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Toby Gerhart's Success a Family Affair

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Courtesy, Gerhart Family

STANFORD, Calif. -- By Friday evening, running back [Toby Gerhart](#) should know the identity of his new uniform, one bearing the colors of the [NFL](#) team that will draft him. Until then, the former [Stanford](#) star and 2009 Heisman Trophy runner-up is torn between two other game-day jerseys.

Will he wear Teagan or Kelsey?

"It's a tough choice every game. A lot of thought and preparation goes into it -- those are my baby sisters, after all," Gerhart told FanHouse with a laugh recently. "I don't want to split the jersey, so maybe I'll change every inning. And I'm superstitious. But I won't take off Teagan's if she has a no-hitter going."

In any Stanford softball game, that is a distinct possibility.

Which Gerhart is the most exceptional, in a family of six standout student athletes, class valedictorians and salutatorians?

Toby, 22, will be an NFL player by this weekend, most likely a second-round draft pick. Garth, 21, is an offensive lineman at [Arizona State](#). The youngest boy, Coltin, 15, is a multi-sport standout in their hometown of Norco, Calif., east of Los Angeles.

But Gerhart's Stanford softball-playing younger sisters, who make up two-thirds of the Gerhart triplets -- Whitley is playing softball at Cal-Poly -- are rapidly gaining recognition on their own.

Kelsey is a talented backup catcher, "who has amazing rapport with our pitchers," Stanford softball coach John Rittman says.

Teagan (pronounced Tee-gan) has emerged as a campus and Pac-10 sensation in her own right after pitching a perfect game last month against Bay Area rival Santa Clara, then following up the next day with a pair of no-hitters against Princeton and Saint Mary's in the Louisville Slugger Classic. Entering a three-game series this weekend at [Arizona](#), Teagan is 22-5 with a 1.58 ERA, with 169 strikeouts and 42 walks.

And the sisters have no bigger fan than the powerful Cardinal running back and top NFL prospect, who finished second to [Alabama's Mark Ingram](#) by 28 votes in the closest Heisman vote in the award's 75-year history.

At any home softball game at Stanford this spring, NFL scouts have been able to find Gerhart sitting a few seats above the Cardinal dugout. Depending on which freshman sister needs a boost or is on a hot streak, Gerhart, 22, will break out her jersey, stand, holler and cheer shamelessly for his 18-year-old siblings.

"He's always surprising us -- we look above our dugout and there he is, wearing one of our shirts. He brings both

and randomly puts on the other one," says a giggling Teagan, whose extraordinary young life has been shaped by a series of incredible challenges that she systematically overcomes.

Born with a cleft palate -- the roof of her mouth had not fully formed, nor had the bones in her inner ear, causing 80 percent hearing loss -- as well as a congenital birthmark that covered one-third of the left side of her face, Teagan has endured 17 corrective surgeries since she was two weeks old, including the use of horrific tissue expanders designed to stretch the skin and gradually decrease the size of the once-disfiguring facial birthmark.

The Gerhart triplets came into the world five weeks premature, and that led to myriad problems.

"I had a C-section but I was awake for it," their mother, Lori, recalls. Whitley was born first and wasn't breathing. Kelsey was third, the smallest, but born healthy. Teagan was second, and when she emerged the room filled with about 75 medical professionals split among the preemies swiftly reacted.

Or overreacted, to hear the Gerharts tell it.

"They pulled her out and there was this God-awful gasp," Lori says, "I can remember trying to sit up and I kept asking my husband, what's wrong? I'm thinking, did I just have conjoined twins, what?"

"This can be fixed surgically," a stunned doctor blurted.

Lori and Todd, a former backup fullback in the USFL and the Norco football coach, looked at their tiny newborn and breathed a sigh of relief. To them, it wasn't catastrophic. Teagan just had a birthmark. "It wasn't anything horrible," Lori says.



That "so what?" attitude, along with the laughter and sibling closeness and competitiveness, is what makes the Gerharts a special family. Teagan says the joke among them is that Whitley, "came out first, swinging, and hit me in the face."

