

Two of the renowned Warburton sisters take the helm

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Coaches Margan Warburton-Nelson and Chelsey Warburton

If you resided in Utah in the decades between 1996-2016, you probably heard about the Warburton sisters from Helper, Utah, who put Carbon High School on the women's sports map. Or the Warburton sisters whose basketball careers started at the College of Eastern Utah, Southern Utah University, Weber State University and University of Utah. Or the Warburton sisters who played professional basketball in the Netherlands and Spain. Or if you did not hear about any of the Warburton sisters, you had to be living under a rock.

Ask any of Warburton neighbors in Helper what it was like to live on the street their parents raised their children on. The basketball hoop in their backyard was used steadily by each sibling where they were given the choice to do chores or shoot hoops. When they were not playing sports at Helper Junior High and CHS, they were practicing until after dark each night: dribbling, guarding and shooting baskets.

They worked summers at Fossat's Drive Inn, where its owner, Ralph Fossat followed each of their careers from high school through college, hardly missing a local game. The sisters said a lot of their neighbors followed their careers and would attend games at home and on the road.

And what most don't know about the Warburton sisters is they have two brothers in the family of six children: the oldest and the youngest. The four sisters are a year and a half apart.

Their parents: John and Stacy Warburton

Their incredible athletic ability might be attributed to their parents who attended college on athletic scholarships in the '70s. A graduate of Granger High School, John Warburton played basketball for Snow College, where his soon-to-be-bride, Stacy, from Green River High School, played volleyball, basketball and softball for the Badgers.

After Snow, John accepted a scholarship to play at Montana, but decided to marry Stacy. The couple moved to Green River, Utah where he took a job working for the highway department. After a few years, the Warburtons moved to Helper because "I had the opportunity to get more overtime," he said.

"All my kids were raised in a gym as I played rec ball, city ball, any type of sport involving a ball. They didn't have a chance to not be athletes because all the family did was hang out in gyms or shoot baskets at the house," John said. "We worked on fundamentals: dribbling, ball handling and keeping the ball from the defender.

"Their brother Chase was one heck of an athlete and made the sisters the athletes they are today. He pushed each sibling to develop basketball skills from an early age and spent hours playing ball with him or her," he added.

The six children: Chase, McKell, Cassie, Morgan, Chelsey and Cole grew up playing sports on the streets of Helper with both parents actively coaching each sibling.

"We had a tiny pad of cement in the backyard with a basketball hoop. I would watch the kids for hours shoot hoops through my kitchen window. As long as they would get along and not fight, I let them play all day," Stacy said. "I didn't have much help with the house because they could decide to do chores or play basketball."

The neighborhood boys would join the six Warburtons as they spent their days playing basketball. "We had a lot of black eyes and broken bones" as the competition between all the players got intense," Stacy said. "Each one of my children are fiercely competitive."

"We were at a family reunion in Colorado and the girls took on their four-male cousins in a four-on-four game of hoops. My girls don't do anything just for fun. In life you have to be willing to fight and they beat their cousins that day, something everyone talked about for years.

"Because John and I were athletes, I wanted my girls to experience other things than sports, so I enrolled them in clogging classes. They were the cutest cloggers and when we get together even to this day, we have clogging fests as a family joke."

By 10 years old, Chelsey and Morgan were competing in the Elks Free-Throw National Contest in Massachusetts. Morgan is in its Hall of Fame for making 23 out of 25 free throws in 2000-2001 while Chelsey took second place by hitting 24 out of 25 in 1997-98, with her second-to-last shot rattling in and out of the net. That year's winner hit 25 out of 25 shots.

By the time the girls were in junior high, their parents convinced the school district that ninth graders should be allowed to play high school ball.

Stacy was an assistant coach at Helper Junior High and moved onto CHS to be an assistant to Coach Bruce Bean.

Playing at Carbon High School

The Warburton girls put CHS in the record books as they led their teams to a state championship, region titles and scholarships to CEU, SUU, Weber and the U of U.

At Carbon High, McKell lettered in three sports and was selected as all-state and MVP. Cassie, Chelsey and Morgan earned all state and all-region honors in basketball and volleyball. Morgan's team won the state championship and she was named 3A MVP. Each sister led her team in scoring each year.

Coach Bean, said, "I think I was able to help them balance their fierce competitive spirit and the joy that comes from that competition and being part of a team. Not just focusing on their own achievement or the win/loss, but enjoying the ride.

