



From Post to Post: One Woman’s Story of Basketball, Family and the Freedom She Was Born to Protect

For Immediate Release

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For many, it takes a lifetime to find a calling. For a select few, it’s been right in front of them all along.

The daughter of Sergeant First Class Ralph Bird and Colonel Victoria Post, Kelly Jaye Post was born November 30, 1996 in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, a town known for its 251-square-mile military base that houses more than 50,000 active duty military personnel and a total population of more than 250,000, making it the world’s largest military installation. Right at home were the Posts, Kelly’s father fighting in Vietnam more than two decades before their youngest of three was born, her mother active duty through the early-1990s.

While their days of combat had concluded, their days of moving for their military had not, the family of five packing up when Kelly was three-years-old to move to Belgium for two years as Ralph and Victoria continued the careers that brought them all around the U.S., into enemy territory and to non-combat international destinations that spanned the globe. A northern European country more than 4,000 miles from the place the Posts called home, there may not have been much geographical comfort to be found in the early stages of their stay in Belgium, but it was a place in which Kelly would find a comfort that would far outlast her time overseas.

“That’s where I first picked up a basketball,” she recalled. “My older sister was playing rec league and like any younger sibling I wanted to do what she was doing. So while she was having practice, my dad would take me one court over and try to teach me how to play basketball. From there on out, I loved it. I played other sports like soccer and tee ball while I was growing up, but basketball was always my true love.”

The Posts love for country and service brought them to Belgium, but once they completed their duties and returned to Fort Bragg two years later, they brought with them a youngest daughter infatuated with her own passion, one that would grow as quickly as the bond with her father.

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One of the brave and selfless protectors of the freedoms his family, friends, colleagues and Americans from coast to coast enjoy, it's easy to paint Sergeant First Class Ralph Bird as a fearless demigod wrapped in red, white and blue from morning until night.

The Posts paint a different picture.

"A teddy bear," Kelly said. "Very goofy, always there for me. My sister and I were definitely daddy's girls growing up."

"He was all about kids," Kelly's mother Vicki said. "He was committed to developing Kelly, and the other kids in the area, to ensure that they had what we believe is a good start – having a strong family, learning leadership and cooperation through team sports – and he spent a lot of time with all of them to make sure of that."

Kelly's first unofficial coach in the rec centers of Belgium and in a more official capacity once the Posts returned stateside and she began playing on a team at six-years-old, Ralph would invest limitless effort and energy into her game as coach of her church league, rec league and AAU teams. But Ralph's lessons weren't limited to basketball.

"He held me to a higher standard both on and off the court," Kelly said. "He was always reminding me that there was something I needed to work on, that the most successful people do the hard things that no one else wants to do and that someone is always watching."

Firm but fair teachings, Kelly was bought in to what her father instilled in her, whether it was the work-ethic developed via long hours in the gym both during and after practice, the hustle it took to play the defense-first team basketball that he preached as she rose through the ranks and turned heads as she approached high school, or any of the myriad of qualities that made Sergeant First Class Bird the man he was during Kelly's childhood.

"He taught me everything I know," Kelly said. "He was my best friend."

Spurred on by the guidance and tutelage of her father, Kelly was on the verge of a big moment, as at just 12-years-old her hard work was paying off in a big way. Not even halfway through her seventh-grade-year, the budding prep star made the varsity team at Fayetteville Academy, an exceptional and extended chance to prove to nearby name programs like Kellie Harper's North Carolina State Wolfpack and Sylvia Hatchell's North Carolina Tar Heels that she was someone to consider for a Power 5 roster spot.

But Kelly's best friend couldn't be there.

Battling complications from surgeries related to a long-held condition Ralph was struggling to manage, he was moved to an Asheboro-based care center while he continued his recovery and Kelly prepared to make her varsity debut the next week. Making the two-hour drive from Fayetteville to Asheboro to visit Ralph each weekend, the Posts stayed by his side. But Kelly's brother Courtney Bird's wedding fell the weekend before Ralph was scheduled to return home, so the family made the rare decision to stay local with Courtney's wedding and Kelly's tournament within days of each other while Ralph's pending return home was on the horizon.

"My brother's wedding was on a Saturday," Kelly said. "I remember calling my dad that Sunday and telling him I loved him and I'd call him the next day. I was supposed to see him later that week."

In the middle of Monday's practice, Vicki walked in. Kelly wouldn't get that chance.

Sergeant First Class Ralph Bird, suddenly gone at the age of 63.

