



This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show

Episode Three: Both Sides of the Buzzer

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV

Archival: Jeopardy! Show Intro

Johnny Gilbert: *Here is the host of Jeopardy!, Alex Trebek!*

Alex Trebek: *Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of all of us, welcome to America's favorite answer and question game, Jeopardy! You know how we play it. We provide the categories and the answers and then it's up to our contestants to give us the right questions...*

Buzzy Cohen: When Alex Trebek first became the host of *Jeopardy!* in 1984, the show was still finding its groove...and working out some kinks.

You might remember from before — one of things *Jeopardy!* hadn't fully figured out was how contestants would ring in to answer clues.

In that very first season, it was like the wild west. Contestants could buzz in whenever they wanted...even before Alex had finished reading a clue.

Jeopardy Show Archival:

Alex Trebek: *Last season, you'll recall that our players could ring in whenever an answer appeared on the board.*

Contestant: *National landmarks for 200, please.*

Alex Trebek: *The answer is...[ding]...she came from France to harbor America's freedom, Lois. [ding.]*

Alex Trebek: *His price was 30 pieces of silver. Greg...*

Alex Trebek: *This year they can ring in only when the answer has been read, and that will be indicated on our board by this white perimeter light. You folks at home...*

Buzzy Cohen: To recap — contestants had to watch and wait for that white perimeter light — that told them when Alex had finished reading the clue — and then they could buzz in.

This change was pretty monumental — it meant audiences could now play along from home because they'd have a fair shake too.

And when it came to the actual game, it would entirely evolve the way contestants played, and launch a new generation of buzzer strategists.

Ken Jennings: **The thing about the buzzer, as well-informed viewers probably know, is you can't just press the button when you know it.**

James Holzhauer: **I practiced buzzing at home, but obviously on the stage is a completely different animal.**

Amy Schneider: **I'd just always been practicing at home with a thumb, so I wasn't gonna switch it up in the studio.**

Buzzy Cohen: As someone who's played a bit of *Jeopardy!*, I can tell you — yes, it's about what you know...but it's also a lot about buzzing in to answer a clue at the exact right moment.

The buzzer...or the “signaling device,” as it's officially called...it can make you or it can break you.

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: I'm your host, Buzzy Cohen, and from Somethin' Else, Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV, This is Jeopardy: The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show.

This week...we take you 360 degrees around the famed signaling device.

THEME MUSIC OUT

<ad break>

ACT I

Fritz Holznagel: **The jeopardy buzzer is a tube. It's a metal or a plastic, hard plastic tube that's about eight inches long. And on top of it is a button you press down.**

Buzzy Cohen: If there's one person who knows how the *Jeopardy!* buzzer works, it's this guy.

Fritz Holznagel: **My name is Fritz Holznagel, and I guess you could say that I am the current accepted authority on buzzing in the United States. [laughs]**

Buzzy Cohen: In contestant circles, Fritz is the buzzer guru — he's the Obi-Wan of the signaling device.

He's even written a whole book about it called *Secrets of the Buzzer*. Here's the first paragraph.

Fritz Holznagel: **“The buzzer is your friend. It is not a venomous rattlesnake, a downed power line or a horrifying object cursed by the ghosts of howard carter king tut in 1922. Many people who try out for *Jeopardy!* or play in quiz bowls have heard otherwise. They've heard that the buzzer is a secret key to the game, which is true, and that it is unknowable, inscrutable, or malignant, which is not true. The buzzer is in fact your all-access pass to the coachella of quizdom.”**

Buzzy Cohen: The rest of the book gets a lot more technical, but Fritz maintains that gentle encouragement throughout.

Fritz is a freelance writer. He works mostly with corporate clients. And he lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.

Being around Fritz is kind of like being around a beloved coach — not the kind that tells you to buck up and play through the pain. He's like Ted Lasso.

MUSIC: whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: He reminds you that buzzer timing is an art, and that art takes time to perfect.

