

From The Best AMERICAN SPORTS WRITING 2005

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## More Than Skin Deep

FROM THE ANDERSON INDEPENDENT-MAIL

COALMONT, TENNESSEE – Color defines so much in life.

On an athletic field, it sets two teams apart. In a church, it's the difference between a wedding and a funeral. On a battlefield, it can separate you from shooting the enemy, or your brother. In this town, color is the difference between acceptance and alienation. It's the line drawn between normal and weird. It's reason enough to hate. At one point in K.T. Mainord's life, he was an alien, a weirdo. He was hated by these townspeople.

All because of color.

To arrive on the Mountain, as they call this place, you wind on two-lanes caked with road salt. You go through "cities" such as Monteagle and Tracy City. You pass the Fiery Gizzard Water Treatment Plant, the Hillbilly Restaurant & Lounge, and, seemingly, more churches than houses.

The Stinger Café comes up on you quick. Probably because it looks nothing like a café. It's a big gray house at the corner of Tennessee Highways 56 and 108. It's called the Stinger because it's modeled to be the hangout for the nearby Grundy County Yellow Jackets, much like The Max from *Saved by the Bell*, or Arnold's Malt Shop from *Happy Days*.

K.T. Mainord, who signed February 4 to play football for the University of South Carolina in the fall, has an entire corner dedicated to him at the Stinger. It's filled with stats, stories, and imposing pictures of him from his high school playing days. And no one this side of Minnesota has looked more imposing in purple and gold. You ask how you'll know K.T. and his mother Linda when you see them.

"Well, I have gray hair, and I'm an older lady," Linda Mainord said. "My son's a big guy and will be driving a green Saturn.

"And he's black. He's the only one in the county."

You chuckle, wondering if that was the right play. She chuckles back. Apparently it was okay.

You step inside the Stinger Café and see, besides a family in the corner with the token shrieking child, you're the only people dining here today. And she was right. You really can't miss them.

If by some chance you walked right by them, the family's story would grab you by the ear, throw you in the chair, and force you to listen.

*An anomaly*

Kevin Tyler Mainord is a black man in a place devoid of black men.

Mainord falls into the 0.1 percentile of blacks in Grundy County, Tennessee, which is 98.3 percent white, according to 2000 census statistics. By all accounts, Mainord is the only black male living in the county.

Mainord, who is set to graduate with honors in May, is one of two blacks at the seven-hundred-student county high school. And the other black student, a girl who is in foster care, transferred in this year.

"We're an all-white school," Grundy County High principal Ken Colquette said. "He's the only black kid to go through the entire Grundy County school system, kindergarten to twelfth grade. And that's one-hundred-something years old."

Setting that kind of precedent in a racially charged environment comes, almost predictably, with a fair share of growing pains.

"Being the only African American in the county, he had a huge, huge problem," said K.T.'s brother Russell Mainord, who is white, along with the other five members of the immediate family.

"I know it's probably worse than he'd ever tell anybody. I know people in the community say stuff. I hear it. I sense it. It's a great place to grow up, but it's a difficult place to grow up.

"They're afraid of anything different."

If that's true, then they fear the Mainord family most.

### *Wrapped Around His Finger*

Linda and Lowery Mainord brought K.T. into their home when he was four days old.

Someone asked the Mainords if they'd be willing to watch a baby being given up for adoption until a home could be found. Linda – the mother of five children, four natural and one adopted – said she jumped at the chance. Lowery wasn't so hot on the idea.

"No more foster children," Lowery told his wife. "You get too attached, and I can't afford to adopt any more children."

"He told me he wasn't going to have anything to do with it," Linda said.

Then eight-pound, eight-ounce Kevin Tyler showed up at their door.

"He reached and got him and it was over," Linda Mainord recalled.

It wasn't over without a bit of a fight. K.T.'s birth mother decided she wanted to keep her child after all. She visited for a while, but then the visits got fewer and further between, Linda said. Then she disappeared.

After court proceedings, the Mainords officially adopted K.T., whom the family calls Kevin.

"Kevin has always had a way of wrapping you around his finger," said Linda Mainord, fifty-nine, who is the mother of children ranging in age from forty to eighteen.

She was widowed seven years ago when Lowery's truck skidded off a rain-slicked highway on the way to Signal Mountain Cement, where he'd worked for decades.

That left Linda with the sole responsibility of managing the home and family, among other things.

Linda has worked for more than two years as a housekeeper for Exceptional Enterprises, a company that helps mentally ill adults work and live more normal lives. Additionally, she's taking care of her mother and father, who are both very ill. She said she doesn't know if her dad will live through the weekend.

"It's amazing all that she's gone through," Russell Mainord said. "She's put herself through things you can't ask anyone to go through."

All this when raising a unique child would have been enough to handle.

### *No Small Potatoes*

Once, in elementary school, a child told K.T. to go back where he came from.

"Where's that?" a young K.T. asked.

"Africa," the child said.

"I didn't know how to explain it to him," Linda Mainord said. "He said he wanted to be like my color. He said, 'I want to be like you and Daddy.' I told him, 'Honey, you're a good color. People go and lay in the tanning bed to get to be like you.'"

When K.T. was five, Linda finally made an illustration that bored into K.T.'s head.

While at the grocery store, Linda bought two different kinds of potatoes, red and brown. On the way home from the store, K.T. picked up a red one and asked what it was. His mother told him it was a potato. K.T. argued it wasn't.

"When we got home, I cut a red one in half and a brown one in half," Linda recalled. "I showed him they were both the same on the inside. I said, 'That's just like you and me. We're the same on the inside.'"

"He seemed to do better after that as far as understanding."

Just because he accepted who and what he was didn't mean others had.

