers. We all think that we do so much to achieve what we want. I oftentimes think people don't really understand what hard work is. They understand what somebody else might think it is or what somebody else thinks it looks like, but most people don't really understand it. To me, hard work is not just working hard, it is understanding what kind of work I need to do to become better at whatever it is that I am chasing after. That to me, is what hard work is. It is taking those things that I am

not good at, those things you have to self-reflect and go, okay, where do I need improvement even though I am not good at it now.

Unfortunately, nobody wants to do those things. People want to take the things that they do well, and then they want to do them a lot and say that is hard work. I'm putting in a whole bunch of time to the things that I enjoy doing. That, to me, isn't hard work. Hard work is finding yourself in a place where you have to do things that you don't want to do. Things that aren't fun, but have a reward at the end of them that gets you closer to who you want to be, where you want be, or what you want to accomplish. I think that period of time when I was working in the grocery store gave me a place to really self-reflect on who am I as a player. Where are my weaknesses? What do I need to do if I really ultimately want to achieve that dream? Oftentimes, if things go your way, you never really self-reflect. You kind of stay in this mode like, okay,

I'm fine, I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing as opposed to truly refining yourself to become better. So, I think it gave me a chance to self-reflect and look back on why I didn't play in college. Why did I get cut from the Green Bay Packers? How in the world do I go from here to actually achieving my dream? To do that, sometimes you really have to look closely at who you really are. What are your skills? What are your deficiencies? So, it allowed me to do that. I really think it helped shape my hard work.

Growing up, I was in all kinds of sports. I'll use my brother as an example. My brother wasn't really into sports and never made the sports teams. So, he worked all through high school. He's going to school and he's working a job and has that responsibility. I never had

that. I did sports, but it was stuff that I enjoyed. It wasn't stuff that I was doing because I needed to do it. I didn't need to do it for gas in my car or buy cleats so I could play football. I was fortunate to do what I loved to do. I was playing sports so I didn't ever have to get a job. So, it was really the first time where I really had to weigh everything. How do I continue to prepare for football while also working a job?

At the time, I was dating my eventual wife who had two kids and she was going to school. I was watching the kids during the day and at night I was working and somewhere in between I made time to work out. I would sleep for a few hours and then do it all over

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again. I just really got to understand what hard work looked like...what sacrifice looked like...because I don't think most of us really understand that until we find ourselves in a place where you are stretched in every direction. I think that time when I was working in a grocery store really allowed me to do those two things. You have worked hard and you have worked hard on the football field, and is that who you really are? Is that work and that hard work that you have always claimed, does that hold true in every circumstance? Is that through and through who you are? I think that period of time really helped me see where I wasn't a hard worker and where some of that stuff that was instilled in me, or that maybe I applied in sports, was taken to a new degree and really came to define who I was as a person. That was something that I carried with me

as I went through my NFL career, as a father of seven, and with the things that I do now. I really think that shaped the work ethic in me.

One of the aspects of character that I always want to have is the ability to scrutinize who I am. Whether that is to scrutinize how I played on a particular Sunday even if everyone in the media said I played great. Can I sit back and truly be honest with myself on who am I, why did I do this, and how can I be better? What little things that I could easily kind of hide and not talk about and kind of cover up that I notice about myself that I want to improve on so I can be more well-rounded... that I can be better...that I can speak to more people and more circumstances and really impact the lives of other people through finding those things in my life that I need improvement on? So, I think those are two things that through that period of time, two character traits that I was able to put under a microscope and fine tune that would ultimately become foundational pieces for who I wanted to be, what I would accomplish, and the kind of husband/father/football player/whatever it may be, that I would become later on in life.

Lindsay: One of the things that I heard you keep coming back to was that idea of ownership. Often, we see people with an opportunity and when struggle or adversity hits them, they can go one of two ways. They can embrace a negative narrative, which is like what you alluded to of why is this happening to me? But what you talked about is taking ownership of the situation and sitting there processing the questions of what is my role and what is my response to that? Then, owning that for your own development in order to use that as an opportunity to shine light on those areas that you may not have thought about developing before.