Fritz Holznagel: **When I watch the show, I still see people who are kind of flailing around with the buzzer. And that still, to me, is kind of the biggest mistake. Just like sometimes you see people make crazy bets in Final Jeopardy! and you know, things happen. You get on the show, things happen. But I definitely can notice when people are kind of waving the buzzer around...that usually it's just not really that effective a way of buzzing.**

Buzzy Cohen: You really do feel like he wants you to get better at *Jeopardy!* You've probably seen contestants holding the buzzer on stage. Like Fritz said, it's a plastic tube that's about eight inches long. On the top is a button, and that button is connected to a wire that feeds down into the lectern.

In the simplest terms — you want to push that button at exactly the right time.

Fritz Holznagel: If you buzz in too soon, you're punished by being locked out for a quarter of a second. So the other people have a chance to ring in while you can't.

Buzzy Cohen: If you buzz in too late, someone else will beat you to it.

It's not a game of speed, exactly, but one of accuracy.

Fritz Holznagel: I recommend six things for maximum speed. And they are: move less, win more. I recommend you use two hands rather than one. Use your thumb rather than your fingers. Keep your thumb joint as much at 90 degrees as you can so that you don't lose time moving that joint when you're ready to buzz. The fifth is pull, don't push. And then the sixth is, be sure you look directly at the signal light when it comes on.

There's something that you can't see at home, which is there's a light that goes on next to the board and that light tells the contestants, *Okay, you can ring in now.*

Buzzy Cohen: In other words, buzzing is all about reaction time — it's a race. You might be thinking, what? Reaction times? I thought *Jeopardy!* was for nerds. This is jock stuff.

Fritz Holznagel: It makes about as much sense as having college linebackers recite Shakespeare to see who wins the football game.

Buzzy Cohen: Fritz self-published his book in 2015.

He sold around fifty copies in the three first years of its publication.

But word spread...and it's become the buzzer bible for *Jeopardy!* hopefuls.

He now sells hundreds of copies a year, and the second edition even features a forward by super champ James Holzhauer.

Fritz knows his stuff. He's played a lot of *Jeopardy!* too.

Jeopardy! Show Archival:

Johnny Gilbert: This is Jeopardy! Now in the studio are today's contestants...a software writer originally from Forest Grove, Oregon, Ryan Holznagel...

Buzzy Cohen: Almost thirty years ago, Fritz was going by the name Ryan.

Back then, he was far from the *Jeopardy!* champion and buzzer expert he is today. He was just as fallible as the rest of us.

In 1993, he was a baby-faced young man making his very first appearance on the show.

Fritz Holznagel: I have a really strong sense-memory of when we left the green room for the first time and walked around the corner. You go down this little corridor that's draped with black velvet and then you pop out and there's the *Jeopardy!* set.

Buzzy Cohen: He still remembers that feeling of getting ready to walk on stage for the first time.

Fritz Holznagel: The stage director — he gave me a shove. [Laughs.] in my back to, like, say, you know, get on out there, get on stage, you know, don't, don't stroll out — race out there.

Buzzy Cohen: And despite the nerves, he did extremely well.

Jeopardy! Show Archival:

Alex Trebek: This bear that lives in frigid regions is also called the ice bear, Ryan.

Fritz Holznagel: What is the polar bear?

Alex Trebek: Right.

Fritz Holznagel: May I have all that jazz for 100, please.

Fritz Holznagel: When I was on the first time, I really wasn't thinking about the buzzer.

Jeopardy! Show Archival:

Alex Trebek: This current Tonight Show band leader appeared in the documentary Bring on the Night with Sting, Ryan.

Fritz Holznagel: Who's Marsalis.

Alex Trebek: Branford Marsalis is right.

Fritz Holznagel: It turned out that I was pretty good on the buzzer, uh, just naturally.

Buzzy Cohen: Fritz aced that game and became a five-game champ. (Remember, that was before the five-game limit was lifted.)

The year after, he won the Tournament of Champions.

And twenty years after his very first appearance, *Jeopardy!* invited him back again...in 2014.

Jeopardy! Promo Archival:

Alex Trebek: We are going to be bringing back the best players from the eighties, the nineties, and the 2000s to compete in a special competition we're calling, Battle of the Decades. Believe me, it's the — it's the — it's the turducken, turducken, turducken of tournaments!

