

## **ESPN's Dan Patrick profile**

**By Jeff Louderback**

Deep in the bowels of Building One, on the sprawling ESPN complex in Bristol, Ct., the space-age SportsCenter set bustles with activity. Awaiting the end of a college football game on this Thursday night, Dan Patrick settles into his chair behind the anchor's desk as a myriad of lights dangle overhead and production assistants position themselves behind multi-angled cameras.

Even as Auburn finishes its rout of Wyoming and the familiar musical score that marks the beginning of SportsCenter - a program devoted sports fans consider required viewing - plays, the self-described "Ohio boy" Patrick reviews notes and devours scores and statistics.

Seconds later, the former Mason High School Comet is providing viewers with the sports highlights they crave while amusing viewers with his trademark catch phrases and dry humor along the way.

Scott Sullivan gets "the whiff" of Chipper Jones to preserve the Cincinnati Reds' 4-3 win over Atlanta. In San Francisco, Barry Bonds hits it deep, and it's "gawn." On professional golfer Jesper Parnevik's colorful sweater vest and pants, Patrick quips, "Not many guys can get away with an outfit like that, but he can."

These days, it seems like Patrick is everywhere. Entertaining viewers with that dry humor and those trademark catch phrases on SportsCenter. Entering the minds of the world's most captivating athletes and exchanging good-natured barbs with co-host Rob Dibble on their weekday show on ESPN Radio. Writing a column for ESPN Magazine. Introducing sports legends on Coors' TV commercials.

Created in 1979, ESPN Inc. once paid cable operators to carry its signal. Today, the company fittingly called the Worldwide Leaders in Sports consists of six domestic and 19 international television networks, a radio network and a magazine among other entities. ESPN itself reaches more than 78 million homes nationwide. SportsCenter is undoubtedly the network's flagship show, and Patrick is its' captain.

Widely known by throngs of loyal sports fans - who relish his poignant interviews, infectious humor and astute knowledge - Patrick is also respected by his peers. His crowning moment, to date, arrived last January when he was named National Sportscaster of the Year by the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association.

"Dan Patrick is to SportsCenter what Peter Jennings is to ABC News," said Len Weiner, director of programming for ESPN Radio. "What you see, and what you hear, is the real Dan. He's a sincere and down-to-earth midwestern guy who loves talking about sports."

Leaning back in his chair, Patrick takes a break from preparations for the evening SportsCenter. Wearing an untucked blue dress shirt adorned with one of his 200-plus neckties, the reigning National Sportscaster of the Year monitors a Cleveland Indians game and a college football matchup on two televisions atop the desk of his office, where the walls are covered with a poster of a young Muhammad Ali in a Black Muslim uniform and a Johnny Bench portrait among other sports memorabilia.

Faith Hill lightly sings "Breathe" on the tabletop stereo system as Patrick talks about his childhood in Ohio, the joys of fatherhood, his rise to sportscasting notoriety at ESPN and....hair.

Patrick's neatly styled coiffure is as much his trademark as those signature tag lines like "the whiff" after a batter strikes out and "en fuego" when an athlete hits a hot streak

Patrick's wedding anniversary to the former Susan White is August 29. This year, as the couple celebrated at their home not far from ESPN's studios, Patrick's wife had an idea.

"The movie Out of Sight was on television, and Sue asked me why I don't wear my hair like George Clooney," Patrick explained. "I said, 'What's wrong with the way I wear my hair now?' I also told her that George Clooney once attended the same church I did in Mason (St. Susanna's)."

Moments later, Patrick found himself in the kitchen for an impromptu haircut.

"I said, 'Alright, go head and get the scissors,'" he said. "She started cutting, and then she told me, 'I can't believe you're letting me cut your TV hair.'"

"When she was done, I looked into the mirror and thought, 'What am I going to do, I have to do SportsCenter tomorrow night,'" Patrick added.

After watching her son on SportsCenter the next night, Patrick's mother, Pattie Pugh, left her son a message from her Mason home.

"Nice do. Makes you look younger," she said. "But you don't look like George Clooney. Did your wife use pinking shears?"

