WHO WANTS TO SEE A 'MILLIONAIRE'? THE RATINGS HAVE SLIPPED, BUT IT'S STILL ABC'S FINAL ANSWER:[Chicago Sports Final, N Edition]


Abstract (Article Summary)

PHOTOS 2 GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO (color): ([Regis Philbin,] PHOTO: [Tyra Banks] and [Charlie Sheen] will be among the superstars on the hot seat when ABC airs five nights of celebrity "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" during November sweeps. GRAPHIC (color): Who wants to see a 'Millionaire'? ( Nielsen ratings for the show.) Source: Nielsen figures provided by ABC. Chicago Tribune - See microfilm for complete graphic.

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TELEVISION.

Even "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" executive producer Michael Davies acknowledges a time will come when ABC's runaway hit of a game show won't be around as much as it is now.

"Do I believe that 'Millionaire' will remain a four-nights-a-week or three-nights-a-week show on ABC for a long time? I would doubt it," he says.

Still, he adds, "I sort of think rumors of our demise are greatly exaggerated and are way premature."

As "Millionaire's" ratings have slowed from its previous juggernaut pace, observers have cited overexposure, changing tastes, new competition and a host of other possible explanations.

From January through May, the show averaged more than 27 million viewers per episode. For the first three weeks of the new season (when the show added Wednesday to its Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday airings), it has averaged almost 20 million viewers per episode.

"The show itself has had such a major success rating and such a major impact on television society, that essentially for them to even lose a few points here and there is going to be seen as a decline," says Darrell Mottley Newton, a lecturer specializing in media studies at the University of Wisconsin.

Additionally, experts say, "Millionaire" is turning off the 18-to-49-year-old audience that is most desired by advertisers. That isn't good news for ABC, which has been battling NBC for that segment of the viewing public.

That doesn't sound good for a series that changed the face of television by fueling a rush of game shows on prime time, made other networks schedule around it, and obliterated other series in its time slots.

But several observers say other factors have to be taken into consideration before critics write off "Millionaire." First, the fall season has been in flux, with the Summer Olympics, baseball playoffs and the World Series, and the presidential debates all creating anomalies within Nielsen numbers.

Also, viewers have been checking out new shows. Freshman series "CSI" on CBS, Fox's "Dark Angel" and "Boston Public," ABC's "The Geena Davis Show" and NBC's "The Michael Richards Show" have all been seeing some good initial numbers.

"I just think that a lot of shows have gone through sampling during these first couple of weeks. ... once things even out and people are finished sampling, I think that 'Millionaire' will remain - - at least on a couple of nights -- a Top 20 show," says Roy Rothstein, vice president and director of national broadcast research for Zenith Media, a media and buying services agency based in New York.

The show has a few special editions lined up in the next several weeks to attract viewers. One of its most popular editions, "Celebrity Millionaire," is scheduled for the heart of the November sweeps -- Nov. 12, 14-16 and 19 (on WLS-Ch. 7).
Competing networks, who smell blood in the water, won't allow those celebrity editions to create havoc as they did in May, when the "Millionaire" had its highest numbers ever -- averaging 35.6 million viewers for each of the episodes. Competitors have encouraged several of their stars not to participate in "Celebrity Millionaire." At the insistence of their employers, "The West Wing's" Martin Sheen, "Late Night" host Conan O'Brien, "Everybody Loves Raymond's" Patricia Heaton, and Cheech Marin of "Nash Bridges" have turned down requests to play for charity.

Lots of ABC stars, including Drew Carey, Norm Macdonald and Charlie Sheen, are lined up to participate, as well as Alec Baldwin, Tyra Banks, Sean "Puffy" Combs and Vivica A. Fox.

"Millionaire" also has in the works stunts with college students playing for tuition money, and a parent and child sitting in the so-called "Hot Seat" opposite host Regis Philbin.

"... I wouldn't be surprised to see the Mets and the Yankees playing against each other," jokes Newton.

It was inevitable for "Millionaire" to suffer some type of ratings decline, according to Rothstein.

"It's hard for any show to keep those levels up. I mean, the only shows that really keep it up are the ones on NBC on Thursday night," Rothstein says.

"Millionaire" simply may be on too many times during the week. Certainly adding a fourth night could be considered overkill, Newton says. "There's only a certain demographic that's going to watch that program night after night after night. Meanwhile, the rest of the viewers that may indeed be drawn to ABC for other types of programs will simply tune in to the competition."

"There is significant statistical analysis that says we're doing the exact ratings we were when we were on three days a week," Davies says. "It's just they're now spread over four nights."

Davies admits some of the 40-odd countries airing some variation of "Millionaire" have seen a slippage in ratings along the same lines as the numbers in America. But he insists those numbers, as in the U.S., are consistently strong.

"Millionaire's" pulling an older audience is simply the nature of the game show, which attracts that segment of viewers, according to Davies.

He adds that in some cities, "Millionaire" is preceded by syndicated game shows "Wheel of Fortune" and "Jeopardy!" on some nights, and "it's very natural to stay and watch 'Millionaire.'"

But Newton notes that the "newness" and "glare" and "novelty" are "starting to wear off" with some viewers.

"For ABC to throw Regis at us several times a week is going to make us begin to eventually lose interest," he says.

Davies believes the show may not be the "event program" it once was, but "Millionaire" still has become "a television classic."

And no one can argue with the numbers "Millionaire" continues to draw.

Many shows would kill to average "Millionaire's" pace of 19.4 million viewers per episode. ABC hasn't given any indication the show's presence will be cut back.

Davies says he also could see "Millionaire" as a five-nights-a-week, half-hour syndicated concept -- which it is in several countries -- in addition to a weekly broadcast, possibly on Sundays.

But for now, "we'll keep on going in those [present] time periods," he says, "for a long, long, long time."

LOOKING FOR MILLIONAIRES

In trying to get more minorities and women on "Millionaire" -- a sore point with both critics and its producers -- Michael Davies may have stumbled on an answer.

Finding college students to appear on the show in the next several weeks was done through a cross-country tour, rather than with the show's normal telephone call-in selection process.

That search, Davies says, resulted in a diversity of contestants that included race, religion and others differences.

"We end up putting on television people who you've never seen on television before. And I think that's really healthy," Davies says.

"I think we're now going to go off and do a multicity tour to find some contestants for our January shows, which is sort of throwing out the phone game just for January. And we're going to see who we find. Perhaps if these work, we might look in the future at changing the way that we do the selection process."

[Illustration]
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