Buzzy Cohen: Wow, turducken — that was a moment, huh?

Well, this time around, Fritz was feeling older, not necessarily wiser, though.

Fritz Holznagel: I knew that I wasn't going to be any smarter than any of those people. In fact, I figured I was probably gonna be quite dumber than some of them in the areas of pop culture. I hadn't been paying attention to pop music. I wasn't watching television very much, and it's a big handicap.

Buzzy Cohen: He tried to figure out how he could up his game.

MUSIC: suspenseful beat with momentum begins

Fritz Holznagel: I started reading about reaction times and how you could improve reaction times.

Buzzy Cohen: Fritz developed a daily routine to train for battle of the decades.

He'd get up in the morning, go to his study, rig up a practice buzzer, plug it into his computer, and start ringing in.

Fritz Holznagel: Over the course of the next four months, I actually did about 25,000 practice buzzes. I tried with my right thumb and my left thumb. I tried with my index finger. I tried it with my pinky. I tried it with all 10 fingers, actually, just in case one of them turned out to be super fast.

I tried different holds of the buzzer, like I tried holding the buzzer along the length of my hands, so that the button ended at the tip of my index finger...sort of like pulling a trigger. I tried holding the buzzer high. I tried holding the buzzer behind my back. In the end, I discovered that buzzing with my right hand and my thumb was fastest for me.

Buzzy Cohen: Remember Fritz's six tips for buzzing in faster? He didn't just pull those out of nowhere. He wrote them up after this intense period of exhaustive data collection.

And by the way, four months of buzzing led him to new conclusions as well.

Fritz hasn't always gripped the buzzer the same way.

In his first *Jeopardy!* appearance, he held the buzzer behind his back. That worked out well for him, as we know, so he kept at it in the 1995 Tournament of Champions, which he also won.

But when he geared up for Battle of the Decades, his many tests actually revealed something new.

Fritz Holznagel: I found that I was about three one thousandths of a second faster when I was holding the buzzer in front than I was when I had it behind my back. I don't know what the physiological thing is behind that, but once I discovered that, I switched. My whole thing was shaving thousands of a second off of my time.

Buzzy Cohen: Fritz was paying attention to incredibly small details — fractions of seconds. It's super granular. But when you're facing a slew of superchamps, a thousandth of a second can make all the difference.

And then...the big moment finally arrived.

Jeopardy! Battle of the Decades Archival:

Johnny Gilbert: This is the Jeopardy Battle of the Decades! Let's meet today's former champions from our second decade...

Buzzy Cohen: As he'd predicted, Fritz was up against two extremely competent players — Dan Melia and Pam Mueller.

By the way, Pam was really one of the ones to watch here...she had already competed in two tournaments of champions, and first appeared on the show when she won the *Jeopardy!* college championship at the young age of 19.

Jeopardy! Battle of the Decades Archival:

Alex Trebek: And Fritz, you get to select first.

Fritz Holznagel: Let's do Broadway musicals by songs for 200, please.

Alex Trebek: one. and what I did for love, Pam.

Pam Mueller: What is a chorus line?

Alex Trebek: That's it.

Buzzy Cohen: At the end of the *Double Jeopardy!* round, Fritz was holding his own against the mighty Pam Mueller...trailing her by just over four thousand dollars.

But in *Final Jeopardy!*...

Jeopardy! Battle of the Decades Archival:

Alex Trebek: As we come to Pam Mueller, who had \$17,000 and the lead, and she picked the wrong response and it'll cost her...nothing. So she will move on. Well done, young lady.

Buzzy Cohen: Pam got *Final Jeopardy!* wrong, but she had wagered zero dollars and kept her spot — edging out her competitors.

For all of Fritz's prep on the buzzer, *Final Jeopardy!* still got him in the end.

And even though he didn't come out on top in battle of the decades, Fritz kept careful notes on his own performance.

Fritz Holznagel: When I went back later and looked at, um, how well I was doing, I got in about 60% of the time on the buzzer when I tried to get in, which is terrific. I just got beat by Pam Mueller 'cause she knew more stuff than I did, so salute. [Laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: A year after facing Pam Mueller, Fritz released *Secrets of the Buzzer*.