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The man that introduced her to the game and molded her love for it was no longer there, complications from his post-recovery care taking a father and husband from Kelly, her siblings and her mother too soon.

"I didn't play that first game but I was out there for our second one," Kelly said of her first seventh-grade varsity tournament. "To this day I can't tell you what happened, I had total tunnel vision, the only thing I remember is that I went all out that day. It was really emotional, basketball was my outlet, and more than ever I wanted to make my dad proud."

A part of her was empty, but all of her was strong.

"I promised him before he passed away that I was going to play Division I college basketball," Kelly said. "I started out wanting to be better than my sister, I conquered that, and then there was this new desire, this promise I made. I had to do it for him."

So Kelly went to work. Countless hours per day, camps every weekend, conditioning and workouts over and over for the next six years fueled by a burning need to be better than she was the day before.

"There were times I was playing in rec league, church league and varsity all at once," Kelly said. "There was one summer I was only home for a week because I went to 21 camps. I had a basketball trainer, a speed coach, my training was really regimented and it seemed almost constant. There was a whole new gear I needed to take it to."

Then, at long last, her pain, hard work, heartache and determination paid off.

"I've known Coach Hatchell since I was nine-years-old," Kelly said of the Basketball Hall of Fame member and longtime University of North Carolina women's basketball head coach. "We have always had a great relationship. It was a dream to go to UNC."

An unmistakable figure in women's basketball, Hatchell had already solidified herself among the legends of the sport. A 1994 NCAA champion, Hatchell made two more Final Fours in the mid-2000s, filed away 8 Atlantic Coast Conference tournament titles and took home two national coach of the year awards, her tremendous collegiate coaching career running concurrently with her time as an assistant and head coach for USA Basketball, winning five gold medals at various worldwide competitions including the 1986 Olympics.

Kelly couldn't ask for a better situation.

But there was a problem.

Following Hatchell's tremendous success at UNC throughout the two preceding decades came a foundation-shaking academic scandal in Chapel Hill. Among the teams affected was women's basketball, which would lose

multiple scholarships over the ensuing years, including what would've been Kelly's. Still, she was promised a preferred walk-on spot to the Power 5 program, an opportunity she was not going to turn down.

The school, though, ironically known for its stringent admissions standards, was under the microscope after the academic fraud, slapped with probation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission, one of its accreditors. Unintended consequences followed, including a giant one laid at the feet of a standout basketball player, and more importantly, student.

"They didn't have the scholarship that year so I was going to be a preferred walk-on and get the scholarship the second year," Kelly said. "I had to be admitted, though, as a regular student. I had a 4.0 grade point average, but my SAT scores weren't very good."

Without any flexibility because of past transgressions, UNC couldn't help Kelly, and she didn't get in.

"It was heartbreaking," she said. "I was set on going to UNC, it hurt."

A devastating blow for the acclaimed, stat-stuffing sensation that collected 25 double-doubles, 10 triple-doubles and one seldom-seen, often-pedestalized quadruple-double, Kelly was intent on reloading rather than imploding. Her promise to her father still on the table, she pivoted to fellow North Carolina Division I side Campbell University, who had offered her a scholarship earlier in the recruiting cycle and were anxious to have the would-be-Power-5 prospect grace their gym.

But from a sprinkle of poor timing came a downpour of bad luck.

In yet another unforeseen occurrence, Wanda Watkins, head coach of the Fighting Camels for 35 years that amassed over 500 victories and 10 NCAA Tournament appearances, stepped away from coaching. The second tried and true all-time great to give Kelly an offer, Watkins would stay in administration at the university, but with the regime change at the head of the women's basketball program, Ronny Fisher, having not seen Kelly play, would take the proposal off the table, though did offer the incoming freshman a chance to earn her scholarship back by proving it on the court.

Kelly would barely get the chance.

Able to withstand the academic scandal at UNC and the coaching carousel at Campbell, it seemed the final nail in her Division I coffin came with an ankle injury that sidelined the freshman for the season, the cost of Campbell without a scholarship too much for her to be able to afford, never able to show her new coach what he needed to see to reinstate the original offer granted to the point guard.

"The biggest thing was the mental part," Kelly said of the injury. "It wasn't fun, when you have to sit out for such a long period of time your confidence can really struggle. It was the first time I had not been able to play for that long of a time in my life."

Bad things come in threes, and this trio of consecutive bad breaks could have very easily ended Kelly's dream.

