

THE ATHLETES

DREW & BARBARA BLEDSOE:

"I inherited her arms."

Barbara Bledsoe was born in the little farming town of Ellensburg, Washington, where she grew up milking cows and feeding pigs. She could out-throw the boys in phys-ed classes in junior high and could out-hurdle them in high school, but because there were no sports for girls, she joined the Pep Club.

Barbara, the first college graduate in her family's history, married Mac Bledsoe (who she met in the 8th grade.) They had two children, Drew and Adam.

Drew began life in a 10-foot wide trailer home after Mac and Barbara came home from basic training in the army. Barbara, an English teacher, eventually taught Drew 7th grade English, where he would sit in the back of the class, chair tipped back, oblivious of the girls.

Barbara cried when Drew was cut as quarterback in the 7th grade, she cried almost a year before Drew left for college (Washington State), and to this day, still wants to wrap both her boys in a blanket and rock their hurt away. Barbara says her greatest weaknesses are being overprotective...and chocolate.

Drew, for his part, claims that his arm, with which he's thrown for more than 40,000 yards in the NFL, is inherited from his mother. He also says that he never felt that he needed to perform to be loved.

Barbara's favorite child is he who does the dishes. Barbara and Mac Bledsoe now run **Parenting with Dignity**, traveling around the country teaching parenting skills.

KENNY LOFTON & ROSIE LOU PERSON:

"I inherited her stubbornness."

Rosie Lou Person was born in 1927 and grew up on a plantation in Midway, Alabama, with one brother and eleven sisters. When she was 15, she began helping her father pick cotton, grow peas and plow the farm.

Rosie Lou left Alabama for East Chicago, met Early Person, had 7 children, and seven grandchildren, one of whom she raised, Kenny Lofton. Kenny, who was 4 1/2 pounds when he was born, was so tiny, his bassinet was a dresser drawer. It was Rosie Lou who taught Kenny how to throw his first baseball.

Kenny has overcome many obstacles to arrive at where he is today. He promised his grandmother that he would go to college – and he did, on a basketball scholarship to the University of Arizona. He did not start playing baseball until late in his college years. Kenny also overcame a stuttering problem as a child – inspired in many respects by the strength and courage of his grandmother.

Unbeknownst to many, Kenny's favorite food is banana pudding, and he has a very special recipe, which he will only share with Rosie Lou. His greatest accomplishment, notwithstanding all of his athletic achievements, was buying his grandmother her home.

Rosie Lou is blind, but this does not stop her from attending Kenny's games with the rest of her family and yelling at the refs when they call him out. Rosie says that Kenny inherited her stubbornness and that what she loves most about him is that he was always obedient and a very, very good boy...

Kenny, whose team always seemed to be going to the World Series when he was on the roster, was a six-time All-Star, four-time Gold Glove Award winner, and when he retired, was ranked 15th among all-time stolen bases. He is a member of the Cleveland Indians Hall of Fame.

Rosie passed away in 2014.

MIA & STEPHANIE HAMM:

"One thing I didn't inherit is her flexibility."

Stephanie Hamm was born in California, the eldest of 11 siblings and the daughter of an Air Force pilot. She found dance at an early age, as well as sand lot baseball. Her mother was a ball player with the Irish Maidens – so Mia's athletic ability traces back generations.

Stephanie married her high school sweetheart, Bill Hamm, and had four daughters. They also adopted 2 sons. When Garrett, an eight-year-old boy's boy, was adopted into a household of girls who read and played drama games, "he just wanted to get out the door, jump on his bike, and run

like the wind. When Mia (five at the time) saw that, she just ran right out the door after him. She made him feel at home in this family, and that was the beginning of the release of her real self.”

Mia quickly picked up any sport Garrett played, including football in the seventh grade. Garrett called her his “secret weapon.”

Stephanie says that Mia’s best attribute is her compassion, and that Mia inherited her face, her eyes, as well as her temper.

Though her daughter is considered the greatest player in women’s soccer history, and famous for her intensity on the field, as a spectator Stephanie still doesn’t get wrapped up in the details of the game, preferring to enjoy its simpler pleasures. “I get involved with the personalities and how they’re playing that day. I love all of these women that play for the national team. It’s always amazed me that we could be at the World Cup in China, sitting in the stands, this little group of Americans, and the Chinese would come over to me and tap me on the shoulder and say, “You number nine, you nine? My girl, my girl!”

Stephanie was a founding member of Liv In the Game, a non-profit organization aimed at empowering girls through physical activity and sports.

CAMMI, TONY & NATALIE GRANATO:

“I inherited her ability to talk and chat.”

Natalie Francis Granato grew up in LaGrange, Illinois, in the 1950s playing catch with her dad, who played minor league ball. However, because there were no sports for girls, Natalie became a cheerleader and sang in the school opera. She also met Don Granato. Their first date was a Blackhawks hockey game.

They had six children, all of whom played hockey. Cammi began playing hockey to fill in for her three older brothers who needed a fourth teammate. It was then as a youngster that Cammi assumed she would become a Blackhawk. It never occurred to Cammi (or her brothers at that point) that girls could not play professional hockey.