Today, Teagan has two titanium bones in her ears, which have reduced her hearing loss to only 20 percent. Doctors constructed the roof of her mouth through a series of procedures that forced Teagan to re-learn how to speak several times. Slight scars indicate where the birthmark -- in the shape of a hand -- once dominated her delicate face, and once made the shy but self-assured Teagan the object of ridicule.

Good thing Toby and her siblings had her back.

"He's always been there for me, through the surgeries and everything," Teagan says. "He's an incredible brother, and a wonderful person. I'm so lucky to have him, to have all my brothers and sisters there for me."

While Gerhart has made a name for himself on the football field for his toughness and grit, he has been exceptionally caring for Teagan. She remembers being 7 and wandering, barefoot, into a field of stickers in their backyard ballfield. "He picked me up, carried me out of there, and then picked all the splinters out of my feet," she recalls.

When the family was out at a restaurant and someone stared or made a cruel remark directed at Teagan's face, the kids were quick to jump in. "People would ask if she was burned, or bitten by a dog," Lori says. "She never had to say a word -- the kids would explain everything."

While Lori, now a special-education teacher at Norco, ran a daycare center in the home and cared for six kids, she often relied on her eldest, Toby, for help.



One morning, as she readied the girls for school, Lori saw that their long blond hair needed braiding. "I asked Toby to show them how," she recalls. "He'd seen me do it enough, so I figured he knew how."

Says Teagan, "He got one of our Barbie dolls and showed us how to braid."

How will that story go over in NFL war rooms the next day or so?

"Uh, um, I'm sure I did that, but I don't remember it," Gerhart says, cracking up. "But I've asked my mom and she tells that story. I really don't remember that ... maybe I've been hit a few too many times."

Gerhart never had a chance to see his sisters play softball for their hometown teams in Norco. While he was away at Stanford, making a name in football and baseball, Teagan, Kelsey and Whitley were growing into highly recruited college prospects. He's playing catch-up now.

"I was there for Teagan's perfect game, the two no-hitters and then when she gave up two hits to (Cal Poly) San Luis-Obispo. It was awesome. I'd never really seen her pitch before, but I'd heard a lot of good things," Gerhart says with pride. "I was sitting above the dugout, just putting up "Ks" as she was striking people out, wearing that jersey. It was a lot of fun."

He was a key outfielder on Stanford's 2008 College World Series team and eschewed lucrative baseball contract offers to return to Cardinal football in 2009. Although Gerhart has a year of eligibility left -- he played only one game in 2007 as a sophomore due to a knee injury -- he opted to enter this year's NFL Draft to coincide with the completion of his coursework at Stanford.

Naturally, the subject of whether Gerhart might eventually seek baseball as a career has come up in his interviews with NFL teams.

"I'm telling everyone I'm completely committed to playing in the NFL," Gerhart says. "I love baseball, but football is where I want to make my mark. I know I can make an impact and I can't wait to get started."

While the league ponders where the 6-foot, 231-pound Gerhart will land in the reformatted three-day NFL Draft -- Round 1 begins at 7 p.m. ET Thursday, Rounds 2-3 kick off at 6 p.m. Friday while Rounds 4-7 conclude at 10 a.m. Saturday -- these final, sweet days of campus and family life have been precious snapshots to treasure.

"I'm trying to just enjoy every last moment I have here at Stanford. It's been a great four years, with all my friends and my sisters here. I'm just trying to really enjoy it," says Gerhart, who is finishing up the 13 credits he needs to complete an undergraduate degree in management science and engineering.

"I think for me the best thing is, I'm in school and I have stuff to keep me occupied. I'm not sitting around all day, reading blogs or thinking about the draft. I try to do my own thing. And when that draft moment gets here, I'll probably be at home with my family, and it's going to be exciting. I'm glad I'll be with them."

Sports have often kept the tight-knit Gerhart kids apart, but it also has brought them together for amazing experiences. When Toby played his final college football game in the Sun Bowl in El Paso, the Gerhart clan loaded into an RV and made the long road trip to Texas to watch him.



