

The Jeopardy! Audition: What is the definition of nerve-racking?

As with most good things that have happened in my life, my wife was responsible for my Jeopardy! tryout. She knew that my mind is a repository for ridiculously useless information, to the point where I can't get anyone to play Trivial Pursuit with me unless I supply copious amounts of beer. I can't remember important info that would actually benefit me, such as when trash day is (well, I do remember, but it usually isn't until the garbage truck is pulling up to the house at 7AM and I have to make a mad dash out to the driveway clad in the first thing I can grab off the coat hook, even if it's an umbrella). But if you don't have an iPhone handy and absolutely need to know the capital of Latvia, I'm your guy (answer: what is L? Get it? On second thought, maybe you should just get an iPhone). So when my wife saw a commercial for Seattle Jeopardy! tryouts, she saw it as the perfect opportunity for me to risk soul-crushing embarrassment in front of a national TV audience.

No, the real reason she mentioned it to me was because she knew I'd jump at the chance. Since the time we met, I had been a frequent Jeopardy! viewer. From the comfort of our sofa, under no pressure whatsoever, I could yell out the answers before the question was even finished. We've all had that feeling, which is why the show is so popular. Who hasn't watched in disbelief as a contestant blew a question that you found disgustingly simple?

"He didn't know that the Treaty of Ghent was signed in 1814? What a moron!" Now the fact that I had to Google that last bit of info wouldn't have bothered me at all because I wouldn't have lost any real money when I yelled out the wrong answer. Plus, I'd be able to rationalize my error.

"So it was 1814, not 1947. Those are both numbers. Close enough."

So I thought, *heck yeah, I could kick butt on Jeopardy!* To get into the audition, all I had to do was sign up online. At the time in 2002, there was no pre-test like there was for Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? (but there is now). So all I had to do was wait for an email telling me where and when to show up.

I showed up on a weekday afternoon at the downtown Westin hotel, which had reserved a huge ballroom for the audition. Every two hours during the two-day tryouts,

they herded 100 people into the ballroom. While my group waited, I tried to size up the competition. Most paced nervously or sat staring at the floor, but some people were reading almanacs in the incredibly likely chance that a question would come up about the one page they were reading over and over. I simply concentrated on not hyperventilating.

When they called us in, I chose a seat near the front but not in the first row. No reason to seem overeager, even though I would have gladly sung the national anthem covered only in shaving cream to get on the show.

A representative from the show explained what would happen next. They would project fifty questions on the screen in front of us. We would have approximately 8 seconds to write down the answer to each question in a fill-in-the-blank form. Spelling didn't count, but if you thought "Abraham Lincoln" was spelled "Aybram Linkin," you probably weren't going to ace the test anyway. Then they'd collect the tests and grade them while we watched a short video, after which they'd tell us the results. If you didn't get at least 35 out of the 50 answers correct, you wouldn't qualify and they would get to shoot you.

At least, I know that's what I'd want to happen if I didn't qualify. What would actually happen was they would call out the names of the people who passed. Everyone else would shuffle out in the walk of shame. We wouldn't get our scores back, so the show's rep joked that if you didn't qualify, you could say you missed it by only one question, which to me would have been like saying that I missed meeting Tom Hanks by only one minute. Thanks! I feel much better about missing a once-in-a-lifetime experience!

Then we took the quiz. I didn't think it was too hard, which is never a good sign. I handed it in, and they went to grade them while we watched a video that seemed to last as long as the OJ trial. When it was over, they came back and read the names. Except for a few random stomach noises, the audience was dead silent. Out of 100 people, my name was the third called. Big sigh of relief. They only called out one more name.

After everyone else filed out, the ballroom felt cavernous, the four of us alone with the Jeopardy! crewmembers. Next on the agenda was a mock game run off a

laptop, but played exactly like it was on the show, with the grid projected on the screen and us holding hand buzzers. They have you play this mock game because they want to make sure that you understand the rules, that you speak more coherently than Porky Pig, and that you don't have the personality of gravel.

After we each got a chance to answer a few questions right, they stopped the game and asked us questions like Alex Trebek would after the first commercial break. They asked me what I would do with the money if I won. Knowing that it wouldn't sound very sympathetic if I said "Vegas, baby!", I said that I'd use it to repay my wife's medical school loans. They liked that. I knew they would. But it was a lie. There was no way in hell I'd win that much money.

Then they thanked us and told us we might be called sometime in the next year. Or we might not. "Don't hold your breath" was the gist of it.

So I went back to my job at Microsoft, completely putting it out of my mind. After two weeks of not thinking about it obsessively, my office phone rang. It was The Call. They wanted to know if I could make it down to LA in two weeks for a taping of the show. Flabbergasted isn't a word I often use in everyday speech, but I think the following was my verbatim response:

"Glarg bnork armblesmanshure." Or something to that effect.

They got what I was saying, so we went over the details. It was official. I would be appearing on Jeopardy!

Now I just had to figure out how to cram the entire breadth of human knowledge into my brain in the next two weeks.

But not until I called my wife. I had some trivia to share.