"They were much more than talented. They elevated their talent, but also elevated their teammates. They truly

made each player better, even those who played against them. "I knew they were talented enough to play D-1. What sometimes happens with this level of talent is that the athlete may not have the drive needed with the talent. They had tremendous drive, work ethic and personal discipline to achieve at the collegiate level and professionally."

Discussing Chelsey and Morgan, he said, "Even though they both had this talent, drive, focus etc., they were different types of athletes and young women. Chelsey was more of a true point guard/floor coach than Morgan, more serious of a personality. She helped 'run' the team on the court. She saw the "big picture" of the game.

"Morgan has the ability to 'loosen up' her teammates with her humor/personality. She took the entire team on her shoulders at times and just took over games. She was able to play multiple positions since she was a taller, more physical player."

Twice in high school, three Warburton girls were playing at CHS. By the time they went to college, three of the daughters were playing at three different universities. "I put 33,000 miles on my '99 pickup in 13 months trying to attend all of their games. If more than one daughter played on any single day, we chose to attend the oldest daughter's game. Sometimes Stacy and I would split up so we could catch more than one game a night," John said.

Off to play college basketball

McKell, Cassie and Chelsey accepted scholarships at CEU to begin their college career under the tutelage of Coach Dave Paur while Morgan accepted a full-ride scholarship to play at the University of Utah.

McKell was the first Warburton to play for the Eagles and was named most improved player. She continued her education at Weber where she graduated with a degree in criminal justice. She spent a year coaching at Ben Lomond High School in Ogden before accepting a position with the Boys and Girls Club in Ogden. She helped launch the Boys and Girls Club of Carbon County.

Cassie played volleyball and basketball for the Eagles where she was named First Team All Region. She continued her education at SUU and was named All-New Comer plus honorable mention in All-Mid Conference. She led her team in scoring and holds all-time-single-season record for three pointers made. She graduated with a

degree in education and taught at Sandstone Elementary in St. George, Utah.

It was never in Chelsey's plans to stay in Price to play basketball, but she blew out her ACL her senior year of high school and all the coaches recruiting her stopped calling. She used her freshman year of college to rebuild her knee and hone her shooting skills. "Chelsey is the best three-point shooter I have ever seen," Paur said. "She proved that at Eastern and later at Weber State."

While playing her freshman year for the Eagles, Chelsey reflected upon her collegiate experience and said her confidence in shooting came from coaches Paur and Dan Allen. She remembers the speed of the game in the transition from high school to college, the different styles and half-court set.

The competition was good in the Scenic West Athletic Conference. Her teammates included Lyndsie Arnoldus, Viva Whither, Janell Casey, Cami Blackburn and Sherill Grant.

In high school, Morgan was highly recruited by Matt Legerski, assistant basketball coach at Utah, where her freshman year her team made it to the elite eight during March Madness. She played with seniors Kim Smith, Shona Throburn and Julie Wood, who Morgan believes was a lights-out shooter on the team. The Utes made it to the Elite Eight that year before falling to the eventual NCAA champion, Maryland.

About her playing ability, her dad said, "Morgan hit the last minute shots against New Mexico twice one season; once in New Mexico's 'Pit' and once in the conference championship in Las Vegas. A guy came up to me after the game and remarked that he wished Morgan would hurry and graduate so the Utes wouldn't be so tough to beat."

About coaching, Morgan learned life lessons from her coach, Elaine Elliot, who "never panicked in a game and was always confident. She knew what she was going to do and was a really good coach."

Coach Elliot loved Morgan's brother Cole and recruited him to be the team manager for the women's team. The two Warburton siblings worked side by side as Morgan continued to hone her skills on the court with her brother just a few feet away at practices and games.

Morgan was grateful for the U of U athletic scholarship that allowed her to earn an education and play a sport she loved. "Kids don't realize that somebody is paying

for their education and to get a degree. In those years at Utah, I learned so much as a student athlete."

Before she left Utah, her basketball prowess brought accolades including being named to the first team All-Mountain West Conference twice and leading the conference in free-throw percentage at .891. She was named honorable mention All-American by the Associated Press her junior year and returning Honorable Mention her senior year where she was Utah's 20th 1000-point scorer. She was named the Mountain West Player of the Year that year plus named to the Utah Sports Hall of Fame.

The Sacramento Monarchs selected her in the third round, 33rd overall in the 2009 WNBA Draft where she played a before being waived. She next found herself in Spain spending the next two years playing for Gran Canaria and Girona.

"Since it was on the boarder of France, most everyone spoke Catalan and Spanish. Krystal Kelle, from Kentucky and Anika Henry from the University of Florida played on the team so we could communicate with each other. A lot of people also speak English so that helped a lot," she said. In her free time, she toured Barcelona, Spain, and spent time on the beach, which she thought was beautiful.