Tony overcame a life-threatening injury in 1996 to return to active duty with the San Jose Sharks. He retired from hockey last year and is now color-commentating. Cammi won an Olympic Gold medal in 1998 and a silver in 2002.

Natalie says that she has influenced Cammi that she can be a lady no matter what she does -and that Tony can achieve anything if he works hard enough.

Natalie has estimated that she has driven at least 48,472 miles to and from hockey games, yelled herself hoarse at over 10,000 games and kissed 349 hockey boo-boos. She is still counting...

ERIK & ELLEN WEIHENMAYER:

"I inherited her grace."

Ellen Weihenmayer grew up in Jay, Florida, which is rural as rural can be. Ellen's family grew vegetables, made their own clothes and bartered for most everything they needed. Ellen was a majorette, popular and was crowned "Miss Soybean Queen" in high school.

She met Ed Weihenmayer, a Marine attack-jet pilot, in Pensacola, Florida. He dared not approach. She winked at him. Twice.

They married and had Erik. Erik began to lose his eyesight at an early age. It was Ellen who insisted that Erik attend a regular school. She refused to send him to a school for the blind. Erik vacuumed, cleaned his room, rode his bike. "If he bumped the vacuum into the wall, he bumped the vacuum into the wall," recalled Ed.

Erik inherited Ellen's sense of mischievousness – he loved throwing eggs at cars – mooning seniors -although as his sight worsened – he began to feel lost. It was wrestling which helped him make the transition into blindness – particularly throwing a sighted kid to the mat.

Ellen died in a car accident when Erik was 16. The family began to hike and trek as a means to cope with her death. Ed would steer Erik down mountainous terrain. "It was the beginning of something pretty cool," says Erik. Twenty years later, Erik stood on the top of Mount Everest.

"I've been looking for my mother in all the wrong places," Erik says. "When I'd visit her grave, I could never find her there... she is the crunch of snow under my feet. She is the rock warmed by the sun.

She is the wind in my face..."

SARAH & REBA FISHER:

"I inherited her self-driven personality."

Reba Fisher was born just minutes after her twin sister, Robin. A tomboy, Reba would race go-karts in the backyard race pit that her father built. Reba met Dave Fisher at a go-kart race in Commercial Point, Ohio -beating him. He relentlessly followed her from race to race, trying to avenge his loss, and fell in love in the process. They married and had Sarah Fisher.

Reba bought Sarah her first car—a pink Barbie pedal car—when Sarah was 4. Sarah began racing Quarter-Midget cars at the age of 5 – and from there it was speed, speed, speed. Sarah raced at her first Indy 500 at 19, becoming the youngest woman ever to do so. Last spring she finished 2nd at the Grand Prix of Miami, stunning the racing world.

Though their house has a fully-outfitted race shop in the backyard, Reba, a school teacher, has always stressed the importance of education. Sarah was an A-student in high school and is earning a college degree while she races full-time in the Indy Racing League.

Reba doesn't like it when Sarah speeds on the highway, but she thoroughly trusts her daughter to handle an Indy car at speeds of 229 miles per hour. Perhaps it's in their blood—Sarah's racing roots trace back to Reba's mother, one of the first female aviators in Ohio. Fly fast. Drive Fast.

GRANT & JANET HILL:

"I inherited her ears."

Janet Hill grew up in segregated New Orleans, the conscientious daughter of parents who were both professionals. An only child, Janet was doted on by her father. "She ran the show," says Grant. In 1965, she left for Wellesley College, which was "all female and all white" Two days later Janet called home to her father with a plan. "He was going to bring me home, transfer me to Tulane, and because I was so miserable—buy me a car," she recalls. Only her mother answered the telephone. And the rest is history. Her mother, Vivian McDonald, insisted that Janet remain at Wellesley. Janet stayed and became a mathematician.

Janet met Yale football star (and soon-to-be NFL star Calvin Hill) after a Harvard-Yale Game, married, and they had Grant. Grant grew up, very tall and very shy. “I just wanted to be normal and I wasn’t” recalls Grant.

Janet, “The General” was very strict. “All the other kids were sneaking out of the house. I’d get up to go to the bathroom and my mother would peek around the corner -where are you going..?” says Grant.

Janet recalls those days with a gleam in her eye. She laughs when talking about her favorite movie, 48 hours, which she also insists is Grant’s favorite movie. She also says a little piece of her died when Grant went to Duke and majored in history as opposed to mathematics.

Janet, formerly a Trustee of Wellesley College and a successful consultant in Washington, DC, is about to spoil her new granddaughter, courtesy of Grant’s wife, Grammy-nominated Tamia Washington Hill. “I’m going to have issues with that” says Grant.

RULON & VIRGINIA GARDNER:

“I inherited her heart.”

Virginia Gardner was born 5 minutes behind her twin sister Ginger, prior to World War II. Virginia grew up in Arizona and joined every activity throughout her high school years. After high school, she joined the Church of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) and became a Danforth Home Economics Fellowship Winner for Arizona, working with the USDA to teach nutrition, canning and sewing to homemakers. She met Reed Gardner and had nine children. Rulon was her baby.