Since then, contestants regularly write to him for help and advice.

Fritz Holznagel: I get emails all the time from people who are gonna be on the show asking if I have any questions, you know, asking questions that maybe I didn't cover in the book. It's always lovely to hear from these people and give them any help I can.

MUSIC: Energetic beat with momentum begins

Buzzy Cohen: Before I was on *Jeopardy!*, I didn't reach out to Fritz directly.

But after my initial appearance, and before competing in the Tournament of Champions, I wanted to up my game too, so I bought one of his mock buzzers.

I'm not the only *Jeopardy!* contestant to attend the school of Holznagel. James Holzhauer credits Fritz's book for helping him prepare for his own record-shattering run.

We wanted to take a closer look at the curriculum...so, after the break...two new students enroll...

Stay with us.

<ad break>

ACT II

Buzzy Cohen: To me, buzzer obsession really gets at what is so delightful about *Jeopardy!* Contestants put their whole selves into prepping for the game...and then it comes down to something as specific as the buzzer. This is what makes *Jeopardy!* strategy so unique.

Or, you know, you might find it a little crazy that people dive so deep on this.

But we're making a podcast about *Jeopardy!* so obviously, we love a deep dive.

And of course, that meant inviting Fritz to the studio in-person...to meet with my two producers, Sylvie Lubow and Julia Doyle.

As you can tell by now, Fritz has thought a lot about the buzzer, but we decided to hone in on one aspect of it: reaction time.

My producers didn't worry about knowing the answers to the clues. They just concentrated on the buzzer — the physicality of the signaling device.

AMBI: *setting up sounds of Fritz in the studio at Sony studios, chatter in the background.*

Buzzy Cohen: On a crisp November afternoon, Fritz came down to the Sony studios with his laptop and buzzer in tow.

It was the same mock buzzer he had used to train for Battle of the Decades. Back in the day, he had a friend make one for him.

Ahead of time, Fritz asked my producer Julia to make a sacrifice...abstain from caffeine, just for the day.

Julia Doyle: I usually drink the equivalent of four, like, 12-ounce cups of coffee by this point. I haven't had any. I feel terrible. [Laughs.]

Fritz Holznagel: [Laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: This isn't a ruse. During his training, Fritz studied the effects of caffeine on reaction times.

So that first test with Julia was caffeine-free.

Julia Doyle: Does it make you smarter too? Will I be able to answer the questions now? like before i didn't know the date and now i'll know the date after drinking the coffee?

Fritz Holznagel: It depends on how much coffee you have.

Julia Doyle: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MUSIC: Drum beat begins

Buzzy Cohen: Let me do a little scene setting.

Picture this: Julia's standing up, holding the mock buzzer that's wired to Fritz's laptop. On the laptop screen is a very simple website.

Fritz and that same friend built the website, and Fritz recorded himself reading about 80 prompts.

Fritz Holznagel: *Jeopardy!* insists on calling this the signaling device. They never call it the buzzer.

Sylvie Lubow: The signaling device.

Fritz Holznagel: It's the signaling device. I call it the buzzer. [Laughs.]

Julia Doyle: Okay. So I'll click this once, it'll play the question, and then as soon as that turns white on the screen, I'll click it again.

Fritz Holznagel: That's right.

Julia Doyle: Okay.

Fritz's voice from the computer: a sonnet has this many lines.

Buzzy Cohen: That's one of Fritz's recorded prompts, playing from the computer.

Julia Doyle: Oh my god...[Laughs.]

Fritz Holznagel: 375. That's a little slow...

Buzzy Cohen: Julia's buzzing in at every prompt. But at first, she's shocked by how fast she has to go to get in.

Fritz Holznagel: Now you see the trauma of being on Jeopardy!. A lot of people say, ah, I got there and froze up...

Buzzy Cohen: See! The trauma is real!

Let me just pop in here for a second and say, for the record, that my producers are extremely hard-working, very smart, and they are very capable people.

But anyone doing this for the first time? It's just not easy.