Both Chelsey and Morgan appreciated their time in Europe playing ball, but hated looking up in the stands and not seeing their family there. Their entire careers focused on family and friends supporting them, and it did not seem right to not have any family or friends in the audience at their games. So they returned to the United States to begin coaching careers.

Morgan said she wished she would have extended her playing career longer, but a coaching position opened at Utah in '11 and she felt it was the right time to accept the job and work towards her ultimate goal of being a D1 head coach.

Coaching at the U of U & USUE

In 2012, Chelsey returned to her alma mater after being named head volleyball coach and assistant basketball coach where she spent the next three years. When Paur decided to retire in '15, he wanted one of his favorite players to take over his program and Chelsey fit the bill.

The first item on her to-do list was hiring an assistant. The U of U had just released its women's basketball staff, including her sister Morgan. With Morgan looking for

a job and Chelsey needing a coach, the sister-playing bond turned into a sister-coaching bond.

One problem with hiring Morgan: nepotism. Once Utah State University's HR office saw Morgan's resume, it was a slam-dunk to let her work as an assistant for her sister Chelsey. Both sisters admit to their competitive nature. "Winning is big in our family. We think about it every day and try to get our athletes to work towards having the same goal."

Coaching in the SWAC is not easy and the Warburton sisters worked on their team, getting better with every game. "Every player on our team is special and the hardest thing for us is to say goodbye at the end of the season.

"This past year we had to transfer our expectations and goals to each member of the team and sometimes it worked, sometimes it did not. In the end, we made progress with each member of the team and that in itself made the season worth it," Chelsey said.

Spending countless hours each day as coaches first and sisters second, the two spent their off season recruiting this year's team. "I put my list of recruits together and Morgan put her list of recruits together. When we compared the lists, they were almost identical," Chelsey said. "Sure we agree to disagree on some topics, but we always try to do the best for the group... we're family and get over it."

The two have been voracious at recruiting their team. "Sure we have to work harder to get recruits, but we try to be smart about getting who we want. We are both approachable and focus on what we have, not what we don't. We are texting, calling, emailing our recruits constantly and have some great recruits committed," Morgan said.

Separated in age by 18 months, the two admit to being able to read each other's thoughts. "What a better way to share one's life with someone we have grown up with. We are both doing what we planned to do after our years of playing ended and continue to share that experience," Chelsey said.

About this season, the two hope to figure out their team's personalities sooner and what works with each athlete. "We will be prepared sooner and our caliber of practices will be tougher, stronger."

With two seasons under our belts, we know what did not work and will work harder at making it work in

'17-'18. They both learned as coaches, that they must break down every aspect of the game, and get their players to have basic instinct of plays, plus work on mental toughness. This past season they hoped for more firepower offensively, and loved the fact their defensive team worked great together and held the scores down on explosive teams.

Chelsey still bounces ideas off coach Paur who guided the Eagles 27 seasons. "I respect what he thinks. He knows what we are up against and what we need."

In five years, Chelsey hopes to be still coaching at Eastern. She loves the game and wants to spend her career in the basketball world.

Morgan hopes to be a D1 coach and plans to move up the ladder as she pursues her love of the game.

Their parents still come to all their games with John, who they say is an X's and O's type of coach, gives advice on how to get the most out of each player. John said he has a different vantage point than his daughters and talks to them after each game.

Stacey said it is harder watching her daughter's coach than play basketball. "As players, I never worried about them getting it done mentally or physically. As coaches they have to instill this instinct in each of their players."

She knows what the game of basketball did for her daughters and how each love the game. The sport made each one a better human being. She said a good coach "must care about their players as a person first, then as an athlete second.

"An athlete will give their all to a coach as long as the coach trusts them and treats them with respect," she said. "Making athletes into better people, makes them into better players. Then a coach can start teaching the players the game. We have to remember that there's a lot of life's lessons taught in sports."

Coming to games also allows Stacy to meet all the players. "Whether it's the mom or grandma in me, I like to bring the athletes treats. I still love the fact that my daughters are helping someone else get what they received in life."

"Our parents are encouraging and after each game, make sure we know that our team is getting better," Morgan said.

Using their family as a team, Morgan said their dad would be the power forward, McKell would play post, Cassie would be the three guard, Chelsey the shooting and point guard, and Morgan the small forward. Their mom would also be a power forward.

At the end of the day, Chelsey said, I hope my players feel that I was fair and honest. I care about them both as a coach and friend.

It's all about them, Morgan added.

~ Susan Polster