

TV Close-Up: Kyle Chandler

by Eirik Knutzen

In early December 2005, Kyle Chandler launched - and terminated - his brief two-episode career as recurring character Dylan Young on "Grey's Anatomy." By the time his character was literally blown to bits in an explosive episode aptly titled "It's the End of the World" a month or two later, he had a well-deserved Emmy Award nomination for his considerable efforts.

KYLE CHANDLER - Kyle Chandler plays coach Eric Taylor on the TV series-version of football yarn 'Friday Night Lights.' CNS Photo courtesy of Michael Muller. And while shooting his contributions "Grey's Anatomy" at the ABC Studios/Prospect in the Hollywood-Los Feliz section of Los Angeles, the show's casting director introduced him to the head of casting for the TV series-version of football yarn "Friday Night Lights" - who happened to be working on the lot. It wasn't love at first sight.

"In fact, the 'FNL' guy didn't think I was right for the part of coach Eric Taylor and refused to see me at first," said Chandler, 41, who now speaks an easy, hybrid Texas-Georgia dialect. "But the 'Grey's Anatomy' casting lady insisted. I had no anticipation whatsoever when we finally sat down."

Their half-hour conversation mainly dealt with Chandler's understanding of the game and experiences as a football player. He probably didn't impress anyone as a high school freshman tackle at 5 foot 4 inches and 130 pounds, though he came back the following year after a growth spurt at 5 foot 11 inches and 200 muscular pounds.

"But the truth is that I was a good bench-warmer," he cheerfully admitted.

"FNL's" casting agent admitted that he already had someone else in mind for the Coach Taylor part, but would be in touch after Christmas if anything changed. Chandler - who had seen the 2004 feature film version of "Friday Night Lights" starring Billy Bob Thornton as coach Gary Gaines, based on H.G. Bissinger's book - didn't hold his breath. But after a Christmas vacation with his wife and two little girls, the call came and he was off to Texas on the next available flight.

The huge project is executive produced by Peter Berg - who wrote and directed the pilot episode, plus directed the movie it is based on - with plenty of help from uberproducer Brian Grazer ("The Da Vinci Code") and others. The school locale and cast of characters have changed, but the concept remains the same: why football is a religion and those who play it are demigods in the state of Texas.

Now set in in the fictional town of Dillon rather than Odessa, Texas, Chandler plays a local boy who did well and came back to coach the high school team in a quest for the state championship.

Connie Britton is Tami, his long-suffering, supportive wife. Scott Porter walks on water as team captain/quarterback Jason Street; Gaius Charles parts the Red Sea as vaunted running back Brian "Smash" Williams. The cast also features Zack Gilford, Minka Kelly and Aimee Teagarden.

Shot on locations in and around Austin, Texas, where the production company has build its own floodlighted stadium to accommodate night shooting, Chandler sometimes commutes to see his family - wife, TV screenwriter Katherine Kyl, plus daughters Sydney, 10, and Sawyer, 5 - in Los Angeles, or they join him on the set.

"Being a dad is the greatest," he chuckled. "I certainly appreciate the unconditional love going both ways. Most of all, I love sitting and talking to my kids. They give me information straight from their soul, heart and essence."

Born in Buffalo, N.Y., Chandler lived in a Chicago suburb until the entire family moved to the small community of Loganville, Ga., when he was 11.

After his father died unexpectedly as a young man, his mother opened a kennel to support and raise her four children. She did a great job, considering that one son is a lawyer, one daughter is a psychologist and the other is a chiropractor.

Chandler, never shy, started acting in high school after he quit football during his second year at the private George Walton Academy in nearby Monroe, Ga.

"I was a tackling dummy during my first year there on the football team, which won the state championship because they had a great coach," he said. "I got a taste of that glory."

But he quit the team halfway through the following season, shortly after his father passed on.

"I wasn't a very good football player and once that happened, I just didn't have a heart for it anymore," he said.

He subsequently enrolled as a pre-med student at the University of Georgia, but immediately discovered their drama department and soon found a reason to get up in the morning. Chandler dropped out of the university in 1988 - only seven units short of his bachelor's degree. It was either that or turn down a development deal with the ABC Network in Los Angeles.

So far, his motion picture credits include "Mulholland Falls" (1996) and "King Kong" (2005). He starred in the drama series "Homefront" (1991) and "Early Edition" (1999-2000) among many TV assignments.

The next step for the straight and unpretentious Chandler is promoting the 2007 release of "The Kingdom," another directorial effort from "FNL's" Peter Berg. A small role, it was an easy, three-day gig in Saudi Arabia for a U.S. government spy thriller set in the Middle East starring Jamie Foxx and Jennifer Garner.

"It's been a great year," he said. "'Grey's Anatomy' was very, very good to me."

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