Fritz Holznagel: So we can see here that your average speed was 282 milliseconds. uh, it throws out — like the ones where you missed it, it throws out the high and the low scores. So you're at 282. Go ahead and have a little coffee. We'll wait, uh, five or 10 minutes for it to take effect, and then we'll do the whole thing again and we'll see if you improve.

Buzzy Cohen: Julia was the guinea pig for caffeine and its effects on reaction time.

But she was quickly joined by Sylvie...who was already very caffeinated.

Sylvie Lubow: I have had exactly one cup of coffee today and, uh, yeah, I'm gonna test my reaction time.

Fritz's voice from the computer: he was the first president of Mexico.

Sylvie Lubow: Ooh. That was slower. 216.

Fritz Holznagel: See, but that's very average. That's not bad at all.

Sylvie Lubow: Okay.

Fritz's voice from the computer: this is the color of a classic London cab.

Sylvie Lubow: [Hitting the table with her hand.] Oh, I'm too soon!!!

Fritz Holznagel: So you're having the real Jeopardy experience here.

Sylvie Lubow: I am!!!

Buzzy Cohen: Sylvie was coming in early...but once she switched hands...

Sylvie Lubow: Whoa. That was fast.

Fritz Holznagel: That was very fast, yeah.

Sylvie Lubow: But I'm a righty!

Julia Doyle: Are you left-handed?

Sylvie Lubow: Yeah, I'm a righty. Let's try it again.

Fritz's voice from the computer: It's the least popular state in the U.S.A.

Fritz Holznagel: 34. You're killing it. You are killing it.

Sylvie Lubow: Who knew?! I'm the lefty on the buzzer or the signaling device!

Wow...to be able to both buzz quickly and have the answer in — or the question, rather — in your brain, it is very hard. That is really hard. 'Cause my mind went blank exactly as yours did.

Julia Doyle: Yeah.

Buzzy Cohen: Yeah. I know that feeling too. Before I went on *Jeopardy!*, I had done quiz bowl in high school.

But quiz bowl has nothing to do with reaction times! You can answer whenever you want. You do not have to worry about timing.

Sylvie Lubow: I have a whole new appreciation for the contestants.

Buzzy Cohen: Thanks, Sylvie! Shout out to all my fellow contestants who make it look so easy.

Sylvie Lubow: I'm typical. I'm so average.

Fritz Holznagel: I wouldn't say that. You're, you are amazing! But average on the buzzer. [Laughs.]

Sylvie Lubow: [Laughs.] is it about that time for...?

Fritz Holznagel: I think so. How much coffee have you consumed?

Julia Doyle: Well, this was a very large cup of coffee and I've had probably half of it.

Fritz Holznagel: Oh, wow.

Julia Doyle: Yeah. [Laughs.]

Fritz Holznagel: Okay.

Sylvie Lubow: She's really slugging it.

Fritz Holznagel: Yeah, it's probably been eight or nine minutes, would you say?

Julia Doyle: I think so, yeah.

Fritz Holznagel: All right, so I'm gonna set this up now and, um, I will put this as "Julia after coffee" as the tag. Before we had "Julia before coffee" and you were at 282 milliseconds.

Fritz's voice from the computer: Althea Gibson was a star in which sport?

Fritz Holznagel: 216.

Fritz's voice from the computer: It's the final event in the decathlon.

Fritz Holznagel: 236. Great. After coffee, you were at 2.226.0 milliseconds. And before coffee you were at 282, so you are actually almost 51 thousandths of a second faster. Five one hundredths of a second faster. That's very fast. That's a lot.

Buzzy Cohen: What do you know? Coffee really does the trick!

MUSIC: *building string beat with momentum begins*

Buzzy Cohen: Since this was just a test...we didn't expect any prizes. But my man Fritz came prepared.

Fritz Holznagel: So here's what you've won. It is a 25-year-old coupon for a free package of Pillsbury Crescent Rolls, which I won when I was on *Jeopardy!* the first time around. After your last show, they gave me a bunch of parting gifts as they used to do on game shows in those days.

Julia Doyle: Did you, did you cash in on any...?

Fritz Holznagel: I ate all the Crescent Rolls I could. [laughs.] before, before December of '97, but I still had some left over — I still had some coupons left over.

