

first things first
{ Kurt & Brenda Warner }
with JENNIFER SCHUCHMANN



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois



the rules
of being a
Warner



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First Things First: The Rules of Being a Warner

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Dave Lindstedt

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*To our parents, who gave us passion,
our siblings, who gave us strength,
and our children, who give us purpose,
we dedicate this book to you.
Thank you for loving us.*

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FOREWORD

To many people, Kurt Warner is associated with his amazing quarterbacking abilities and his performances on the football field. He's known in the world of sports as an icon of excellence and talent. However, many more people, including me, know him and my mom, Brenda, in a totally different way. They are not only famous in the eyes of sports fans everywhere; they are also known for their incredible capacity to change lives. I don't know anything about football. I don't have to, though, to know that my parents are great.

This book has a lot to do with the other side of things: what goes on in their lives outside the realm of professional sports. There is a lot to be said about their charity work and their calling in life. But take it from me, their teenage daughter: There is a lot to be said about their normalcy as well. People in the spotlight often are unfairly credited with perfection when in reality, they're as normal as everyone else! Our living room is flooded with toys, and odds are, one of the twins didn't flush the toilet. I've wiped one little brother's

vomit off another little brother; and my dad, as he will mention, is a pro at cleaning poop off any surface. We argue, we disagree, and we love each other, just like any other family. We're normal. That is something a lot of people have a hard time believing.

There are many areas in which my parents do not excel, including their rules about boyfriends and curfews, but no one asked me! They have, however, successfully ingrained in their children's hearts countless important lessons. I'm grateful to have been raised in a household where there is so much love. I don't always see eye to eye with my parents, but now that I'm getting ready to leave the nest and head to college, more is becoming clear about why they've done what they've done.

My parents have rules that were created to protect us, but they also have invested time in teaching us how to be independent, to love people actively, and to lead lives of excellence. My mom always emphasizes that we are self-sufficient, and she has, with a motherly sternness, taught us to stand on our own. I'm especially thankful for this now that I'm leaving, because I can take what she's taught me and confidently fend for myself at school in New York City. At the same time, my parents have exhibited what it means to love the people around us. We have had the amazing opportunity to spend our Christmases at orphanages and our Thanksgivings at local food shelters to serve God through serving his people. These opportunities have given us perspectives that we will carry for the rest of our lives and—I hope—elaborate on. My father has done an exceptional job of teaching his children to

foreword

lead lives of honor and excellence, and he has done so mostly through example. He doesn't need to tell my brothers how to treat their wives when they grow up, because they've already seen firsthand how to do it with excellence.

What I would like readers to take away from this book is not the attitude that Kurt and Brenda Warner are perfect but that they are real, normal people who have experienced a lot and have a lot to say. They love God, each other, their kids, and the people God has sent them to reach. They stand for excellence and God's love, and they have amazing stories to tell.

—*Jesse Warner*

PROLOGUE

{ KURT'S INTRODUCTION }

I knew it was important to get it right the first time—there wouldn't be any second chances. I didn't have the control I would like to have had in this situation; there wasn't much time left, and I couldn't call an audible. I had to trust that those who had laid out the game plan knew what they were doing. We were all professionals, yet I was the one who had to make it happen.

It was a bright Sunday afternoon, and I stood in the middle of the green Astroturf. I hadn't properly warmed up. In fact, I hadn't expected anything to go like it had gone. I remember lots of shouting. I got the ball in my hands, but there was no chance to get rid of it. I dropped to my knees and then collapsed to the ground, vowing to hang on to the ball no matter how hard I was hit.

The biggest one got me first, his arm grinding into my back. I tried to support myself on my elbows as the bodies dove on top of me—a second, a third. My shoulders burned from the pain, and the blood rushed to my head.

People yelled from every direction. There was confusion and chaos. As I lifted my head, more bodies—a fourth, and then a fifth—piled on. Someone stepped on my calf. I wanted to scream, but I knew a camera was aimed at me, and I didn't want anyone to see my pain. I didn't say a word. My training had conditioned me to absorb the worst pain imaginable and never give my opponent the satisfaction of seeing me react.

