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## TV A look back at the 'Jeopardy!' guest hosts' highlights

The rotating guest hosts have each brought their own voice and personality to the job.



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**By Randee Dawn**

For "Jeopardy!" fans, it's been a season like no other. Since the loss of iconic veteran host Alex Trebek, who hosted the classic game show for 37 years, there has been no permanent host. Instead, an ongoing series of guests have taken the space behind the podium for weeks at a time.

And as the show tells TODAY, that is the plan: to continue until Friday, August 13, when the season ends and four weeks of reruns commence. In theory, a new host will be announced in

time for the new season (here are some of the most likely candidates we considered before the guest host season began) – but so far, we don't know who's a front-runner.

But what we've been faced with in this most unusual of "Jeopardy!" seasons is this: a selection of temporary hosts who have each brought their own voice and personality to the job. And as all of them have no doubt learned, this is no cakewalk.

"'Jeopardy!' is a grind," Adam Nedeff, game show historian and author of "Game Shows FAQ," told TODAY. "(For a full-time host there are) 230 episodes per year, taped five at a time, 61 clues per episode with lots of big words and obscure names. It needs someone who's up to that task. Game show hosting is a unique skill, and hosting 'Jeopardy!' is something even more pronounced within that."

And, he added, "The show needs somebody who is willing to take a back seat. Listen to how Alex was introduced. He was 'the host of Jeopardy,' not the star. Contestants are the star, the game is the star. The show is not intended to be a vehicle for somebody."

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Noted Claire McNear, author of the "Jeopardy!" book "Answers in the Form of Questions," "Alex Trebek was an extremely talented TV professional who had a ton of broadcasting and hosting experience when he started at 'Jeopardy!' and then he spent 36 years polishing it. He was so good because he really put in the time and work to pull it off, but he also had a whole lot of practice. The next host is going to be compared to him, and we're hearing from a lot of his would-be successors that that's a pretty daunting thing."

We do not doubt that! So, we thought it was time to take a step back and do a little midseason assessment.

— Savannah Guthrie Jeopardy Productions

TODAY's own Savannah Guthrie accepted the baton from June 14-25. We may be a little biased here, but she did a great job. Of course, we want her in Studio 1A, where she belongs.

— Trebek with Jennings in 2014. Jeopardy Productions via Getty Images

## Ken Jennings (Jan. 4-Feb. 19)

As the official "Jeopardy!" Greatest of All Time (GOAT) player and consulting producer, it seemed natural that Jennings – no TV newbie since he notched his many wins on the show – would ease audiences into the transition. He was clearly tickled to be there, and couldn't help bringing his own spin to the questions, adding more detail and facts to the answers. Smooth in his delivery, he was still a fan at heart. And here's one other issue he had to handle: No audience. When Jennings took over, it was to a nearly-empty studio, due to pandemic restrictions.

— "Jeopardy!" executive producer (and temporary host) Mike Richards. Jeopardy

## Mike Richards (Feb. 22-March 5)

If you ran both "Jeopardy!" and "Wheel of Fortune" and a temporary slot opened up on either, would you program yourself into it? Heck yeah! Yet Richards never felt like he was shoehorned in (and he has hosted other shows before, like "Pyramid" and "Beauty and the Geek"). Respectful of both Trebek's legacy and the show itself, he was surprisingly effective as the host we never knew (and possibly he never realized) he could be.

— Katie Couric. Jeopardy

## Katie Couric (March 8-19)

The show's first female host, former TODAY anchor and veteran journalist Couric, was snappy, enthusiastic and – as she's often been described – relentlessly perky. She seemed to take contestants' correct and incorrect answers personally, like she was next to them on this roller coaster ride. Favorite moment? Quipping, "She's gonna be upset!" when none of the contestants could come up with "Gwyneth Paltrow" for the "I've Won an Oscar and an Emmy" category. But like many temporary hosts, she's well-established in another field, and has said she's not interested in anything permanent.

— Dr. Mehmet Oz. Jeopardy

## Dr. Mehmet Oz (March 22-April 2)

Dr. Oz rode into the show on a wave of controversy; audiences and past contestants alike rebelled against his off-show medical comments (Variety wrote that he gave the show "a black eye"). On the show itself he had a particular laconic style that didn't always jibe with the rhythm the question/answers seemed to require, and it was hard to get a read on his personality from that position.

— Aaron Rodgers. Jeopardy

## Aaron Rodgers (April 5-16)

Green Bay Packers quarterback Rodgers was as friendly to the game and the players as a golden retriever; often he seemed surprised to have even been included in the running (but he did stay poised thanks to his sticky note plan). But he was a "Celebrity Jeopardy!" winner in 2015 and clearly knew the game well, and when no one guessed the Packers for a sports-related question, he offered an amused, charming reaction to the gap in their knowledge. Still, it seems hard to imagine he'd give up football to be permanently benched behind the podium.

— Anderson Cooper. Jeopardy

## Anderson Cooper (April 19-30)

Two-time "Celebrity Jeopardy!" champion, CNN anchor and correspondent for "60 Minutes," Cooper and his horn-rimmed glasses brought a newsman's vibe to the position (while on social media we got to see his son Wyatt watching him for the first time), and he was crisply chatty with the contestants while easily moving things along. He looked like a game show host: professional and in charge. But as with many of the other guests, he's got a reputable ongoing job as a journalist, and is unlikely to make a change.

— Bill Whitaker. Jeopardy

## Bill Whitaker (May 3-14)

No surprise that the show chose more journalists than any other profession to step into Trebek's slot; they tend to be focused and authoritative, while also accustomed to being the center of a camera's attention. "60 Minutes" correspondent Whitaker had all of that going for him (and a question that seemed to predict the return of "Bennifer"), but brought a soft-spoken manner to the job – a sharp contrast to Cooper's approach, if familiar to anyone who enjoyed Rodgers' stint.

— Buzzy Cohen. Jeopardy

## Buzzy Cohen (May 17-28)

"Jeopardy!" champ Cohen was definitely quirky in the sartorial department – those glasses! – but he managed to meld some of the best parts of previous hosts into one smooth, coherent whole: He was a fan of the game, expert in how it all worked, the right kind of cheerleader for the contestants (not too over-the-top, not too laid-back) with a clear, sharp personality that never overwhelmed the game itself.

— Mayim Bialik. Jeopardy

## Mayim Bialik (May 31-June 11)

The former "Big Bang Theory" actor (and neuroscientist) proved the producers were finally on to a formula with their temporary hires: She was cheerful without trying to make overt jokes, authoritative in her knowledge and moved the show along smoothly and efficiently. Though she might be willing to step back from acting, that Ph.D. she earned indicates she might be a bit overqualified for the position.

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