Buzzy Cohen: Even with a world of buzzer knowledge at one's disposal...it is an entirely different story when you show up to the *Jeopardy!* stage and actually play the game.

And then there's one thing — or rather, one person — we haven't really talked about yet.

After the break, we'll pull back the curtain on the human being behind the machine. Stick around.

<ad break>

ACT III

MUSIC: Steady beat with wooden blocks begins

Buzzy Cohen: There's someone I haven't mentioned until now...a person who's central to understanding how the buzzer works.

A person cloaked in mystery...especially among *Jeopardy!* contestants. In alumni circles, no one really knows much — or even who he is.

I'm talking about the *Jeopardy!* staffer who runs the whole buzzer mechanism from a desk offstage. His official title is the Enabler.

Contestants wouldn't be able to buzz in without the Enabler. Remember the white perimeter lights that flash on around the *Jeopardy!* board? Those come on because the Enabler presses a button...and that's what allows contestants to ring in...

Over the years, different folks have done the job of the Enabler. And like any job, some like it more than others.

Ryan Haas: I don't miss it. [laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: That's game material manager Ryan Haas. These days, Ryan sits in the writers' library, managing gargantuan databases of game material.

But he used to enable the buzzer back when Alex Trebek was hosting the show.

Ryan Haas: For someone that plays guitar, I have no rhythm and Alex would throw me off 'cause he was Canadian. So instead of saying 1823, he'd say 18 hundred and 23.

By then I'd already enabled it. [laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: Ryan enabled for five years...until a different colleague took over in 2017.

Michael Harris: I am the senior researcher of *Jeopardy!*

Buzzy Cohen: Meet Michael Harris. The Enabler.

Michael Harris: Also the gameplay analyst and the title of the Enabler, which is, um, I guess what we'll be discussing a lot today.

Buzzy Cohen: Before the break, Fritz taught us how caffeine speeds up reaction times. And that made us wonder...what does the guy on the other side of the buzzer drink to keep alert?

Michael Harris: You know, like some people, caffeine totally, like, perks them up or whatever. I don't, I've never felt that with caffeine.

Buzzy Cohen: Maybe for a job that most people would think is incredibly stressful, you actually have to be relaxed...maybe you have to be somebody who *doesn't* average eight espresso shots a day like I do.

So actually, instead of coffee, the enabler likes to gear up for tape days with... seltzer?

Ambi of Michael Harris filling up his water bottle with seltzer

Michael Harris: Sparkling water.

Buzzy Cohen: When you're up on stage, with the lights on, you can't really see Michael Harris. He sits next to the judges, off-stage. And he's very low key. But right in front of him, on his desk...

Michael Harris: It's very simple. It's a little square black box. It has two, basically, toggle switches. One says enable, and it's blue with a little green light. And one says clear, and it's um, black with a little red light. So when I hit enable, the little green light comes on. There are blue lights on either side of the game board, which is what the contestants are looking for, for them to know that they're able to ring in.

Ambi of Michael Harris pressing the buttons.

Buzzy Cohen: Hear that little tapping noise? That's Michael pressing the enable button...an all-important sound that normally gets drowned out by daily doubles and the *Jeopardy!* theme song.

The thing is...for all the mystique built up around the Enabler, Michael Harris is...a pretty regular guy.

Michael Harris: I don't know if you wanna say like, the fourth man, since there's three players, like I'm the fourth man. [laughs.]

You know, if I, I don't want to slow up the game in any way. I don't want to disrupt the game. My whole thing is to be as engaged and as focused on the gameplay so that Ken reads the clues the way he should. I enable, they answer. I enable, they get it wrong. I enable, but to keep that flow going. And so the contestants, if they're getting in a rhythm, can stay in the rhythm or do whatever, but I don't want to be the — the thing that slows it up.

Buzzy Cohen: For all that the contestants have agonized over the buzzer...the Enabler keeps a pretty cool head as the person on the other side of the proverbial wall.

