

It's still early for Greg Kinnear's 'Later'

BY SUZANNE GILL

Greg Kinnear isn't just funny, he appears to be one very smart cookie as well. On Monday, Feb. 28, he stepped into Bob Costas' shoes as host of NBC's weeknight talk show "Later" without becoming the focus of laser-like attention. In fact to most network viewers he is a complete unknown.

As host of the daily clip show "Talk Soup" on cable's E! Entertainment Television, Kinnear has been available in a mere 22 million living rooms for the past two years. In 1991, he was the creator and host of the unsung summer replacement series "Best of the Worst" on Fox.

"Talk Soup" has been a great vehicle for me," Kinnear says, "in the sense that we do a little bit of everything in there. I've had the opportunity to interact with people, to do man-on-the-street, to kind of do commentary, to act, to do comedy."

"Later" has been remade to serve Kinnear's strengths. After six seasons of one-on-one interviews by

Costas, the show has moved its production base from New York City to Burbank, Calif. A small studio audience has been added, comedy segments turn up regularly, and the 30-year-old host, writer and executive producer is trying to make the transition look as effortless as possible. He speaks of his predecessor with respect but not awe.

"Bob Costas has done an excellent job at this and has really created a great niche with this show. The job is to fill the shoes of Bob, and hopefully keep the ball rolling."

"I guess one thing that I like about (Costas' version was) that sort of eclectic element that they (had) with regard to the guests. One night you might see Barry Goldwater, and the next night you'd see Steve Martin. That sort of unpredictability is something that I'd like to keep in the show."

Unlike recent mantle inheritors Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien, Kinnear is getting comfortable in

his late-night seat without drawing the scrutiny of a hundred critic vivisectionists. He may even have time to settle into the job before anyone pays much heed.

More experienced than the jumpy and angular O'Brien, whose show precedes "Later" each weeknight, Kinnear is comfortable in front of a camera and can ad lib without breaking a sweat. But his true genius may lie in lying low.

Not since Bob Woodward's nocturnal meetings with White House snitch Deep Throat during the Watergate era has anyone moved from obscurity to obscurity with more viability than Kinnear. In a recent USA Today poll rating the popularity of talk show hosts, he somehow came in second only to the ubiquitous Howard Stern. Before signing with NBC, Kinnear was courted by both CBS (for a slot following David Letterman's "Late Show") and Fox (to replace late-night dud Chevy Chase). He picked the network post that offered a chance to improve and grow at his own pace with minimal ratings pressure - and hung onto his day job at E!, too.

Where Costas showed special interests in sports and rock 'n' roll, Kinnear claims to be passionate about "politics, comedy, actors."

"I'm somewhat of a new Junkie," he says. "I grew up overseas. My father was with the American Embassy in Lebanon and after that Athens. And it just kind of opened my eyes to a whole other - the bigger picture in a lot of ways."

It also gave Kinnear a chance to run his own radio show, at a small station on a local military base. That high-school lark eventually led to "Talk Soup," a bouillabaisse of clips from daily talk shows, garnished with Kinnear's often humorous observations. Now billed as NBC's "hot new late-night guy," Kinnear knows what's expected of him.

"It definitely is considerably different than 'Talk Soup' because whereas that's just (a matter of introducing) a clip, and it's almost a commentary on a moment that happened, in this case, hopefully I'm going to be able to make moments happen."

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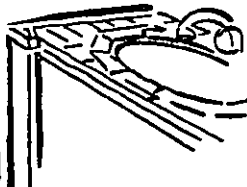
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