Ryan Longwell, Football and Family

By Amanda Healy

The humming of energy intensified at Lambeau Field as fans filled the stadium for the first home game since the Green Bay Packers won Super Bowl XXXI the season prior. Packer fans, more commonly known as Cheeseheads, take immense pride in their team. The city of Green Bay owns the organization, adding a unique level of devotion that most teams don't experience. With this came high expectations, and as the banner was raised, rookie Ryan Longwell felt the pressure as he prepared to kick the ball for his first career field goal after they stalled on the first drive against the Chicago Bears. As the ball was suspended in the air, he shut his eyes for just a moment. The kick could have been good, or it could have been bad, but no matter what happened, he got to the NFL. He made it.

Growing up, sports played an integral role in Ryan's life, trying different activities like soccer and baseball, but the course of his life shifted when he attempted to kick a football—his days soon consisted of attending school and then coming home to practice kicking over and over again while watching televised games to see how professional kickers operated. His first kick in high school was 44 yards, something no one had seen in the town of Bend, Oregon. With his dedication, Ryan attended the University of California, Berkeley on a scholarship as a punter and kicker, eventually setting him up for a 16-year-long career in the NFL playing for the Packers, Minnesota Vikings, and a brief time with the Seattle Seahawks.

UC Berkeley coach Steve Mariucci left to coach the San Francisco 49ers, where Ryan signed as a free agent, but after two minicamps, he was released. The NFL carries fewer kickers than other positions, and with limited spots available, he was unsure if he would get another opportunity to play at a renowned level. When the call came from the Packers, you may picture stereotypical excitement and jumping with joy, but there was a sense of disappointment. After being released from a team, you are on the waiver wire; bids can be placed, and the worst team to place a bid would get you. Yet the Packers won the Super Bowl the year before,

meaning no one else placed a bid on him. Ryan would save the $800 he would make each week of training camp because that is all he had if it didn't work out. Subconscious questions pondered if he was really good enough to play at that level, but those thoughts were outmatched by determination and focus. "I was kind of the mindset that if you have a plan B, you are not really all into plan A, and I was kind of all into plan A. I was going to give this everything I got, and if or when it doesn't work out, I will figure it out from there," said Ryan.

At the age of 22, Sarah Kehoe was working as an anchor at the local news station in Bend, Oregon, where she was assigned to interview the "hometown hero" who just had his big break. After the interview, Ryan asked her on a date, and around two years later, Sarah was walking down the aisle at a beautiful church in Bend holding black magic roses, becoming Mrs. Longwell. She was with Ryan's family when he got picked up from Green Bay, and the support that they have shown each other has taken many forms. Whether it was the news station asking Sarah to give private details about Ryan's career or having to fly weekly to ensure their children could spend time with their father, their commitment has never wavered.

Having lived in an apartment above a garage, Ryan was ready to build a home and establish roots. Soon after buying property and beginning building, the complications of getting to and from Oregon to Wisconsin presented themselves; eventually, they decided to move to Green Bay, a decision that sparked Sarah's interest in flipping houses. While living in the brutally cold Wisconsin weather, Ryan and Sarah gave birth to a baby boy, Reece Longwell, and a few years later, they had a girl, Shaye Longwell. While they were both born in Green Bay, they really grew up in Windermere, Florida, about a 20-minute drive from Disney. Sarah and Ryan grew up loving Disney, and Sarah's sister, Anne Shrake, had been completing the Disney College Program, so she looked at land for them. Soon, Ryan got a warmer climate and a golf course that he could enjoy during the off-season.

When Ryan was in season, his weeks were physically and mentally demanding. After being picked up by the Packers, he realized that it was not just a game. It is a business, and you

gain that perspective quickly. "I was kind of tunnel vision, and as naive as I was and as dumb as that sounds, I just thought I was physically talented enough, but more importantly, I thought I had the head to do it. I thought I was mentally really, really strong," Ryan said. In a typical week, he would have a game on Sunday, Monday would be a recovery day with lift and attending meetings and watching film, Tuesday would focus on the community attending charity events and appearances, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday would be practice from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., often getting out earlier on Fridays, Saturdays would change depending if the game was home or away. Then, he would repeat it week after week. It's the same routine, a pattern where it's easy to lose track of time and hard to remember what day it is. Entering the league, Ryan and Sarah were dating, but then marriage and kids came along. Significant life changes happened while he continued to play, impacting his outlook on life; however, all this was happening, and he was still expected to kick the same.

Growing up, I went to the same school as Reece and Shaye, and when we were in lower school, it was normal for them to be gone for a couple of days every two weeks to watch Ryan play home games. Sometimes, they would stay for up to two weeks to see back-to-back games. While this lifestyle is foreign to most, it was all Reece and Shaye knew. It was their dad's job, not a superior way of life. That is exactly how Ryan and Sarah wanted it, making sure their children understood that some dads work at a bank, some go to work at a school, and some go and play football. There is no difference. They are all jobs, and Ryan's job was not more special than anyone else's.

