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Database boosts creative freedom of writers

'America's Funniest Home Videos' 500th Episode

By TODD LONGWELL

The creative team behind "America's Funniest Home Videos" was struggling with a recent episode of the skein, trying to find a final piece of comic absurdity to put it over the top, and team members found it in a clip of a beefy Italian-American from Long Island making crank calls.

"After he does the joke, he turns to the camera and goes, 'Huh-huh-heh,'" says writer Michael Palleschi, a 12-year veteran of the show. "We thought, 'What if we cut him out and put him over (other) videos?'"

Twenty-three seasons in, the creative team behind "AFV" knows it needs to mix it up to keep viewers coming back, whether it means superimposing visual non-sequiturs such as a laughing crank caller or a flying baby over video montages or having clips face off in a recurring bit known as "Vs." (e.g. "Pigs That Don't Want to Be Ridden vs. People Who Can't Use Kitchen Mixers").

"We have a lot of people getting hit, a lot of cute babies, a lot of cute animals, but how do we take those elements and combine them in ways that are different and exciting for people?" asks writer Jordan Schatz, who's in his sixth season.

The process is made easier by a recent update to the "AFV" database that allows the four-man writing team, headed by co-executive producer Todd Thicke, to search the show's nearly 2 1/2 decades' worth of clips and view them on demand.

"If we're doing a 'Vs.' with people getting scared by clowns, you can go to the database and type in 'scared' and 'clown' and find that," says writer Erik Lohla, in his third season. "But we did a package last year called 'Comfy Brown Couch,' which was funny stuff in living rooms with a brown



Co-exec producers Michele Nasraway and Todd Thicke during a taping on location at Disneyland's Cars Land



In the early days of the show, a production assistant empties mailbags of VHS tapes from viewers



The 300th episode script meeting with Nasraway, exec producer Vin Di Bona, Thicke and host Tom Bergeron.



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couch, and we couldn't search for that because they don't write in the database 'guy sitting in a comfy brown couch.' "

The writers put together more than two dozen four- to eight-minute clip packages for each Saturday night taping, during which two shows are recorded.

"If something doesn't appeal to you, just wait 15 or 20 seconds and there will be something you might like, like guys falling off roofs or a salute to dogs driving cars," says Thicke, who's been with "AFV" since its inception in 1989.

Based on the studio audience's reaction, the packages are trimmed down or dropped completely so they fit into each show's running time of 43 minutes, 25 seconds.

"If you have a situation comedy, the most you can have is three takes of a scene," says the show's longtime editor Manny Moura, who got his start cutting the 1970s sitcom "Welcome Back, Kotter." "We have one take of a scene, but if they don't like it, they send you back to the library to find more."

The content of the show is also shaped by cultural trends and fads, like mixing Coke and Mentos to create explosions.

"When the yoga ball became popular, we got a million clips with those," Palleschi says. "Then when the Wii came out, we got a million people throwing their controllers. Now, we have funny clips with iPads."



First 'AFV' host Bob Saget and Di Bona.



'Funniest' class act: writer Jordan Schatz, left, producer Rich Connor; co-exec producer Michele Nasraway; head writer/co-exec producer Todd Thicke; producer-writer Mike Palleschi; and writer Erik Lohla.

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