Warner: Yes. I think there are a couple of things in there. The first thing, and we try to share that with our kids all the time, is that that life is not fair. That is the first part of it. We always go in to life or circumstances thinking that everything should be fair.

Everyone should be on equal ground and everyone should have equal opportunity. I think what you come to realize pretty early in life is that life is not fair. It can be extended to so many different things from the house that you are born into, the circumstances that you are born into, the struggles you may face growing up, or something that you want doesn't play out in your direction. But, life is not fair. Something that we try to profess in our lives is that we have seen that on both sides. We have seen that in times of struggles and trials, where we could sit back and think, you know what, life is not fair. We have also seen it on the blessing side as well. After everything that we have been through to be where we are at, sometimes I look back and think, "Why me? Why was I chosen to be given all of this and placed in this opportunity?" I look at so many other people that are trying to do the same thing and don't get there and you can say life isn't fair. We are blessed and we need to recognize that. So, I think that is one part of it in understanding that life is not fair. It's not so much the hand you are dealt, but what are you going to do with the hand that you are dealt? Because we often don't have control over the cards that are given to us. But, we do have control over how we use them.

I think the second part is the internal reflection. We live in a world where it is so prevalent for people to look for outside reasons why they are where they are at instead of looking internally and asking what hand did I have in this? Where did I fall short or miss? I think you put those two things together and sometimes it is out of your control. Sometimes it is not about you. But there are other times when it is, at least to some degree, about you. I think you really have to scrutinize every situation and make sure that you are really looking at both sides to be able to determine what you are going to do with that. Is it about my personal improvement or is it simply about taking my cards and turning them into something else? There are two sides to it. I think that, certain things throughout my life, have shown me that I need to consider everything. I need to consider both sides. I need to make sure that whatever side it is, I need

to grab ahold of it and not let it take me out. So easily, I think people sometimes say that life isn't fair and they blame everything that happens in the future on the fact that at that point in time, life wasn't fair. They never look at themselves. They never take ownership. They stay in the path and stay in the fact and say, it has nothing to do with me. I was just dealt a bad hand. I believe that there are ways for us, in the midst of both of those circumstances to get better...to better ourselves...to better our circumstances. Sometimes you can't do it all by yourself but I think starting with that kind of perspective, has always helped me to gravitate to the next things. To hope that tomorrow will be better than today. That was one of those circumstances that allowed me to fine tune the scope that I wanted to have on each and every circumstance that I faced in life.

Lindsay: That echoes one of the things that we teach our cadets at the Academy is to own where you are at and what you do and then you need to engage that situation in order to be better. That is part of our Leader of Character Framework.¹ At the end of the day, you still own where you are...what you do...what you stand for in any given situation. Fair or not. You still have the responsibility of how you respond in that situation. That leads me to another question. When you look back at your NFL career, what would you like people to say about you and how you lived your life in front of millions of people on a daily basis? What would you want people to take away from that period in your life?

Warner: That's a big question. I think with everything, you want people to take a lot of things away. When you look back at the journey, I want people to take away the idea that he never let his circumstances define him. Very similar to what we just talked about. He was dealt some different hands. The circumstances weren't always in his favor, but he never let that define who he was, who he was going to be, and how he carried himself. That could be everything up until I was in

the NFL or while I was in the NFL where I found myself benched three times and cut a couple times and having to resurface. The overarching theme is the idea of perseverance and never letting the circumstances define what he was going to do in his career, but more importantly, who he was going to be as a person.

What I would want them to remember about me is just this idea of character. Everywhere he went, everything we know about him, he was above reproach. You build and you spend so much time trying to allow your values and your character to define who you are. So many people do a great job of that and then through one circumstance, one instance, or one moment they throw that away because they contradict who they have been up until that point. My hope, when it is all said and done, not just my career but my life is that I don't have any of those moments. Character was something that defined me in everything that I did...in every circumstance...in every relationship, that there will never be a time where people can look back and tear apart my character. I want them to see me as a person of character, first and foremost, in all things. They understood who I was, what I stood for and that never wavered no matter what situation I found myself in.

