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Slap-schtick keeps hitting funny bone

'America's Funniest Home Videos' 500th Episode

By TODD LONGWELL

Twenty-three seasons in, "America's Funniest Home Videos" executive producer Vin Di Bona has a crystal clear vision of who his audience is and what it wants.

"It (ranges) from 3-year-old kids to teenagers and they're watching with their parents or their grandparents," he says. "And we cater to them. This year, one of the changes we've made is having a kid introduce (host) Tom Bergeron. We know that the audience is going to love that."

It's periodic tweaks to the formula like these that have enabled "AFV" to make it to 500 episodes and beyond. It's the longest-running entertainment show in the history of ABC, and it has been so since its 17th year on the air.

At this point, "it's sort of graduated from college and moved back in with its parents," jokes John Saade, exec vice president of alternative series, specials and late night for ABC. "It really is a perfect Sunday 7 o'clock show."

What most people don't remember is that "AFV" almost didn't make it out of grade school because ABC canceled it at the conclusion of its 10th season in 1999.

A variety of factors contributed to its temporary demise, including the 1997 departure of original host Bob Saget, who was replaced by the team of John Fugelsang and Daisy Fuentes for seasons eight and nine. But the core problem was that the show was trying to be something it was not and never will be: hip.

"There was movement to make the show younger and more MTV," says head writer/co-executive producer Todd Thicke, who's been with "AFV" for entirety of its run. "The shows were good, but



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The "AFV" gang celebrates the show's longevity

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they were a little bit more wry, sarcastic and sexy, and that's just not what we are."

The changes were set in motion in 1996 when the network plucked 32-year-old Jamie Tarses from NBC, where she was instrumental in developing "Friends," and appointed her president of ABC Entertainment.

"What we do is very baseline comedy, but it's also belly-laugh comedy," Di Bona says. "For a more sophisticated comedy maven, that bugs the crap out of them. The show was moved to Saturday night at 8 o'clock, which at that time was just becoming the death slot. And we know what happened. Thank God there were enough people at ABC who understood the possibilities the show still had."

Tarses resigned in August 1999 and by December, "AFV" was back on the air with the first in a series of specials hosted by ABC sitcom stars such as D.L. Hughley ("The Hughleys") and Richard Kind ("Spin City"). Then, in 2001, ABC decided to bring "AFV" back as a weekly series.

The Rhode Island-born Di Bona happened upon his next host when he went to accept a career achievement award at the New England Emmy Awards, emceed by Massachusetts native Bergeron, who was hosting "Hollywood Squares" at the time.

"It was mostly documentaries and news awards, so it was pretty dry, but Tom was cracking everybody up," Di Bona remembers. "My mother leaned over to me and said, 'Get that guy.' "

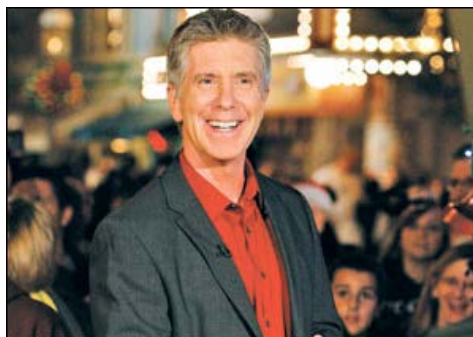
The easygoing style Bergeron brought to the show took it in a new direction.

"Bob (Saget) is a comedian, which was perfect for the show for a long time," Di Bona says. "But a comedian always wants to tell the very funniest joke. Tom is a host, a facilitator. He sets the tone, he sets up the joke, but he doesn't have to do the joke."

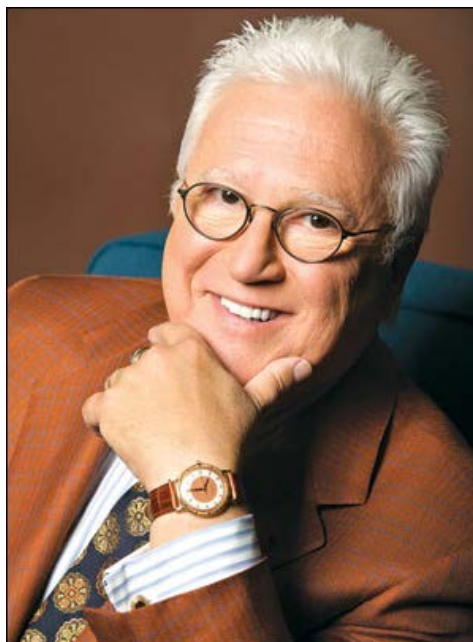
Whereas Saget provided wall-to-wall character voices for the subjects in the clips, whether they were hapless dads, precocious babies or



'AFV' exec producer Vin Di Bona and former host Bob Saget celebrate 20 years of 'AFV.'



"AFV" host Tom Bergeron on location at Disneyland,



'AFV' exec producer Vin Di Bona



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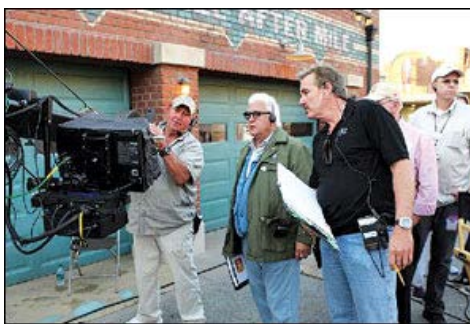
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conniving cats, Bergeron serves as a detached observer. But in many ways the creative dynamic remains the same.

"The first rule of thumb is the clip has got to be funny," Di Bona says. "The second is the voiceover is never right on. It's always counterpoint or it's a point of view that gets you a second laugh after the initial visual premise. In some instances, moreso in the Saget years, comedy sound effects give you the third laugh."



Di Bona on location at Disneyland's Cars Land.

Although some have complained that those laughs often come at the expense people suffering painful injuries, he says he's received little pushback from ABC.

"There's maybe three times a year that I call and have to fight for a clip," Di Bona says, "and if I lose that battle, it's one clip out of 50 in the show."

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