

ESPN's Mayne perseveres despite personal tragedies

If ESPN anchor **Kenny Mayne** were an athlete, he'd be fodder for inspirational profiles. First, he flounders but still makes it to the majors. Then, he's blindsided by an off-field tragedy. Finally, he scores a workplace hole-in-one.

But Mayne, 38, didn't go through all that while tackling or hitting for a living. Instead, he was just trying to be entertaining.

Which makes Mayne's persistence all the more startling because he had to dispatch his droll one-liners during as difficult a situation as a parent can face.

Sunday, he'll mark the one-year anniversary of the death of a son after that boy's twin had been stillborn.

He'll also mark the end of his third month as a co-anchor, with **Dan Patrick**, of the late-night *SportsCenter* show on Thursdays through Sundays, which was perhaps ESPN's most-coveted studio job opening ever.

The experiences aren't comparable. "I hope my wife, Laura, and I were decent people before, not too caught up in worldly things. But now everything is so inconsequential. I'd trade everything to have those kids back, go back to building garbage cans or whatever."

Yes, he assembled garbage cans out in the rain in Seattle after he'd left a local TV station in 1989.

Having already had a job interview at ESPN, he admits: "I might have been full of myself. I wanted to run things my way so I left (Seattle)."

Today, strangers occasionally greet Mayne by calling out an on-air catch phrase like "Yahtzee," which he uses to call home runs. But when his colleagues in the garbage receptacle business recognized him from TV, he had some explaining to do — and didn't know exactly what to say. "So I said, 'It's another case of The Man keeping us all down.'"

He literally worked his way out of that job by running out of cans to assemble. Then, he made cold calls to sell prepaid legal insurance, the only job he could find, before becoming an MCI salesman.

But he kept pestering ESPN for freelance work, even a full-time job, without



Sports on TV
By Michael Hiestand

elaborating on what he did to pay his bills.

"I don't think they ever heard the exact nature of what I was doing. It was a pretty depressing time."

In 1994, he made it, sort of. He was hired for ESPN2, eventually hosting a show on auto racing, though he didn't know much about the sport.

His delivery is deadpan: He opened shows by thanking viewers for having electric-

ity.

Cut to May 1996, when Kenny and Laura are in Maine celebrating their first wedding anniversary. Creighton and Connor Mayne arrive four months premature; Connor, 1 pound, 7 ounces at birth, survives. But with liver, kidneys, eyes and lungs problems, he would require a half dozen surgeries.

Mayne commuted four hours for his car show as Laura stays at the boy's bedside in Maine. When he's back, Mayne tells his son about ballgames they'll someday attend, call horse races for him off the hospital TV and "reads *The New York Times* out loud to get him to sleep."

"It was thrilling in a way because we thought we were going to win," he says.

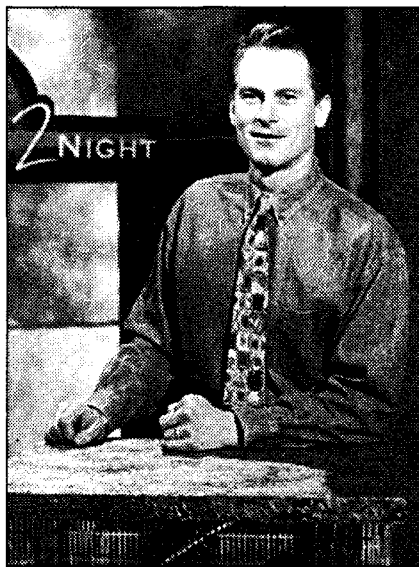
But on the night of Nov. 23, he says, "everything just crashed."

Subsequently, Mayne got the *SportsCenter* opening, created by the histrionic exodus of **Keith Olbermann**, and has become the Bob Newhart of TV sports — extra dry. He once reacted to a Tele-Prompter malfunction by deadpanning, "The pioneers didn't have them, and they flourished."

Mayne had better be clever. As ESPN/ABC Sports President **Steve Bornstein** puts it, "If we're not entertaining, we're nothing." Off the set, it's something else. Laura miscarried in September, but Mayne says they're determined to have a healthy family. "All we do is talk about the boys and what we'd do with them as if they're still here," he says. "We act like our whole family is still together."

Around the dial

Michele Tafoya will work her first



ESPN

Remembrances: ESPN anchor Kenny Mayne and wife still 'talk about the boys.'

Olympics as the late-night host of CBS' 1998 Winter Games coverage, replacing **Pat O'Brien**, who's left CBS. CBS executive **Rick Gentile**, who'll also pick a show co-host, says O'Brien's "Rock 'n Roll highlights" will return. "I've told Pat that's not his intellectual property," he says... Tiger Woods' TV impact continues: TBS' golf *Grand Slam* on Monday night drew a 1.3 rating, up 18% from last year. ... New ESPN college basketball game analysts: **Rolando Blackman**, who scored 17,000 points before retiring from the NBA in 1994, and **Quinn Buckner**, the ex-NBC analyst and Dallas Mavericks coach who'll work games and replace Clark Kellogg in ESPN's studio. Kellogg is expected to go to CBS.

TODAY'S TV LISTINGS

Times listed are Eastern (ET), and programs are live unless indicated.

College basketball: Men, Preseason NIT, second round, Rhode Island at Connecticut (ESPN, 7:30 p.m.), and Utah State at Florida State (ESPN, 9:30 p.m.); first round, Eastern Michigan at UNLV (ESPN, midnight).

NBA: Orlando at Cleveland (TBS, 8 p.m.).

NHL: N.Y. Islanders at Detroit (ESPN2, 7:30 p.m.).

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