Then, I think the game of football is the ultimate team sport. When it comes to a team sport, or a team in anything, leaders are so important. What is accomplished by that group of people or that team oftentimes is dictated by the leader that they have. I would like people to look at my career and if nothing else, say maybe he didn't throw the ball the best, or maybe he wasn't the greatest player to ever play, but he was a great leader. When he was at a place, they played and achieved at a level above what they have ever achieved before or what they would have achieved without him due to that leadership.

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¹ <https://www.usafa.edu/character/>

and belief of the people around them so they accomplish things that people never thought they could accomplish. If I kind of wanted people to define who I was, because my career has been up and down and weird in a lot of different ways as I found myself in different places and on different teams, if you look back to when I played the game and when I was on the field that all of my teams succeeded at a particular level. I like to believe a lot of that had to do with my ability to lead. Whether that was through the character and values that I had that wore off on other people or if it was my ability to connect with different people in

Warner: Everything that we do with the Foundation has a background in things that we've dealt with or experiences we have found ourselves in. To be at the place we are now, after having gone through some of those things, a lot of what our Foundation does has been shaped around those experiences and trying to help people to work their way through that. So one day they can be in a place similar to where we are at. Everything that we do comes from the kind of people that we want to be. It starts with faith and that is why we named it First Things First. We do believe that we are where we are at now because we keep our faith first.

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Through that, we have been blessed and have an amazing platform. We are blessed to be where we are, but also see it as a tremendous responsibility to make sure that we use it properly. To be able to use those things in our lives that we want to define us: the importance of relationships, perseverance, hard work, belief, letting people know

different ways to push them to a level that they never thought they could get to. Or, simply instilling a belief in a group of people that they never had before. We all know that belief has an unbelievable way of allowing us to achieve things at a level we never thought we could simply by believing that it is possible. I think those things are some of the defining elements that I would want people to say about me, my career, or the person I was when it is all said and done.

that you love them, trying to inspire people to do more and be more than their circumstances say that they may be or people around them say that they can be at a particular time. Who we want to be as people and who we model ourselves as – our Foundation has been an extension of that. It has also been an extension of our lives in what we try to do from a program perspective. For instance, we work with sick children, whether it be the hospital things that we do or the Make a Wish trip that we have. All that stemmed from when our oldest son suffered a traumatic brain injury when he was four months old. So, we understand those struggles and the challenges that can have on a family.

Lindsay: You clearly had success on the football field and now you are having success in other domains like your First Things First Foundation. How has the growth and development that you mentioned before translated into what you are now doing with your Foundation? Could you speak a little about what you are accomplishing through the Foundation?

In those times, you often will need people to come in and help you out and allow you to take a step or take a step with you. Or to forget about some of the struggles for just a few minutes and enjoy your family. A lot of

our programs have been designed around that part of it. When I met my wife, she was a single mother of two. After we were married, we bounced around from one apartment to another and we will never forget when we got the opportunity to own our first home and what that meant for us as parents, our kids, and our family to have a place we could build around and a sense of accomplishment and pride that carried us to another level. So, we do a program that was adopted from Warrick Dunn, called Homes for the Holidays, where we help single parents obtain home ownership for the first time with help from organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. It helps them take that step and then move forward to a new place in life. So, that is kind of how our Foundation started and developed by taking the character and values that we believe are so important and applying them to programs that have directly impacted our lives over the years. We combine those things and try to leave a lasting legacy on people's lives.

Lindsay: It sounds like that is a family endeavor for you all.

