

The Warshaw Pact: One soccer player's self-guided drive to succeed

By Estela Marie Lactao Go

A scar, running just above the brow bone, across the middle of the forehead reminds Bobby Warshaw of his 16-year-old self.

It was a summer in Brazil, in front of 25,000 people, shortly after Warshaw was substituted into an exhibition match when an opportunity to play for the United States in the FIFA U-17 World Cup was taken away from him. After missing a tackle, the frustrated Pennsylvania midfielder, attempting to redeem himself, sprinted at full speed toward the ball. Warshaw headed the ball as his opponent headed him.

"It was like a Rocky movie," Warshaw said. "I could see the blood and the teeth fall in slow motion and I'm like, 'Oh man, I really got that guy, I really messed him up.' Then I feel my mouth and I'm like, 'Wait, those are my teeth, that's my blood!'"

The damage: twenty stitches to the forehead, five missing teeth, and a fear to challenge players that forced him to stop playing with the U-17 U.S. team that summer.

While Warshaw started playing 10 days after the accident, it was clear that the once fearless soccer player was scared and hesitant to get back on the field. Then, for a year, he wore a mouth guard and felt his teeth every time he played.

But he did not admit defeat: ball to the wall to his head, over and over again, until the fear subsided and a rejuvenated Warshaw emerged from the setback.

DEDICATED FROM THE BEGINNING

The decorated soccer player from Mechanicsburg Area Senior High was a top recruit for programs across the country. Warshaw made his way into the Cardinal lineup; he was a midfielder, turned forward, who eventually transformed into a defender. Although whatever position he played, he found a way to get to the goal and score.

"The first time I saw Bobby play was at a big national event and he's a dominating player, with a dominating personality so he stood out right away," said Stanford coach Bret Simon. "He's vocal, passionate, competitive, and always pushing himself and his teammates. So, he's very easy to see (on the field) and his impact is very easy to see too."

The All-American defender—and MAC Hermann Trophy semifinalist—will go down as a Stanford great who capped off his collegiate career as a four-year starter who scored 18

goals – including 10 game-winners – and had six assists, 42 points and led his team in scoring three times.

“It’s hard to know (Bobby’s legacy) two, three, five years down the road and how that ripple effect will play out,” Simon said. “I just hope that when the new team starts their own culture, some of that love for the sport and some of that competitive drive will stay and won’t have to be re-created.”

Growing up, Warshaw saw his father and two older brothers play soccer and at a very young age chose to also take on the family sport. Lessons were taught and tricks were learned, all in the backyard of their rural home in the small town of Mechanicsburg, Pa.

“When you’re a little kid playing with those much older than you, you’re forced to be tougher and better,” said Chris Warshaw, Bobby’s oldest brother. “Bobby played in elite soccer clubs with players several years older than him so he was always playing with kids a little bigger and a little faster.”

While athleticism graced the family, Warshaw had the skills to play soccer with a finesse unmatched by those who taught him. He took his soccer abilities to new levels and has even been able to carry through successful bicycle kicks — a difficult move where the player throws his body in the air backward to kick a ball over his head — during high school and collegiate matches, including on Sept. 24, when he broke a scoreless draw in a 3-0 victory over Saint Mary’s.

Warshaw’s dedication is observed, his intensity noted. But to him, he sees his work ethic as necessary to play soccer professionally.

“When I train, it’s zero-sum,” Warshaw said. “It’s right or it’s wrong and I’m not going to get off the field until I’ve done it right.”

Warshaw is known on his team for training beyond practice hours, sometimes so much that his coach kicks him off the field. Texts are sent, calls are made, and doors are knocked in the attempt to get his teammates to practice extra. He always wants to train harder, see more videos, and meet with coaches to see how the team can improve.

“One-on-one, Bobby is more quiet, but when you’re discussing soccer, his personality blossoms and comes out,” Simon said. “But if we were talking about something else, he’s more introspective. He’s just so tied in with the sport that his enthusiasm just bubbles over with anything to do with soccer.”

BEYOND THE GAME

Warshaw credited his dedication to soccer to his upbringing. His love for competition and winning is a result of years playing soccer, video games and board games with his brothers.

“I’m a product of my parents, my brothers and how much they were willing to put into me,” Warshaw said. “There’s certainly more people out there who are more talented than I am, more athletic, more intelligent. But I just had a great family on my side.”

Soccer in the backyard then politics at the dinner table was normal for Warshaw. In a home with two parent lawyers, including a father with a long-standing passion in soccer, Warshaw’s fate was set. Academics and athletics intertwined and Warshaw found himself a Stanford soccer star majoring in political science.

But Warshaw has his priorities: first family, then friends, both before soccer and academics. He calls his brothers every week, calls his parents more than anyone he knows, and even manages to make time for weekly dinners with brother Chris, who is finishing off his Ph.D in political science and Juris Doctor in law at Stanford.

While friendships have meant a lot to Warshaw, how he valued friendships was reinforced during the end of his sophomore year at Stanford when he received the news that three of his high school friends were in a car accident. Two died at the scene.

At this emotionally trying period in his college career, he just finished taking a religious studies course called “The Rhetoric of Hope”—which studied the influential lives of Abraham Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr.—and later looked back at the class as a blessing.

Warshaw’s favorite quote from the class that helped him through the death of his friends, which later became his personal mantra, is from Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech, *Strength to Love*: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

“I was the kind of player that would take practices off when I was frustrated,” Warshaw said. “But all of a sudden, you’re reading about Martin Luther King Jr. and how he got beat over the head, thrown in jail, and still showed up the next day and did everything he could. And I can’t deal with adversity and train through it?”

However learning and experiencing adversity changed Warshaw.

“When that happened, you think of their lives, what could have been, what should have been, what could be,” Warshaw said. “I think the coaches and my teammates would say that I came back that summer a better person.”

LESSONS WELL LEARNED

Being a leader, a teammate and a friend, sometimes all at the same time, is a challenge for Warshaw. With his personality and his role on the team, it is hard to find the right balance.

“I still think I have great relationships but that balance is the toughest thing over the past eight years and the one that I should have thought more into,” said Warshaw.

With June will come the Wacky Walk, graduation, and remembering good times with friends. Then, possibly a professional soccer career or a calling to do nonprofit work with Grassroots Soccer, a program in South Africa. But Warshaw is determined to do something in the sport, one way or the other.

Warshaw will finish his undergraduate degree in political science this fall and prepare for the Major League Soccer Player Combine, held in January in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

“I’ve done everything I could,” Warshaw said. “I put in all the hours and I’m not going to regret anything if it doesn’t happen. If it works out and I get on a team, I’ll do it but if it doesn’t, I’m happy I came to Stanford and have many other options.”

Whatever comes for Warshaw in the coming months, there is no doubt that this passionate and dedicated student athlete will make the most of his talents.

Years down the road, his 22-year-old self may be just the inspiration he needs to continue to do great things.