"It was going to go one of two ways," she said. "I could dwell on those 18 months and let them break me, or I could work to make sure I got back to Division I. For me, it was an easy choice – I love basketball."

Through the local angle and a series of connections via former teammates and coaches that vouched for her abilities, Kelly, without any Division I options, transferred to the University of Mount Olive to remember the kind of basketball player she once was.

“I needed to get back out there,” Kelly said. “After the injury and everything that went on before that, I needed to get myself back together.”

She did exactly that, playing her usual well-rounded basketball and starting 48 times in her three years at the Division II school, the team winning 47 games and piling up 37 league wins during that time, their best campaign coming in Kelly’s one full season as a starter. When her senior day came, the do-everything undergraduate was putting the finishing touches on her kinesiology and biochemistry double-major which she teamed with a double-minor in business and coaching, a lifetime of education fit into one four-year span. Most impressively, the Division II ADA Academic Achievement Award Winner, three-time Conference Carolinas All-Academic awardee and Presidential Honor Roll recipient completed her four years on-time despite all of the setbacks in her recruiting process and the misfortune of her freshman year. Pair all of that with her fulfilling collegiate career on the court, and the Fort Bragg-native could close the book on her college life knowing she had accomplished more in four years than many do in a lifetime.

But something was still missing.

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With a redshirt in-hand from Campbell thanks to the ankle injury that kept her from living out her Division I aspirations years earlier, Kelly was determined to find what she was looking for after exiting the University of Mount Olive.

“I knew I just had to find that one coach that believed in me,” she said. “I love the game. I was never going to give up on that Division I dream.”

ETSU had just the coach.

“Kelly reached out to us during the summer,” Buccaneer women’s basketball head coach Brittney Ezell said. “When I saw the film that she sent from Mount Olive I saw a tough kid, a smart player and someone with real leadership capabilities, so I got back in touch with her and it was an easy connection after that.”

Ezell was not only welcoming of Kelly as a basketball player, but of her want to re-ignite another aspect of her life, one that she knew from her first day in Fort Bragg.

“Kelly being from a military family we knew that was in her heart,” Ezell said. “I connected her with Lieutenant Colonel Shawn Dodge, the head of our ROTC at the time, and got out of the way. We support Kelly, and all of our players, in setting up their life after basketball.”

It’s a life Kelly’s lineage is very familiar with, her two siblings following in their mother and father’s shoes, brother Courtney joining the ROTC at North Carolina State years earlier and later deployed when Kelly was 14, her sister Erin Post-Bird enlisting right out of high school. Kelly’s plans made the Posts a perfect five-for-five.

“We were always together as a family,” Vicki said. “If we weren’t at home together we were always out exploring, being active. It was pretty non-stop, that was our lifestyle. We’ve been together in this, too, we’re a

military family that's part of a bigger family that is the Army. It makes me feel good we raised Kelly in such a way to follow that family tree and go down the same course that we have."

Academically, with all of her undergraduate education fresh in her mind, Kelly wasn't slowing down, as she would be begin her Masters Degree in Sports Management while taking part in women's basketball and the ROTC at ETSU, a mentally rigorous program to go along with two physically taxing tasks. Classes began and it was business as usual in August and into September, Kelly even periodically twiddling her thumbs in comparison to the 90-100 hours per week she dedicated to school, basketball and part-time work at her previous institutions.

Then preparation for her second shot at the Division I level kicked in.

"It was rough," she said. "I was up at 5:30 during the preseason to go to physical training, then I'd have to go run seven miles with my troop, then weights, I'd get some breakfast, do some homework, go to conditioning, have some lunch, then go to an individual workout with basketball, then a shoot-around. Literally five workouts a day."

All that while finalizing which direction her life would be headed.

Undecided if she truly wanted to pursue a career in the military or not, that same month she was called into the field by the ROTC for the troop's once-a-semester field training exercises. Taken to an undisclosed, though secure, location, cadets are dropped into an area in which they must seek out various checkpoints with just field equipment, a compass, map and their sense of direction as tools with which to navigate. As part of the exercises cadets must stay in the often-wooded areas overnight with someone awake at all times to keep watch. To simulate life in combat situations, ambushes are included both for, and against, the cadets, who are assessed based on performance throughout the weekend. On Kelly's weekend, it was raining, muddy and cold.

"I loved it," she said. "It was so much fun. I was in a leadership position and I think I might have gotten three hours of sleep over those four days. I know it sounds bad, but there's so much adrenaline, and in the leadership position I was in watching out for my cadets, my soldiers, there's a lot of bonding there. I have a desire to do that with people that are with me out there, that have my same mindset."