From the corner of my eye, I saw two different-colored jerseys pile on. My shoulders gave a little from the weight. By my count, I now had seven bodies smothering my back.

Stay focused, stay focused. This must be what it feels like to be buried alive.

I struggled to keep the ball from squirting out from the pile. Someone's chin pounded my head, and I prayed that it would be over soon. I wasn't sure how much longer I could take it. I held my breath.

"Hold it . . . hold it . . . don't move!" the photographer shouted above the noise of the kids. "I got it! We're good to go."

As the kids climbed off me and the photographer concluded the photo session for the cover of this book, I thought about how badly I want you to know the *real* Kurt and Brenda Warner. I want you to see the off-the-wall things we say to each other and the way we parent our kids. Despite the craziness that goes on around us sometimes—like a photo shoot in our backyard—we're just real people.

The things we say often surprise people. For instance, we talk about sex. When I'm traveling, I'll say, "I can't wait to get home to be with my wife. It's been too long!" When people who know about my Christian faith hear me say things like

that, it can shock them. “You can’t talk about sex,” they say. Or, even better, “You enjoy sex?” Sure I can, and yes, I do. I’m a married man who loves his wife, and sex is a very important part of our marriage.

But other things are important too. Like who gets up with the kids when we both want to sleep in, who pays the bills, and who cleans up when company comes over. We’ve created some rules in our family that we all try to live by, and so many people have asked about them that we thought a book would be the best way to share them.

I’ve asked Brenda to join me in writing this book. She has an amazing story of her own, and someday I hope she’ll tell more of it than this book allows. But you need to know the basics of her story, because it’s an important part of our story. I also want you to hear directly from her how we run our house, parent our kids, and love each other.

What you’ll see is that we don’t always agree—even on the rules we set for ourselves—but one thing we can agree on is that we love each other, we love our kids, and we love Jesus.

{ **BRENDA’S INTRODUCTION** }

I’m a storyteller. And as the wife of an NFL player and the mother of seven kids, I have lots of stories to tell. One day, I hope to tell them in my own book. But after the *New York Times* printed an article about the rules we use to train our kids, we had so many inquiries that we felt it was the right time to write a book that explained more about our marriage and our parenting philosophy—not because we have all the answers, but because so many people have been interested.

Like everybody else, we're just trying to figure it out as we go along, but some of what we said made people want to know more. So that's how this book started, as a way for us to share a few stories about what's worked for us.

For example, here's a story that illustrates how the football side of our lives and the day-to-day part come together. It was right after Kurt won his first Super Bowl, so it must have been sometime in 2000. He received an award for being "Man of the Year." All week long I asked him, "What have you done to be Man of the Year?" That was before we started our foundation or were active in the community, so I was like, "Seriously, Man of the Year? What makes *you* Man of the Year?"

"I won a Super Bowl?"

Kurt will tell you that even *he* couldn't come up with a good argument. But he wasn't going to turn it down. It became a joke for us.

So, we're getting ready to go to the event. Kurt threw on his tux, because that's all he had to do. I mean, he wakes up in the morning looking stunning. I was standing in the bathroom, trying to keep my belly roll inside my Spanx while putting on makeup, when I heard Kurt from down the hall.

"I smell poop."

Our son Kade was just a toddler at the time, and we both knew what had happened—he'd taken off his diaper.

I heard Kurt looking for him. "Kade. Kade! Where are you?" Then I heard, "Oh, no! You won't believe what Kade's done."

"What?" I yelled as I squeezed into my evening gown.

"He's finger painted all over the glass door. With poop."

prologue

So I yelled back, “What makes you Man of the Year?”

And he said, “I’ll get it.”

That’s the kind of stuff that goes on all the time in our house. We know we’re at home cleaning poop off the glass, but all the public sees is “Man of the Year.”

