

Morrissey found a good friend in Warner

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mike Morrissey enjoyed calling the plays and serving as the offensive coordinator when he was the head football coach at Cedar Rapids Prairie, but he willingly relinquished those duties to an eminently qualified gentleman at his new job in Arizona.

Morrissey gave the offensive keys at Desert Mountain High School in Scottsdale to Kurt Warner, the former NFL great from Cedar Rapids whose rags-to-riches story captured the imagination of the entire nation during his pro football career.

Warner lives in Arizona and served on the search committee when Desert Mountain was looking for a new head coach last year. Warner's son, Kade, is a star receiver at Desert Mountain and Warner had worked as a volunteer assistant at the school on a part-time basis with the previous head coach.

That changed when Morrissey left Iowa to become the coach at Desert Mountain following the 2014 high school campaign, a move brought about by his family's desire to live closer to his wife's parents in Arizona. Morrissey and Warner, a pair of high school quarterbacks from Iowa, quickly became friends and Morrissey invited Warner to become a full-time assistant at the school.

Warner, who keeps busy as an announcer for the NFL Network, devoted himself to the high school team and formed a strong bond with Morrissey. The two men worked hand-in-hand at practices, games and long into the night at times.

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Morrissey would upload the film after one of their games on a Friday night and they'd analyze it into the wee hours of the morning.

"We'd still be texting back and forth until about 4 or 5 in the morning," Morrissey said in a phone interview this week. "I'd probably end up falling asleep at some point and I'd wake up to about 20 more messages about different things that he saw."

"He's really dedicated to it and he loves being around the kids. It's not just a football thing for him. He likes to see the kids grow as far as character building and doing the right things as young men."

"It's been a blast," Morrissey said. "It really has."



Morrissey remembers how excited he was when he told his wife that he'd talked to Warner after meeting with the search committee last year. That excitement grew as the two men got to know each other as friends and coaches.

Warner, 44, attended Cedar Rapids Regis High School and the University of Northern Iowa before embarking on a pro career that took him through Arena Football and NFL Europe before he landed with the St. Louis Rams. He became a two-time NFL MVP with the Rams and was named the Super Bowl MVP after leading St. Louis to the title in Super Bowl XXXIV.

Warner also played for the New York Giants and Arizona Cardinals and led Arizona to Super Bowl XLIII before retiring after the 2009 season. He passed for 32,344 yards and 208 touchdowns in 124 NFL games and set league

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records for accuracy.

Warner still throws a nice ball, according to Morrissey.

"He'd throw to our kids all the time," he said. "He'd do it in pre-game, when our quarterback needed a break. He'd jump in there and throw some passes.

"If you watch him throw, it's like he never took any time off. It's still right on point, great mechanics, his footwork is great. It's all still the same.

"A kid from Iowa growing up and watching him play, then I see him throwing passes to our kids every day. It was like, 'Man, I don't know if they appreciate what's happening right now.'"

Morrissey was a star quarterback at Pleasant Valley High School and Upper Iowa University. He enjoyed throwing passes as the scout team quarterback at Prairie and has continued those duties at times at Desert Mountain, with Warner offering a few good-natured barbs along the way about missing a receiver or throwing to the wrong guy.

"He definitely didn't let me off the hook," he said, laughing.

Morrissey marveled at the way Warner combined being an assistant football coach at the high school with being a top analyst for the NFL Network, flying to games all over the country but never missing a beat at Desert Mountain.

"The way he juggles things, especially on our end, is incredible," Morrissey said. "He made it to

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everything."

Desert Mountain practiced before school, from 5:15 a.m. to 7:15 a.m., to accommodate Warner and the other assistant coaches who did not work at the school, to beat the heat and to condense the amount of time players spent at school. The seniors were finished with their classes by 11:45 a.m. and the juniors were done by 12:45 p.m., so they could leave school and not come back until the next day.

"Our kids actually liked practicing in the morning," Morrissey said.

The Desert Mountain coaching staff featured a wide receivers coach who played for Memphis and the Pittsburgh Steelers, an offensive line coach who played at the University of Arizona and a running backs coach who played Division II football in Michigan. Morrissey said all the coaches worked together on the game plan and Warner welcomed input from everybody.

Morrissey admitted it was an adjustment for him to stop calling plays during games, but he knew the assignment was in terrific hands with Warner.

"Nobody I've ever met knows more than him as far as offensive stuff and what we're doing," said Morrissey. "It's pretty hard to argue with a guy that's had as much success as he did."

Desert Mountain, which finished with a 1-9 record in 2014, improved to 6-5 this season and made the playoffs in Morrissey's first year as head coach and with Warner calling the plays.

Morrissey said he and Warner have become good friends. They play basketball together and their families have spent time together.

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"I definitely consider him a friend," Morrissey said. "We talk on a regular basis, whether it's football stuff or different things that are going on. I definitely consider him somebody that I've enjoyed being around and enjoyed gotten to know."

Morrissey said Warner plans to work with the high school team again next season. "I think he had a blast," he said.