Kelly exited the weekend knowing what she would be doing after she leaves ETSU with her Masters Degree, following in her mother and father's footsteps in forming her life around defending her country.

"I want to be in the military for 20-plus years," Kelly said. "My goal is to be active duty. I know people think I'm crazy when I tell them this but the thought of being deployed doesn't bother me. I love the nitty gritty, I love the grind, the hard work. I love to be surrounded by people that value the things I do – people that want to make a difference, protect their country, serve their people - it excites me knowing I could be on the front lines making a difference protecting my friends, family and everyone here at home. That's what it's all about, I want to make a difference in this world."

But before that noble pursuit, unfinished business on the basketball court beckoned.

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Having made it through a pressure-packed October and the rough and tumble, 5:30 a.m., five-workout days of preseason, Nov. 28 approached, ETSU's season bumped back 18 days due to COVID-19. Their opener against

Longwood would mark a big day for the program, simply getting underway a big victory in the uncertain times of 2020, but also a big day for Kelly, who had fought through bad break after setback after bump in the road to stand on a Division I basketball court four years after she had her only chance to do so taken away.

If and when she got the chance, she wouldn't forget the person she promised this day would come.

"I wear number 20, it's the number he gave me when he coached me on my first team when I was six-years-old," Kelly said. "On all my basketball shoes I always write his initials and the date he passed away on my right shoe. My dad is always there."

And at the 5:58 mark of the second quarter Nov. 28, 2020, he was smiling. Kelly completed her long journey back to the Division I level, appearing in ETSU's 62-56 season-opening victory over Longwood, the Bucs coming from behind to claim a big road win to get their 2020-21 campaign underway. While she played a solitary minute in the contest, it may be the most memorable one of her collegiate career.

"I'll never forget it," Kelly said. "I didn't think I was going to play that day because I was actually quarantined until the day before the game, and I was exposed to someone that had COVID the day after the game, so it's almost like it was meant to be. I remember walking into the gym, putting my jersey on, warming up, it was all so surreal. Then when Coach Ezell called my name, I ran over to the scorer's table and I had to take a deep breath so I could calm down and remember what I was doing."

It didn't take her long to recall the game she loved, looking right at home as she stole the ball on her first play in a Blue and Gold uniform.

"That's when it hit me," Kelly said. "I'm really doing this."

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Kelly continued to mark off milestones on the court, making the first Division I start of her career in the team's Feb. 7 road game against Furman. In the momentous occasion, the graduate transfer would score seven points, grab four rebounds, take four steals and hand out three assists, the well-rounded game that once made her a top-flight Division I prospect on full display.

As she continued to pay tribute to her father through basketball, she was honoring both parents in the ROTC, turning in the highest score of any cadet throughout her company in her first semester at ETSU, promoted in semester two to Platoon Sergeant with 20 cadets reporting to her on everything from grades to nutrition plans. A part of teams all of her life, she now has her own, as the page begins to turn from one phase of her life to the next.

"I never thought as a kid I would say basketball is over for me," Post said. "I've been playing since I was four-years-old, so it's hard to believe this season of my life will end. Basketball has taught me so much, things I use now in the military like leadership and putting words into action. What I'm doing right now is a bit like coaching in the field, and all the training I've done to be a collegiate athlete has come in handy, because now I'm training to be a soldier."

Her training took a big step forward Jan. 25, as her mother conducted her ceremonial oath, a confirmation of one's dedication to join the Army in the future, obey the orders of the Commander In Chief and protect the Constitution of the United States.

“It’s really cool she has decided to do this,” Vicki said. “I’m so proud of her. Ralph would be so proud of her. Not of one aspect of her life, but of the complete person she has become over the years. She has the same values that we do as a family. She really cares about everyone she is with and everything she does. He lived that same way.”

In Kelly’s long, sordid journey to get to where she is, nothing came easy. There were twists, turns, disappointment and loss. When one thing fell into place, another fell through. When timing led one way, fate took her the other. But through it all she persevered, pushed through and pressed on until she found the place that fit, the final piece to the puzzle of a life she’s always known.

“The military was always an option,” she said. “Things didn’t really work out at Campbell, Mount Olive didn’t have the ROTC, but when I found out that ETSU did, it felt right. It feels like I found my home. To be able to be part of a Division I basketball team and begin to lay the foundation for my future of becoming an officer, it feels like a perfect match. I love ETSU, my only regret is I didn’t find this place sooner.”