

National honor for Breitbach as Warner's favorite teacher

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Behind every famous person is a fabulous teacher.



Dick Breitbach's wife Kitty says you can throw out the name of a former student, and the long-time high school coach and teacher will tell you what year the kid graduated. He doesn't forget them.

They don't forget him either. This year his most well-known graduate, former NFL quarterback Kurt Warner, singled him out for special recognition when he named him as his favorite teacher. Warner was one of four celebrities asked by the non-profit organization TeachersCount to choose his most influential teacher for a program called ["Behind Every Famous Person is a Fabulous Teacher."](#)

Each year, in conjunction with Scholastic Publishing, TeachersCount creates posters highlighting famous people and their favorite teachers. The posters are distributed to schools and other organizations around the country to encourage appreciation for the teaching profession.

As Warner's choice, Dick and Kitty Breitbach were flown to Arizona for a photo shoot with the NFL star and stayed in Scottsdale's luxury Camelback Resort – a dizzying experience for a humble guy who devoted his life to teaching, coaching and mentoring students at Cedar Rapids' Regis and Xavier High Schools.

Breitbach began teaching social studies and coaching football and basketball at Regis in 1960. He left teaching for a time after earning his Master's in Administration and becoming an assistant principal, but in the late '70s asked to return to the classroom. He taught a theology class at Regis for the next 20 years and served as principal from 1993-1997, helping to craft the plan for the opening the new consolidated Xavier Catholic High School that replaced Regis and LaSalle.

Breitbach served as associate principal at Xavier for one year before retiring from the administration in 2000, but coached Xavier freshman football for five years and was the head basketball coach from 2001-2007.

An outstanding young man

Over the years, he coached nearly every sport, he laughs, including baseball, golf and tennis. But football and basketball were his true bailiwick, and Kurt Warner excelled at both, leading his teams to the state tournament in the late 1980s.

"Kurt was our leading scorer and rebounder in basketball and All-State in basketball and football," recalls Breitbach. But he was much more than that.

"At my first meeting with his mother when he was a freshman, she said, 'I don't want Kurt majoring in athletics. He's got to be a student first, and if he goes down in his grades, that's it for his sports.' " She needn't have worried, he says.

"Kurt was an honor roll student and a very mature young man. He had a very outgoing personality and was comfortable around kids his own age, younger kids that looked up to him, and adults. He had an appreciation for everyone. And if kids ever got out of line or bullied anyone, he talked to them."

In spite of Warner's terrific athleticism, Breitbach didn't necessarily think his young star was bound for glory in the NFL. There are lots of great athletes, he says, but most of them don't make it to that level. "It was because of his intensity, his character and his stick-to-it-tiveness that he got through to the NFL."

Breitbach kept in touch with Warner and followed his career as he played at UNI, in the Arena Football League and for NFL Europe before he got his chance with the St. Louis Rams. When a season-ending injury to starting quarterback Trent Green opened the door for Warner, even Breitbach was caught off guard by his rapid ascent.

"It was really something," he recalls. "It was kind of surprising that he did so well the first time he set foot on the field." During that heady time when Warner led the Rams to two Super Bowls, Breitbach enjoyed reconnecting with his star player, visiting his practices in St. Louis and eating with the team on occasion.

Warner spoke at the retirement party for Breitbach, who says he feels gratified to have been picked as the quarterback's favorite teacher and coach. "It's definitely an honor. I really appreciate that he considers me someone who made a difference in his life."

Asked what Warner might have learned from him, Breitbach demurs. "Probably the question should be, 'What did I learn from Kurt?' I hoped to instill in him that he had the personality to be a leader all through the school, not just in athletics, but in the classroom and in volunteer activities. I stressed to all my kids that you've got to be something more than a basketball or football player – someone the younger kids can look up to. But I didn't have to teach him much in character or values because his mother had already instilled that in him."

Still on campus

Since his retirement, Breitbach has had a knee replacement, but stays in shape with regular visits to the Xavier weight room and the local pool. For the last two years he spent part of nearly every day helping "my friend forever," the late Bob Dolphin, who had lost both legs to diabetes. Breitbach has served on the board of directors for the Cedar Rapids Baseball Club (Kernels) for more than 30 years.

The Breitbachs also enjoy winter getaways and spending time with their seven children and 19 grandkids, many of whom are athletes. Their daughter, Mary Breitbach Anton, died of cancer in 1998 but is still very much part of the family.

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Breitbach continues to substitute teach at Xavier and occasionally fills in for the person he says does “the hardest job in the school – the main office secretary. There’s not very many days I don’t go up there for one reason or another,” he says – including, according to Kitty, “to raid their candy jars.”

For someone who spent nearly 50 years shaping young lives as a teacher and coach, it’s still the place that feels like home. “I can't imagine having done anything else,” he says.