We have a great marriage, but it’s not perfect. We still argue. Last week we had a huge blowup over jealousy. We’re eleven years into our marriage, and sixteen years together, and these things still happen. But we’re still together.

There have been ups and downs—good times and bad times in the Warner house over the past few years—and we think we’ve learned a few things through that process. That’s what this book is about. We don’t have ten steps to a perfect marriage or six easy ways to parent a teen, but we do have a few rules in our relationship that have worked for our family. Maybe a version of the rules can work for yours.

We don’t want to come across like we have it all together, because we’re still learning. We have our shortcomings and make mistakes just like everyone else. But we have so much fun. We find a lot of humor in each other and in our kids. There are belly laughs in our house every day. And most of all, we really appreciate what we have and what we’ve been given.

That’s because we didn’t always have it.

As you read this book, you’ll see that Kurt starts each chapter from his perspective, and then I give mine. This is intentional. In our marriage, even though Kurt is more famous and makes more money, or whatever, we have equal voices, and we both shape our relationship and our parenting.

first things first

The first part of the book summarizes our story. Our past holds an important influence over who we are and how we parent. A lot's been said about our lives, and a lot of it has been wrong. We don't intend for this to be an autobiography; Kurt has already written his, and like I said, I'd still like to write mine someday. But we know that some people haven't heard our story and that there is a lot of misinformation out there, so in the first part of the book we just want to set the record straight.

Starting in chapter 4, we'll share the rules we've come up with to hold everything together. You'll join us for a day in the life of the Warners. With seven kids, our house is never boring. And when you take kids on the road, well, crazy things can happen—like the time Zack told Fergie of the Black Eyed Peas, “You stink. You stink.” We'll also talk about our marriage and our relationship—the good, the bad, the belly rolls, and the belly laughs. We hope you'll find a few rules that will work for your own family and marriage.

In the last chapter, we summarize with some parting thoughts on what the rules really mean to us. We don't have all the answers, but we've found some things that work. We hope you will too.

football Warner style

{ KURT }

Stupid! You're so stupid! You just lost your team the Super Bowl!

With less than eighteen seconds remaining in the second quarter, I'd just thrown the pass that I thought would give us the lead in Super Bowl XLIII. But as soon as the ball left my hand, my stomach hit the ground. Defensive Player of the Year James Harrison emerged from behind the helmets. I watched in horror as the ball hit him right between the numbers.

Screened by a blitzing player and my offensive linemen, I hadn't seen Harrison in the passing lane. What I thought would be a Cardinals touchdown turned into a mad scramble to stop Harrison from scoring at the other end of the field. I did my best to slow him down enough for one of my teammates to tackle him, but as I lay on the turf watching him weave down the field, all I could think of was how stupid I was. Harrison scored the touchdown that gave the Steelers a ten-point halftime lead.

Even at moments like that, I love my job. When I'm on the field, my mind is totally focused there. I don't scan the stands looking for celebrities in attendance. I don't notice the jeers being hurled at me from opposing fans. I don't smile at my kids or wave to my wife during the game. When I'm on the field, I'm locked in. Even after a play like the interception by James Harrison, I was laser focused on finding an opportunity to make up for my mistake.

In the fourth quarter, I got that opportunity. Down 20-7, we knew if we wanted to make a comeback, we would have to open up our offense and throw the ball. For as long as I can remember, those are the times when I've been the most comfortable on the football field—with the ball in my hands, taking charge and dictating the tempo of the game.

Our offense had started clicking in the second half. We had scored once and had gotten a safety, forcing the Steelers up against the ropes. With three minutes remaining in the game, we were down by just four points. We had the ball and the momentum. Now was our chance.

We stayed in the spread offense. My plan was to get the ball to Larry Fitzgerald or Anquan Boldin, placing our fate in the hands of two of our best players and allowing them to make plays. The Steelers knew they were having trouble stopping us and had chosen to play a two-man coverage. So, against the league's best defense and one of the most difficult coverages to throw against, I called my favorite play to attack them.