Rather than travel back with his Cardinal teammates, Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh told Toby he could pile into

the RV with his family. So he did.

"It was kind of like my last hurrah, I guess, and everyone wanted to be there for it. Everybody wanted to be together," Gerhart says of that memorable reunion. "I had a choice to fly back with the team or I could ride in the RV, and I decided to ride back with the family.

"I think everybody realized then that this was the end of my college experience, and the beginning of theirs. They wanted to be there for me, and now I'm there for them. It's my last semester on campus and I'm not obligated to practice three or four hours a day. So I'm out there at my sisters' games, just cherishing these last few weeks before my life gets crazy."

College recruiting trips also became family affairs. Everyone accompanied Toby on his visit to Stanford, an academic powerhouse tucked among coastal hills, redwood trees with a picturesque campus custom-built to cater to elite student athletes.

It was then that Teagan had her heart stolen by Stanford.

"I fell in love with it and I didn't want to go anywhere else," she says.

Since they have been on campus together, Teagan's dominating presence on the mound has drawn comparisons to her famous older brother.

"I don't think he wants to face her on the mound," Rittman, the softball coach, jokes. "She is built a lot like Toby -- she's really fast and extremely strong. Very powerful.

"We kid her -- 'Hey, if we put some shoulder pads and a helmet on you, and you'll hold you own out the on the football field.'"

Gerhart's draft stock is soaring in recent weeks as teams have taken a closer look at him through individual meetings, interviews and workouts. The Broncos came to Stanford, working around Gerhart's academic schedule, then brought him to their training facility outside Denver for a closer look.

The Chargers -- coach Norv Turner is said to be enamored with Gerhart's running style and work ethic -- met with him at their headquarters. So did the Eagles, Jets, Saints and the Ravens. These are teams in the market for a versatile running back, and Gerhart is a unique combination of everything an NFL team covets in a primary ball carrier.



He's intelligent -- Gerhart reportedly finished with the highest score among this year's running back prospects on

the 12-minute, 50-question Wonderlic problem-solving test, posting a 30. He possesses powerful between-the-tackles burst and production -- Gerhart had 43 career touchdowns and 39 receptions at Stanford, including a school-record 1,871 yards and 28 touchdowns that led the nation last season.

"I think this guy is rising up some draft boards because he's solid," said Mike Mayock, the NFL Network's top draft analyst, who doesn't envision Gerhart as the straight blocking fullback some NFL scouts project him to be. "What I like about him is I think he can play two positions for you ... he could play some fullback for you if you need him to because he's tough enough and he'll block. But he can also be an I- (formation) tailback who can push the pile.

"To me, the ideal back who can push the pile has more value. So I think you start him there and he can have a dual role, depending on what team drafts him. I like him athletically, I like him playing tailback -- he can play some fullback -- and he's a real solid second-round value."

That's up to the NFL to decide. For the Gerharts, the most impressive choice they've ever seen is the difficult decision Teagan faced at age 12, whether to undergo a final lengthy, painful surgical procedure that would erase most of the remaining scars from her face, but would keep her off the softball field for at least six months.

The family didn't balk when Teagan hesitated, then finally said no.

"I just didn't want to do it," says Teagan, who reached the decision at the last minute. Her sisters didn't blink at the choice.

"I remember telling her, 'Why? It's not necessary. You can hardly tell you have a birthmark,'" Kelsey recalls. "Besides, that mark has shaped who you are."

Toby Gerhart agrees. "She's an amazing person, and I'm so proud to be her brother," he says. "To see what she has overcome, what she's achieving and the way she has done it, is just such an inspiration to me."

In her dorm room, Teagan often looks to a plaque on her wall: "Determination Is the Will to Overcome Adversity."

Says her oldest brother, "That tells me everything I need to know about Teagan Gerhart."

And everything you need to know about Toby Gerhart is simple. He has extraordinary talent. That much is known. Beneath the helmet and the pads, there is so much more.

"He is special, no doubt about it," his mother brags. "But more than anything, he just had a great big heart. An enormous heart."

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