Make no mistake, Patrick is no talking hairdo. Daniel Patrick Pugh - he changed his on-air name to Dan Patrick when he arrived at CNN in 1983 - has shared a fondness for sports since he was a elementary school-aged boy who decorated his bedroom walls with Sports Illustrated photos he cut from the magazine before his father and brothers had the chance to read it. Born in Zanesville in 1957, he was raised with three brothers and two sisters in Mason, not far from Kings Island.

Basketball was Patrick's main passion. As a junior at Mason High School, the 6-foot-3 guard earned All-Fort Ancient Valley Conference honors. In his senior season, he received all-conference recognition and was named honorable mention all-state.

"He loved basketball so much that he would walk down to the (schoolyard) court in the middle of winter wearing nothing but sweat pants and a t-shirt," Pattie Pugh said. "He'd come back looking blue from the cold, but the next day he'd be back out there again."

In high school, Patrick had no thoughts of being the next Al Michaels. He had visions of casting comparisons to Pete Maravich.

"I scored 30 or more points four times, and that was before the three-point line," Patrick said with his trademark dry wit. "I scored 36 points against Clinton-Massie, and one of the guys on that team is now a teacher there. He asked for an autographed photo for his students, and I signed it with his name and the message: 'You still can't guard me.'"

Patrick's SportsCenter sayings ring familiar in the ears of his boyhood friends, who remember him as a stereotypical class clown who made wisecracks as fast as he shot 20-foot jumpers.

"He always kept us loose in the locker room, and bus rides were never boring with his jokes and comments," said Tom Spaeth, who played basketball with Patrick at Mason High School. "What you see on SportsCenter is Dan being Dan. He used to say things like, 'Nothing but the bottom of the net,' all the time when we were shooting around."

Last summer, Patrick was inducted into the Mason High School Athletic Hall of Fame, an honor he is humbly proud of.

"He didn't feel that he should be inducted because he thought there were other athletes more deserving," Pattie Pugh explained. "He didn't want to be there because of who he is."

Patrick not only starred on the basketball court, but he was also a pitcher who attracted interest from the Cincinnati Reds. The team wanted to sign him and send him to their Rookie League team in Billings, Mt. He decided against it.

Instead, Patrick ventured to Eastern Kentucky University, where he saw limited playing time in two seasons on the basketball team. "The coach called me 'Golden Boy,' and I don't think he meant it as a compliment," Patrick said. "I don't think he even knew my name."

Recognizing a career in the NBA was improbable, Patrick transferred to the University of Dayton, where he studied broadcast journalism and gained on-air experience at the campus radio station, WVUD. At parties, he imparted his knowledge of sports to anyone who would listen.

"I would make people ask me sports trivia, and they couldn't leave until they stumped me," he said. "I wasn't popular with their girlfriends."

Who played right field for the New York Yankees before Babe Ruth?

"George Halas, who later became Papa Bear Halas of Chicago Bears fame."

Who was professional football's first 1,000-yard rusher?

"Beatty Feathers."

Who?

"Beatty Feathers. I don't remember what year he did it or who he played for, but the guy's name was Beatty Feathers."

Vividly, Patrick remembers the first time he saw ESPN. He was a senior at UD, and that winter his roommates chose cable TV over heat.

"It was cold in the winter, but we watched TV in sleeping bags in our living room," Patrick said. "We watched SportsCenter, and I told my roommates that someday I was going to work there."

Patrick transferred the same work ethic that earned him all-state honors on the basketball court to the broadcasting field. Though he did not have a formal play-by-play role, Patrick received credentials from then UD Sports Information Director Gene Schill to call basketball games into a tape recorder. He would then ask sportscasting professionals to listen to the tapes and offer constructive criticism.

"It's one thing to practice when the team is practicing, and it's another to hone your skills on your own," said Doug Hauschild, the present-day sports information director at UD who attended college with Patrick. "He did what he could to make himself better."

"There are some guys you meet and think to yourself, 'He might go somewhere,'" Hauschild added. "Dan was one of those guys."

After graduating from UD, Patrick was a disc jockey at Dayton's WTUE-FM before joining the sportscasting team at WDTN-TV Channel 2 in the same city. He saw limited on-air exposure, though, mostly serving as vacation relief for the sports director and his assistant.

"I was basically the third person in a two-man operation," Patrick said. "I nearly quit the business because I figured if I could not get a job as a number two sportscaster at a station in Dayton, then I was not going anywhere."