As I took the snap and scanned the field, I knew the odds were good that Larry or Anquan would be open. My first read

on the play was to Larry, and I saw that he had gotten a great jump at the snap and had separated from his defender. He caught the ball in the open field and ran sixty-four yards into the end zone.

With 2:37 left to go in the Super Bowl, we had just taken the lead. It was the first time I allowed myself to think, *We just might be the World Champions!*

Of course, we all know what happened. The Steelers came back with less than a minute on the clock, preventing us from achieving the first Cardinals championship in franchise history.

After eleven years in the NFL, I think I finally have the proper perspective on winning and losing. Losing still stinks. But what happens on the field—whether it's the highest of highs or the lowest of lows—doesn't define me as a person.

Most people think that the stories I'll tell after a Super Bowl will be like the one above—a game-changing moment of threading a great pass through a field of defensive players to the waiting hands of my receiver. Others have seen enough media coverage about me to assume I'll tell stories about how I prayed to Jesus for our team to win. Nothing could be further from the truth. The stories I tell the most are not necessarily exciting to reporters, but I think they're more important.

After my Super Bowl win with the Rams in 1999, my favorite story to tell was one about my kids. I had three kids at the time, and none of them came to the big game. They thought football was “boring.”

When the game was over, I couldn't wait to call them.

first things first

I was in the locker room with my agent, Rob Lefko, who wanted to prep me for a press conference the next day. I had been named Most Valuable Player, and there would be a lot of media attention. I asked him to wait a minute while I called home to talk to my kids.

The phone rang a couple of times before Zack, my oldest, who was nine at the time, answered the phone. Here's what the conversation sounded like from Rob's perspective:

"Hey, buddy! Daddy just won the Super Bowl. . . . Uh huh . . . Did you watch any of the game? . . . Uh huh . . . Okay . . ." And then before I could say, "I love you . . .," he was gone.

I turned to Rob and said, "Zack wasn't interested. He was watching Veggie Tales."

The point of the story isn't that my kids do funny stuff; it's that my children remind me that football isn't the most important thing in our world. And I love that! I love that my kids aren't preoccupied with my football career. Ten years later, three kids has turned into seven, but not much has changed about their attitude toward football.

Zack's now nineteen. He is in his fifth year of high school, and he is learning how to live independently. He's legally blind, but after watching him get around, you would never know it. Brenda will tell you more about Zack when she tells you her story.

Jesse is seventeen. I met her when she was nine months old, and we didn't exactly hit it off. But now she's heading off to college and I can't imagine life without her.

Kade is ten. He's our big boy. He plays Pop Warner

football, but he doesn't like it much. Brenda once caught me in the backyard trying to pay him a quarter for each pass he caught, but she put a stop to that.

Jada just turned eight. She's our little fashionista, and she's a vegetarian. I'm not sure if she's a vegetarian because she cares so much about animals or because she doesn't like her mother's cooking.

Elijah is five. He's the only one who really cares about football. And he always knows the scores. When I come in after a game, he's always quick to remind me, "Dad, you lost!" Nice, huh?

Sienna and Sierra are our three-year-old twins, affectionately called "Babygirls." Sienna is bigger than Sierra and can often be found hiding out in the snack pantry. Sierra is smaller but spunky like her mother. We often describe their personalities as sweet and spicy.

This year, the oldest five kids got to choose whether or not they wanted to attend the Super Bowl. We didn't give the Babygirls a choice. Zack chose not to come; his hearing has developed to compensate for his blindness, so he finds the fireworks at football games uncomfortably loud. Jesse wanted to come. Brenda wonders if the only reason was because she wanted to be on TV. I'd like to think it was to support her dad, but either way, I was fine with it. Kade, like I said, is playing Pop Warner football, so he's just starting to get into it a bit. He decided he wanted to come. Elijah does whatever Kade does, so of course he was in. That left Jada. At first she wanted to come because everyone

else was going. Then she didn't want to waste a whole day watching football.