Linda estimates he has been in about a fight a year. A wooden cross was driven into the end of the family's driveway when K.T. was four.

In 2001, a series of letters containing death threats were mailed to the home because he was dating a white girl.

"They threatened to burn our house," Russell said. "They threatened to catch him out and make him pay. They threatened to castrate him. They threatened to kill him."

The Mainords sent the letters to the FBI, which investigated and told them their problems should be over. Nothing has happened since.

"Should we move?" Linda asked her husband early in K.T.'s life. "What should we do?"

"We're not going anywhere," Lowery replied. "He's staying with us and the county will have to accept him."

### *Getting Out*

Two days after first getting K.T., Linda and Lowery Mainord loaded their new child in a basket and took him to his first football game. Days after he was born, so was a love affair between that baby and sports.

Lowery, an avid baseball fan, got his son into the game at age one. Then came football a year later. Linda said she realized he had been given exceptional talents when he played for the "Junior Jackets" football team at age thirteen.

Putting K.T. in the community's eye through sports went a long way toward his gaining acceptance.

"I think that involvement helped more than anything," Russell Mainord said. "I think people are afraid. That's what makes them hate. They feel threatened to some degree by something they don't know. By him being involved, they got to where they knew him and accepted him."

K.T., who is now six-foot-four, 266 pounds, said he began to realize he had a gift when he was a sophomore at Grundy County, playing defensive tackle for the Yellow Jackets.

When he signed earlier this month to play for South Carolina, he became the county's first Division I athlete in sixty years.

"There could have been others before me. They just didn't work at it and gave up too easily," K.T. said. "I didn't want to stick around here all my life and wind up working at the Toyota or Nissan plants."

"I think football's the thing to get me out of here."

Despite playing the bulk of the season with a second-degree shoulder separation, K.T. had 150 tackles (sixteen for a loss) and nine sacks last year in leading Grundy County to the second round of the playoffs.

"He has the grades, the brains, the size, the speed, the stretch," said Colquette, who is also the school's football coach. "That's a pretty good combination."

The recruiting process was arduous for K.T., though."

Off the Radar?

Twenty-one schools offered K.T. a scholarship. His favorite from day one was Tennessee, which he grew up rooting for. Volunteer coaches told K.T. when he was a junior that they planned to offer him a scholarship early, so he could play his senior season without having to worry about where to go to school.

K.T. waited for papers from Tennessee, but they never came.

His list thereafter, with the exception of Colorado, included only teams that play Tennessee regularly: Alabama, Auburn, Florida, South Carolina and Vanderbilt.

Alabama zipped to the top of the list until K.T. went to Tuscaloosa for a visit the weekend of January 17.

He said he decided during a prospect dinner, led by coach Mike Shula, that this wasn't the program for him.

That was affirmed when Alabama coaches sent K.T. home after an incident at an off-campus party.

K.T. said he was dancing with a girl, who dropped her wallet when she was leaving the party. K.T. found the wallet and asked a student what to do with it. The student told him to throw it away. He did, except the girl's checkbook, which he says he kept so no one would use her account.

When the girl returned, K.T. gave back her checkbook but said he didn't know, out of embarrassment, where her wallet was.

"I didn't want to tell her I threw it away," he said.

She assumed K.T. had stolen the wallet and went to get the police. By the time the police arrived, K.T. had retrieved the wallet. No charges were filed against him, Alabama police said.

Tide coaches found out the police had been called and told K.T. he should go home. On the ride back to Coalmont the next day, he contacted USC coach Lou Holtz and told him he was going to be a Gamecock.

"Some people said he did it because he thought everyone would drop him," said Russell Mainord, who is a graduate assistant at USC. "He did it because they stuck by him here. Coach Holtz told him, 'Son, that wouldn't have happened here.'"

*New world*

In the beginning, you wondered how K.T. Mainord ever made it, how he grew up different in a town where different wasn't good.

You were blown away by the volume of barbs and taunts he faced every day inside supposedly safe schoolroom walls. You were stunned that each year K.T.'s elementary school principal would go into his class and explain to the children that K.T. was not like them, but that was okay and they shouldn't tease him.

They learned. And so did you. Acceptance is no longer a problem. Being too popular is. K.T. is classified by his mother as something like a social butterfly. He's always flanked by an army of girls, she said.

"One of his teachers told me he has like a harem or something," Linda Mainord said, laughing. "They're standing around carrying his books, rubbing his back, and saying, 'Let me do this for you, let me do that for you.'"

While humorous, everyone wonders how K.T. will adjust to college life, life in a "big city." The incident at Alabama didn't do anything to quell those concerns.

"He just needs to grow up some," said Colquette, who recently gave K.T. in-school suspension for skipping class. "Just like you did. Just like I did. If he does that, he'll make them a fine football player. If not, then he'll be somewhere else."

Undoubtedly, when K.T. arrives in June at USC, he'll be in for a big dose of culture shock.

Richland County, where the state capital is located, is 45.2 percent black.

That means in Columbia there are roughly 150,000 black people, 149,999 more than there are in Grundy County.

### *Color*

The word's primary definition is one we all know. It's the one we learned in elementary school, with a box of crayons and a sheet of paper.

"I don't see color," Linda Mainord said. "I see a person. That's it."

Color has other meanings, though. As a verb, it can be defined as to affect, or to influence.

The Mountain has been shaped by K.T. Mainord's life just by his existing - coexisting, really. Mom and Dad started the change eighteen years ago by adopting him.

"Looking at it now, knowing what all could have happened," Russell Mainord said, "it was nothing short of heroism."

K.T.'s maturation into a man has finished the transformation of a place that was stuck in the 1950s.

"I think him being there changed the community more than it changed him," Russell Mainord said. "Because people learned to accept."

The Mainord family colored Grundy County.