Discouraged but undeterred, Patrick mailed tapes to ESPN. On-air personalities Bob Ley, still with the network, and Greg Gumbel, now with CBS, told Patrick they thought he was not ready for a position there, but they praised his potential and encouraged him to continue his pursuit of a sportscasting career. In 1984, he landed a position at the fledgling CNN, where he remained until departing for ESPN in 1989.

Patrick met his wife, the former Susan White, at CNN where she was producer of Inside Politics. He will never forget their first date, at a Manhattan bar, where they talked and drank the night away, leaving Patrick penniless.

"I had \$36 in my wallet, and we bought three pitchers of beer which were \$12 each," Patrick recalled. "Fortunately, she lived near the bar, but I lived a long distance away. I was too embarrassed to borrow money from her for the cab fare, so I walked 30 blocks home."

His marriage proposal was even more memorable. Patrick and White were visiting his family in Mason over Thanksgiving weekend. They returned to New York City on separate flights.

"My flight departed first, and I gave my sister Mollye a box with an antique Russian engagement ring and a note asking Sue to marry me," Patrick explained. "Mollye gave the box to a flight attendant, who delivered it to Sue when the plane was in the air."

"In the note, I asked her to let me know her answer when she landed," he added. "My plane arrived about 15 minutes before hers did, so I rushed over to her gate. She was in tears when I saw her, so I knew the answer was yes."

From the NCAA Final Four and the NBA finals to the Super Bowl and the World Series, Patrick's assignments annually take him to the sports world's elite spots. Though he has the security of a lucrative contract and the notoriety of nationally renowned television personality, what Patrick likes most about his job is the perks of covering the events he watched with a passion as a child.

"All I ever wanted was to be a sportscaster," Patrick said. "Witnessing exciting moments, like Michael Jordan's shot to beat the Utah Jazz in the NBA finals and Joe Carter's World Series winning home run, is why I love what I do. It's not about fame and fortune."

For recognizable faces in sports and entertainment, success has its price. As ESPN - and Patrick's prominent role with the network- has grown, his privacy and anonymity has disappeared. The humble and affable man who cherishes his midwestern roots - "I live in Connecticut, but I will always consider Ohio home" - can venture few places without attracting a fan who is interested in chatting about last night's game.

"I'm not a celebrity. Brad Pitt is a celebrity. I'm a sportscaster. There is a big difference," Patrick said. "When I do go out in public, though, I do so with the mindset that someone will want to talk about sports. I can imagine what it must be like for the more recognizable athletes."

Patrick doesn't mind sharing conversations with fans about the latest sports headlines, just not when he's eating, thank you. Sometimes he personally answers mail sent to his Bristol office. One woman wrote that she wanted to do something special for her son, who was

graduating magna cum laude from high school and faithfully watched Patrick on SportsCenter. "Would you give him a call?," she asked.

"One night, I was sitting here in my office and called him," Patrick said. "He didn't believe it was me, so he started asking me SportsCenter questions."

Ever the trivia buff, Patrick passed the test, increasing the boy's excitement.

"I asked him, "Do you realize how great your mother is?" Patrick said. "Then I told him, 'Tell her how great she is and tell her you love her.'"

"Right now?" the boy said.

Yeah, Patrick said, right now. In the background, Patrick hears the boy shout, "Mom, you're great. I love you."

"He told me he was thinking about getting into broadcasting and asked me if I could call him in a couple years for career advice," Patrick said. "I told him to have his mother write me a letter."

Another time, another request. Patrick receives a call from a former girlfriend. She tells him that her 12-year-old son, who suffers from spina bifida, was an admirer of Michael Jordan. Would Patrick get Jordan's autograph for the boy, she asked. For Christmas, Patrick sent the youngster a life-size cardboard cutout of Jordan inscribed with the star's signature.

"His mother thanked me and told me it was something he would always remember," Patrick said softly. "He doesn't realize that it is also something I will never forget."

Though Patrick's days as an all-conference athlete are long behind him, competitive blood still rushes through his veins. After interviewing Michael Jordan following game three of the 1998 NBA finals, Patrick told the man who is arguably basketball's greatest player ever he could score on him in a one-on-one matchup.