Warner: All of our kids are involved heavily in all of the programs that we do. That is very important to us as well because how Brenda and I grew up and what we went through is so different from what our kids have gone through. The situation that we are in now, and as blessed as we are, they will probably never have some of the struggles that Brenda and I had. So, one thing that is important to us is that they see what is important to us and for them to understand those values. A big part of living life and being a part of a community or team is being able to take your eyes off of yourself and focus on other people. That has always been something that we have instilled in our children. So, everything that we do is family oriented within our Foundation to make sure that our kids understand that and they see that in action. They are aware that even though the worst thing in their lives may be something minute, there are

people that are struggling on a daily basis and we are called to help them in any way that we can.

Lindsay: That is quite the commitment. With that in mind, what does the future look like for you? What would you like to do and how will you continue to impact people?

Warner: I'm still trying to figure that out but there are definitely some things that I want to do. I've been fortunate to turn my on field career into an off field career. But I think, when you look at the big picture and look through that long lens of the future of what you want to do in the next 30 to 40 years, I think there are a couple of definitive things. I want to continue to impact the world. I'm always looking for opportunities that would allow me to do that in bigger ways. I want to change the world bigger than I am able to right now. To give you an idea of one example, some partners and I started Elite Sports India. It is a league in India, like the NCAA of America. We started and developed this with the idea of how sports in our country have impacted the lives and the direction of families in an incredible way. We are taking sports into India in hopes of creating a model to help those in poverty and to help transform people through sports so lives are changed and we have an impact on that country in a positive way. Families are positively impacted for the long term. Those are the kind of things that I have visions for. How can I be as far reaching and impactful as possible in the next 40 years?

I think the other part of it is making sure that I really use my position to impact the lives of my family whether that be my seven kids or my grandkids. A big part of our legacy is what we leave behind and how those that we have impacted go on to impact others. The other part of it is making sure that I can feed into the lives of my family, my kids, and my grandkids. How can I help them to move on and impact the world in powerful ways in whatever direction that they go?

Those are the two things that really jump out. I think the bigger picture for me is to spend the rest of my life impacting the lives of others with the hope that they can pay it forward and impact others to continue to make the world a better place.

Lindsay: That's a great vision building on the substantial work you have already done. In thinking about the idea of legacy and impacting the future, at the Air Force Academy we are developing the next generation of military leaders. What advice would you have for them as they are at the beginning of their careers?

Warner: That's another big question. I think one thing that has become really important to me in everything that I have done is the ability to, in every circumstance, see two sides. The first side is what do I need to do, what do I need to accomplish, what is my goal in this? How can I be great at what I am getting into? That is always one side of it. Everything that I do, I want to be great at it. I want to make sure that I can define what that looks like and how I can do that and make sure I follow that course. But, I also believe in every circumstance that we need to get outside of ourselves and ask, in this, how also can I impact people or impact people around me? How can I leave a legacy within this that isn't simply just about me? That would be my encouragement to any young person that is trying to define what their life is going to look like. In this moment or circumstance, what is that going to mean and to make sure you look at it from both lenses. I think too many people get stuck simply only looking at themselves and looking at what I want to do and I want to be great and they get self-absorbed and they miss sight of the opportunity to truly impact the world around them. To truly look at the opportunity in a team or group setting. I think you see that in our world all the time. Sometimes, you shake your head and ask where are we going as a culture? I think it is too often because people simply look at themselves. They want

to start a business and want to know what will they get out of it? They get involved in something and only ask what can I get out of it? They want to get into the NFL and know how they can accomplish their goals instead of being able to see both sides. The reality is that I can have my goals and I can have my things and I can be great in what I do, but I also need to make sure that in all of that, I am looking at a bigger picture and realizing that the bottom line is that my success must lead to other people's success. It needs to lead to bigger success. It needs to lead to cultural change. It doesn't need to be worldwide. It can be in my household or my small business or my team. I would just encourage them to go into everything and not just set personal goals but also team goals or cultural goals. Be able to make sure that their eyes aren't just stuck on themselves. Success doesn't just look like them accomplishing what they want to accomplish personally. It is about accomplishing something that is bigger than you and leaving that as you legacy.