Sometimes when Brenda takes the kids to my games, they just fall asleep—which is good, because at least they're not bothering her while she's trying to watch the game. But this time, Brenda thought the kids should be there for the memories. She kept saying, "What if this is your last Super Bowl?" But I didn't want the kids to come to the game just because Dad was in the Super Bowl. I don't care if five years from now I have a picture of them in my arms with confetti falling around us. I don't even care if they remember I played football.

In the end, Jada decided to stay home.

Three days after the game, Jada seemed upset. "What's wrong, beautiful?" I asked.

"Dad," she said, "I *really* wanted to go to the Super Bowl."

That surprised me, because just days earlier she had said that going to the Super Bowl would be a waste of time. Had I missed something?

Brenda explained it to me later. "When Jada went back to school, all her friends mentioned how they saw her brothers and sister on TV, so now Jada wishes she had gone just so her friends would have seen *her* on TV too."

But here's the funny part: When the cameras showed my family, no one saw Kade because he was tucked inside his hoodie playing with his Nintendo DS rather than watching the game. Some of our friends watching the game on TV didn't even know that Kade had gone with us.

So that's football at the Warner house. Girls who want

to get on TV and boys who want to be left alone to play their DS.

{ BRENDA }

At the Super Bowl we were all sitting in the same row. It was me, then Jesse, then Elijah, then Kade. The game was in the third quarter. *The third quarter*. You know, the one after the huge halftime extravaganza?

I heard Elijah say, “Momma, Momma.”

He said it over and over and over, and finally I’m like, “*What*, Elijah?”

“Is this the Super Bowl or just a normal game?”

“It’s the Super Bowl, Elijah. This is the third quarter.”

I focused back on the game, but a couple minutes later I heard Elijah again.

“Jesse. Jesse. Jesse. What’s an armadillo?”

“Mom, Elijah wants to know what an armadillo is.”

Did I mention that it was the third quarter—*of the Super Bowl*? And all I’m getting is, “What’s an armadillo?”

Prior to the game, all they could talk about was getting a puppy. They’d seen the news coverage when Barack Obama had promised his girls a puppy if he won the election. Our kids also wanted a dog, and they tried to talk Kurt into getting one. Kurt, of course, didn’t want anything to do with it. So about halfway through the season, I said, innocently enough, “Well, how about Dad gets you a puppy if he wins the Super Bowl?” And the kids all started yelling, “Yeah, Daddy! Yeah, Daddy!” The little ones really know how to work it.

So Kurt said, “I could *probably* agree to that, because we’re not going to the Super Bowl.” That’s exactly what he said—the emphasis was on the *probably*.

But somehow it became a pact. When the kids brought up the puppy topic, Kurt would say, “*If* we go . . .,” and the kids would say, “*When* you go . . .,” But Kurt wasn’t worried, because at that point in the season, no one, including Kurt, thought the Cardinals would be in the Super Bowl.

Then the playoffs started.

The way I remember it happening is that a reporter asked Kurt, “Are your kids excited about the playoffs?”

He said, “No, not really. All they care about is that Mom promised them a puppy if we win the Super Bowl.”

When I read that, I couldn’t believe that Kurt had told the media. Then it became a big deal. At every game, people would ask Kurt, “You get a puppy yet?” or “Did you pick out your puppy?” We started getting leashes and dog dishes in the mail.

So when the Cardinals actually made it to the Super Bowl, the children’s thoughts apparently had little to do with football and everything to do with animals—puppies and armadillos.

When the game ended, Kade started crying when he realized we had lost. Bawling. He’s a gentle giant, and I assumed his heart was broken for Daddy.

Then Kurt ran over to our front-row seats. I didn’t think he would. Usually, he only does that when he wins. He told me later that he knew the kids would be upset, and he wanted them to know he was okay.

So, as he was standing on the field, he said to Kade, “Hey, buddy.”

Kade was still crying big crocodile tears.

Kurt said, “It’s okay; it’s going to be okay. It’s just a game. I love you all, and I’ll talk to you in a little while.”