When reflecting on her unique way of growing up, Shaye told me, "It got to the point where it felt so normal to me that when my friends would ask, 'What? Are you leaving again?' I would be like, 'Wait, you're not leaving again? You don't do this?' In that sense, it felt so normal because we did it for over half of my life." Still, it was hard with so much distance; getting a phone at a young age was helpful to FaceTime Ryan whenever she wanted. You value time as a family when it is only available in bursts and celebrate holidays and special occasions on

other days when scheduling allows it. “We are a super close family, and I think football brought us a lot closer because not a lot of people go through the same schedule and routine like we went through,” Shaye said.

Both kids took after two of Ryan's interests: sports and the Packers. His son Reece is now interning in the business operational side of the Green Bay Packers; some employees remember him visiting as a baby and now work alongside him. He gets to experience what Ryan got to experience, especially since the kids were too young to truly understand Green Bay, having seen more Vikings games. Shaye grew up playing competitive tennis and decided she wanted to play in college in middle school, around the same time Ryan retired. These aspirations were fulfilled as she played at Louisiana State University, a very competitive SEC school. "When he retired, we got a lot closer because we were making up for a lot of lost time," Shaye said, which they specifically got during drives to tennis tournaments where it was just the two of them. Ryan had a perspective on the world of sports that many adults do not have. He wasn't overbearing or crazy like the stereotypical tennis parent, but he always encouraged Shaye to give her full effort because that is all you can do.

When the kids were younger, during the off-season, Ryan worked out in the guest home they converted into a gym. Shaye would come in and sit, watching the entire workout, not saying anything. "Shaye is the hardest worker I have ever seen; she just is. No one was ever going to outwork her," Ryan said. They both share very similar qualities. Ryan's dedication to football never stopped for a moment. After every season, the Longwells would go on a vacation to reconnect, often a Disney cruise. Even in Europe, he would wake up at 5 a.m. to work out before family activities began because you can't shut off being a professional athlete. Shaye explained he always did a good job fitting it in without making it a hassle for the rest of the family.

Every sport has rivalries, and the Packers vs Vikings rivalry is filled with hatred. Not many people can say they have had 75,000 people full-throat booing at them, but Ryan has.

When he signed with the Vikings, most Cheeseheads were furious, but the NFL is a business. When Ryan returned for his first game back at Lambeau Field, the crowd let their wrath be heard, which was particularly long due to the TV broadcast. Some may shy away from all the pressure, but Ryan chuckled, thinking it's kind of an epic moment, and got his head in the game because you have one goal: to make the kick. Three years later, when he returned with Brett Favre, teammate and close friend, they also booed him out of the building.

Signing with the Vikings sparked controversy after he spent multiple years with the Packers. He was unsure if Green Bay would allow him to come back and retire. After attending a golf event in Wisconsin and seeing how excited the fans were to see him, conversations started, and he eventually signed a one-day contract to retire as a Packer. Not only did he retire, but he was inducted into the Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame. He is a man who never chased records because he never wanted to set a cap; he focused on the day that was in front of him, the next kick, doing whatever he could at the moment. In the process, he surpassed the records of the greats who played before him, scoring more points than all of them.

When I was younger, I remember when the Shrakes, Ryan’s in-laws, flew to Green Bay for his induction into the Packers Hall of Fame. The elegant ceremony was held in a banquet hall at the stadium entrance, with a multiple-course meal and an exhibit dedicated to him. One photo that hangs in the display was the moment after his first career field goal when he closed his eyes briefly; not only did he make it to the NFL, but he broke records, had incredible career-defining moments, and was an inductee. I was always curious why Jude Clover, the father of one of my classmates, went as well. I knew he was a Cheesehead, but there was more weight behind the invitation, a true testament to Ryan’s generosity. Jude's father was a beloved Packers fan who had recently passed away. Ryan and Sarah felt it was only fitting for him to attend the ceremony to celebrate his dad. It was an incredibly emotional night in many different ways, but it did not matter who was around the table; Ryan introduced everyone as family and attributed his success to them, honoring Sarah and her sacrifices more than anyone.

Once retired, Ryan needed a break, but then he started spotting problems with how kickers were being coached in college football. He knew the only way to fix it was to get involved. He spends his time now working at UC Berkeley and has the perspective to help these young athletes in ways other coaches cannot. If you were to go into Ryan's office right now, you would see two photos. One photo is a scoreboard reading 3-0, his first career kick. The other is of him and Brett Favre returning to Lambeau Field together, standing at the 50-yard line as captains at the coin toss. The whole stadium was booing them, but they couldn't help but think of their old teammates who would love to be in that position. These moments reflect the commitment of a man who loved to kick a football as a kid and turned it into a career, living a unique yet challenging lifestyle, but at its center is a family that had to make sacrifices because nothing is more important than spending time together.