Life was not easy on the farm. Rulon fed cows and had difficulty reading – his teachers did not think he could graduate from high school, never mind college. Virginia, who was a nurse, would come home at night and tutor Rulon late into the night. Rulon, who was teased because of his size and learning difficulties, was encouraged by Virginia to persist.

Rulon graduated from high school, then from junior college, and finally from the University of Nebraska. Virginia is most proud that every one of her children graduated from college and several of them have advanced degrees.

When Rulon reached the Olympic final in Sydney, he faced an opponent anyone's mother would fear: Alexander Karelin of Russia, undefeated in 14 years, whose signature move was hoisting 286-pound opponents over his head and slamming them head first into the mat. The only time he had wrestled Rulon, he had done it three times, annihilating him 5-0.

Family members made Virginia promise to sit on an inside seat so she couldn't run from the arena. From there she witnessed one of the greatest upsets in Olympic history, as Rulon won 1-0. Rulon won the gold medal, defying all expectation—as he had all of his life. With the encouragement and support of his mother Virginia.

BRANDI CHASTAIN & LARK CHASTAIN:

"I inherited her smile."

Lark Chastain was born in Fort Benning, Georgia and led an exciting life as a child, as her father was the Army's USO liaison for all of the stars and celebrities who visited. She dined with the likes of Bob Hope, quickly developing her winning personality.

Lark attended San Jose State University and became a stewardess. She married her high school sweetheart, Roger Chastain, and they had two children, Brandi and Chad. She bought Brandi dolls and doll carriages – all to no avail. Brandi shook off ballet and tap dancing – and took to soccer with a vengeance—sleeping in her uniform for 2 weeks. She also excelled at any sport she tried. She joined her brother's baseball team, filling in for a player who was injured. When that player came back, it was Brandi's brother who was asked to leave the team, not Brandi.

Lark, a vocal spectator, would travel to Brandi's matches with a huge yellow megaphone (completely unnecessary according to Brandi). It was taken away from Lark by a referee as a prohibited mechanical device. "To this day, I always know where my mother is in the stands," says Brandi.

Brandi's penalty kick that won the 1999 World Cup is one of the most famous moments in sports, but Lark points out that Brandi may have learned more from being cut from the US women's team back in 1993: "On the inside, she was dying, but she said in retrospect, 'That made me a better person.' She would handle losses far better than us. She was wise beyond her years, even at that age, and I've probably learned as much from her as she's ever learned from me."

Lark passed away in 2002.

MOLLY BARKER & MARY WILMER:

"I inherited her breasts... neither of us have any."

Mary Wilmer grew up in Dunkirk, New York during the Depression. She chased her two brothers and rode her horse, Shillelagh. In high school, Mary went to a boarding school in Maryland, became the May Queen and captained her basketball team. She went off to Smith College and quit to marry Henry Wilmer (causing her father to have a fit).

Mary had 4 children. Mary also began to drink heavily -beginning a lifelong battle with alcohol. It was her daughter, Molly, who helped her begin the first steps of fighting the addiction with running. One block at a time. Then one mile at a time.

Molly inherited the family trait and herself fought this battle. While out on a run, Molly had a epiphany. She had to do two things. Stop drinking. And empower younger women to stop feeling that they had to be other than who they were. Molly launched **Girls on the Run**, a 12-week program which empowers young girls with skills to enhance self-esteem and confidence.

Mary passed away in 2002. She outran alcoholism. She beat lung cancer. She lifted weights and wore Birkenstocks. She loved Molly for her twinkle in her eye, for her generosity of spirit, and for inspiring a new generation of girls to "have the self-esteem that I never had."

SHAQUILLE O'NEAL & LUCILLE HARRISON:

"I inherited her calmness."

Lucille Harrison was raised in Newark, New Jersey, a very tall and shy girl. It was Lucille's mother who taught her to be proud of her height, of who she was – and Lucille has, in turn, taught each of her children to be proud of who they are. Lucille had Shaquille when she was 17 and overcame many obstacles to support her young son. She came off of welfare, found a job, and supported Shaquille. She met Phillip Harrison, a staff sergeant in the Army, and had three other children.

Shaquille was extremely intelligent – and rebellious growing up. "He had a mind of his own," says Lucille. "Anything we wanted him to do, he did exactly the opposite." Shaquille describes himself as a juvenile delinquent – until he found basketball.

Shaquille didn't make his high school team until his junior year, but his parents helped him learn to work hard and persevere. When Shaquille left Louisiana State University early to enter the NBA draft, he told his parents he would return to complete his degree—a promise he has already fulfilled. Now Lucille is attending college—an opportunity that she says she did not have so many years ago.

A dominant player and personality, Shaquille describes his mother as an angel. “Whenever I lose my keys, I call my mother – even if she is 1000 miles away.” Lucille is protective of her son – and he of her. A fact, she says, that always has been and always will be.