As we left the stadium, it was total chaos. We had to walk through a bunch of Steelers fans, and, of course, we were wearing red. People yelled stuff—“Go, Steelers!”—right into the kids’ faces. When we finally got to our car, Kade had again pulled his hood over his head so no one could tell he was crying.

As we got into the car, Elijah started bawling too. Now, I know he doesn’t understand the game, so I didn’t know what he was crying about. But he kept crying and crying, until finally he calmed down just enough for me to talk to him.

“Elijah, what are you still crying about?”

He sniffled, his lip quivered, and then he finally got it out: “We’re not getting a puppy. Daddy lost the Super Bowl!”

We laughed about it, but Elijah continued to cry.

I’m writing this a month after the Super Bowl. We still haven’t gotten a puppy.

Kurt is holding out.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KURT AND BRENDA WARNER met when she was a twenty-five-year-old, divorced mother of two, living on food stamps and working her way through nursing school, and he was a twenty-one-year-old backup quarterback at the University of Northern Iowa.

Brenda was certain that Kurt would be scared off by the news that she was a “package deal.” Instead, he fell in love with her *and* her kids. On October 11, 1997, they got married. Shortly thereafter, Kurt adopted Brenda’s kids, and over the past twelve years, they’ve added five more children to their family.

In 2001, the Warners established First Things First, a family foundation dedicated to promoting Christian values and positively affecting the lives of those less fortunate. Projects include Baskets of Hope, which delivers baskets of stuffed animals, toys, Bibles, and music to children with life-threatening diseases; Homes for the Holidays, which surprises single-parent, first-time homeowners with complete furnishings

for their new homes; and We're Going to Disney World, an annual trip to Walt Disney World for terminally ill children and their families.

Each of the First Things First projects grows out of Kurt and Brenda's own personal experiences and is centered on their life theme of putting faith and family first. To date, the Warners have initiated more than a dozen ongoing projects that affect the lives of people in communities in Arizona, Missouri, and Iowa.

Kurt and Brenda live near Phoenix, Arizona, with their seven children: Zack, Jesse, Kade, Jada, Elijah, Sienna, and Sierra.

JENNIFER SCHUCHMANN is an accomplished writer, trainer, and speaker noted for creative and practical approaches to business and spiritual topics. The author of *Six Prayers God Always Answers*, *Nine Ways God Always Speaks*, and *Your Unforgettable Life*, Jennifer has also written for *Today's Christian*, *The Christian Communicator*, and *Atlanta* magazine. Jennifer lives in Atlanta with her husband, David, and their son, Jordan.

FIRST THINGS FIRST FOUNDATION

In 2001, Kurt and Brenda Warner established First Things First as a 501(c)(3) public charity. The foundation's mission is to have an impact on people's lives by promoting Christian values, sharing experiences, and providing opportunities to encourage people that all things are possible when we seek to put "first things first." First Things First has actively initiated twelve ongoing projects that bless people in communities in Arizona, Missouri, Iowa, and beyond. Programs include trips to Walt Disney World for ill children, building recreation centers in children's hospitals, teaching the football basics to Special Olympics athletes, and rewarding single parents as they achieve their dreams of home ownership. Each program promotes the Warners' life theme of putting faith and family first.

These programs would not be possible without the support of our community and corporate teammates throughout the years, especially Aaron Rents, American Airlines, A-Mrazek Moving Systems, the Arizona Cardinals, Custom Cuts, Dream Factory, FedEx Office, For Those Without a

first things first

Voice, Give Kids the World, Horizon Moving Systems, Hostway, Insight, Joyce Meyer Ministries, Logo Joe's, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Marketplace One, Missouri and Illinois credit unions, Missouri and Illinois police stations, NFL Charities, Nike, Operation Food Search, Packages From Home, Priority Sports & Entertainment, ProSource, Roth Capital Partners, U-Haul, University of Phoenix, Wal-Mart, and Walt Disney World Resorts. (We apologize if anyone was inadvertently omitted.)

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**For more information,
visit the First Things First Foundation Web site at
www.kurtwarner.org.**