"I never said I could beat him," Patrick said with a grin. "I just said I could score on him."

Reacting to Patrick's challenge, Jordan asked him to stand up. "How would you guard me?," Jordan asked.

Patrick placed his forearm on Jordan's back.

"There are 28 teams that guard me that way," Jordan growled.

"I told him, 'Michael, I can't guard you, but I don't think you can guard me,'" Patrick said. "You should have seen the look on his face. He can take a joke only so long before it becomes a challenge."

Patrick and Jordan have yet to meet on the hardwood, but maybe His Royal Airness should be wary of the well-groomed sportscaster. Sharpshooter Dan Majerle, now with the Miami Heat, was a member of the Phoenix Suns when they clashed with Jordan and the Bulls in the 1993 NBA finals. Majerle accepted Patrick's challenge to a three-point shooting contest. During practice, as the Suns players and coaches watched, the duo squared off, shooting 15 three-pointers each.

"He made 11 of 15," Patrick said. "I was 10-for-14, and he told me if I banked the last shot from the corner, it would count as two."

Patrick unleashed the shot, which cleanly bounced off the glass and through the net.

"The next night, he hit eight three-pointers against the Bulls," Patrick said. "After the game, he said he had rebounded from the most embarrassing moment of his career."

Patrick's good-natured challenges to some of the world's most talented athletes exemplifies his passion for sports. He is not a talking head who mindlessly reads scores from a teleprompter for money. He truly loves sports - talking about them, playing them, watching them and experiencing them at another level.

"I don't just want to talk about these people, I want to feel what they do," he said. "I once told (Arizona Diamondbacks fireballing pitcher) Randy Johnson that I want to stand at the plate and feel his fast ball come by me. I would love to play one-on-one with Michael Jordan, even if I lost 10-0. These are things few sports fans get to do."

Though Patrick's demanding schedule keeps him in the studio and on the road sometimes longer than he would like, the father of four children - Jack, 8; Grace, 7; Georgia, 5 and Mollye, 2 - shares the same devotion to family as his mother and father did.

Jack Pugh - who worked in the computer science department at UD, where all six of his children graduated - died of lung cancer at 54 when Patrick was 25.

"He was a very spirited man who never made much money, but always made sure we had what we needed," Patrick explained. "At my basketball games, he would be in the stands yelling at the referees and waving a white hanky. Whether the game was important or insignificant as far as the team we were playing, he would be there."

In the early moments of one game, Patrick objected to words of instruction from junior varsity coach Dave Ritter, who sent the normally mild-mannered player to the locker room.

"His dad had been out of town on business, made the flight into Dayton, drove 45 minutes to the game and walked inside the gym just as Dan was being sent to the showers," said Ritter, a retired school superintendent who operates a bed and breakfast in Huron. "Jack gave me an earful following the game, but later we all laughed about that moment for years. I called him (Patrick) 'Showers Pugh.'"

Patrick regrets that his father, whose ambition to become a sportswriter was never realized, did not get a chance to see him rise to national prominence. Pattie Pugh, who Patrick credits with teaching him "how to be a parent" through the discipline and love she has shown, is a regular SportsCenter viewer.

"I have to watch him to make sure he's dressed well," she said with a laugh. "He's come a long way from the days when he walked around in sweat pants and t-shirts."

Patrick covets time with his children, especially since he does not have the same opportunities to spend time with them as a father with a 9-to-5 job does. The sentimental side of Patrick is seen when he talks about his family. Tears flow when he watches the videotape of the ceremony where he received the National Sportscaster of the Year award. His son, Jack, introduced him, talking to the audience about why his father is special.

In late August, Patrick took his 5-year-old daughter Georgia to her first day of school.

"She walked into our room, dressed and ready to go, at 6:15 that morning," Patrick said. "I worked late, so I didn't get to bed until 2:30. But I wanted to be there with her for her first day of school."

When Patrick arrived at the school, the parking lot was filled with sobbing mothers giving their children hugs and kisses and watching them walk into the building.

"I wanted to cry, too," a grinning Patrick said. "But I decided to wait until I got back in the car."

Father and daughter embraced, and then Patrick watched as Georgia walked to her classroom. Being part of moments like these, he says, provide more emotion and satisfaction than any game-winning shot or high-profile interview ever could.

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