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## Di Bona discovers new species

'America's Funniest Home Videos' 500th Episode

By TODD LONGWELL

When tracing the genesis of "America's Funniest Home Videos," TV historians like to point to the camcorder explosion of the late 1980s. But, in truth, it all started with an infestation of Australian frilled lizards in Tokyo.

It was the mid-'80s, and Vin Di Bona -- who was coming off the first year of action-adventure series "MacGyver," which he produced with his Emerson College fraternity brother Henry Winkler -- was watching local L.A. station KNXT.

"It was a story at the end of the newscast," recalls Di Bona. It told of how Tokyo residents had begun importing the hooded, upright-walking reptiles from Down Under by the thousands after they were featured on an unidentified Japanese TV show, and now "the damn lizards were running all over the place," he says.

After four months of searching (it was pre-Internet, after all), Di Bona figured out the show was "Waku Waku Animal Word," produced by the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS).

"It was like 'Wild Kingdom' meets 'Hollywood Squares,'" Di Bona says.

Knowing a good concept when he saw one, Di Bona licensed the animal footage through Joe Bellon, a former CBS exec who had been trying without success to sell TBS shows internationally, and put together a pitch for a U.S. version of the show, titled "Animal Crack-Ups." After numerous failed attempts, he sold it to ABC with Alan Thicke as host, and it debuted in the fall of 1987.

"The Japanese were very excited that one of their shows was on American television, albeit on Saturday morning," Di Bona says. "For them it was a big deal. So about two years into the show, they said, 'We have this variety show we'd like you to see' called 'Fun TV With Kato-chan and Ken-chan.' They did a comedy sketch, they did a blackout, they did some talk, a music number, then they showed three homevideos. They repeated that cycle maybe once or twice in the show, and then at the end the host and the celebrities said, 'Which is your favorite clip?'"

Di Bona zeroed in on the homevideo portion of the show, and using "Fun TV" footage, put together a



Guest star Tony Curtis demonstrates a Houdini trick on then-host Bob Saget in 1998.



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presentation reel.

"I pitched it to ABC and four minutes in they said, 'We're buying this show,' " Di Bona recalls.

He enlisted "Animal Crack-Ups" writer Todd Thicke, younger brother of Alan, to script the "America's Funniest Home Videos" pilot. He also borrowed the original show's narration style, which anthropomorphized the animals in the clips.

"If it was the study of an animal's habitat, it became a situation comedy," Di Bona says. " 'What's mom going to do today? The boys are out playing and dad's late for dinner...' "

Similarly, in "Home Videos," original host Bob Saget did character voices articulating the thoughts of the clip subjects, whether they were adults, babies or animals.

Just as Di Bona had recognized the universal appeal of the TBS shows, he saw that the "Home Videos" concept would travel well. Within three months of its smash debut as a weekly series in February 1990, he was selling the skein around the globe.

In the years since, it's been licensed to 81 territories, with more to come. Some territories have simply taken "AFV" as-is and subtitled it. But many countries have produced local versions, including Australia, the U.K., Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. (Only the U.K., Australia and Italy still produce homegrown shows.)

At first, the foreign shows relied on footage (as well reworked scripts) from the U.S. show, but soon locals were sending in their clips, some of which would find its way to back to skein in the States.

"If you don't hear people speaking, then a fall is a fall, and it's funny in any nation," says "AFV" co-exec producer Michele Nasraway. But there are differences, sometimes not so subtle. "In Germany, it seemed like every other clip had a beer keg exploding. With Australia, we've noticed there are a lot of naked toddlers running around outside."

It's a gift that keeps giving: the million-plus clip library generated by "AFV" shows worldwide has also provided material for everything from the Internet series "CuteWinFail," produced by Di Bona's digital arm FishBowl Worldwide Media, to the board game the Game of Life: zAPPed Edition for iPad.

#### 'America's Funniest Home Videos' 500th Episode

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