Michael Harris: **There's no magic or hocus pocus involved in it. I think perhaps what it is they find maybe...is, um, they'll be on a streak and then suddenly they didn't get in and they might get in the next clue afterwards.**

But then someone else might have a streak and they're probably like, *What did I do to lose that mojo for that moment?*

MUSIC: *whimsical spacey music begins*

Matt Amodio: **The combination of practicing a lot, but not getting too rigid in your strategy is, is really what's necessary to make a great buzzer.**

Buzzy Cohen: That's Matt Amodio...he first appeared on *Jeopardy!* in 2021...and he ended up winning an astonishing 38 games.

Matt Amodio: **Only in the last year have there been, uh, public data on how many times each contestant presses their buzzer.**

Buzzy Cohen: It's true — *Jeopardy!* has only recently begun releasing stats on buzzer speed and accuracy. And when it comes to champions who have truly conquered buzzerdom, Matt is high up on that list.

Matt Amodio: **Going on the show, I knew that the buzzer was going to be a problem that I needed to solve.**

Buzzy Cohen: For Matt, that meant thinking about the person on the other side of the buzzer.

Matt Amodio: **Michael, can I, can I say his name?**

Buzzy Cohen: Yeah, the guy's not Voldemort.

During Matt's run, he says he became aware of Michael's existence...because, well, it was clear there was a human being enabling.

Matt Amodio: You can definitely tell that there is maybe a faster day where the buzzer opens up sooner with respect to the last word than others. And then, um, some days where, where it's really almost exactly as the last word's being, uh, finished, that it opens up.

And I don't know if that's because Michael had an extra cup of coffee. Maybe, a poor night's sleep.

Buzzy Cohen: Again, what we're talking about concerns milliseconds...probably differences that are so extremely small they'd be missed by most.

Matt Amodio: If we were to clone Michael and put one of him in charge of, uh, opening up the lights and another of him as a contestant, I don't think he would do any better than any of us because, there's only just a certain amount of, uh, synchronicity that a human being can have at that level of precision.

Michael Harris: If I were a machine, it might be a different thing.

Buzzy Cohen: Michael Harris: Human man.

Michael Harris: We're all human, right? So perhaps, maybe Matt is more attuned to knowing, oh, Michael's rhythm is different today than it was yesterday, or it's different this show than it was this morning.

And I may not be even aware of that because it's, you know, it's just me and he's perceiving how he's getting the other end. So it could be happening...I just can't, I just don't know for sure.

Buzzy Cohen: What came first...the chicken or the egg?

Michael Harris: I actually feel a lot of times that maybe my pacing ends up kind of, syncing up with how they're driving the show. You know, Matt taking maybe a little bit slower in responding and then calling or James going super fast with response and selection where it just starts to become this like train and I am basically...almost in a way kind of keeping up with — 'cause it just moves so much faster. Maybe it's the strange symbiosis that happens, especially maybe for the super champs because they do ring in on average more times than the other contestants.

MUSIC: bright music with building momentum

Michael Harris: So I guess the longer we're together, there can be a kind of symbiosis that happens. And they may not even realize it, perhaps we're both kind of this feedback loop of, I'm ringing in, Michael's gonna ring in now, Michael's gonna open up now, ring in. You know, that kind of thing.

Buzzy Cohen: But first...a word of caution:

Michael Harris: If you come in thinking too much about me and trying to get into my head before you even play, then you might not even find your own rhythm.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: You know in a midsummer night's dream, when Demetrius is in love with Helena? But she doesn't think about him at all because she's in love with Lysander, and he doesn't think about her at all...because he's in love with Hermia. It's this circle of one-way attention that keeps leading to another person, and another, and another.

Well, the enabler doesn't think all that much about the contestants...even if some of them — maybe a lot of them! — are thinking about him. In a somewhat Shakespearean twist, the enabler is thinking about yet another person — the host.

And specifically — the host's last syllable...the one that comes at the end of the clue.

Michael Harris: Still to this day I'm like, do I wait till that last syllable rings out? Do I last when it gets to the very close end of that syllable? Because it's all sound.

Archival of Alex Trebek: In the 1960s, Stephen Hawking was diagnosed with a disease named for this famous athlete.

Michael Harris: So it's like, do I wait till that, like, million dollars, or do I hit it at er, or at sss, you know, so there's probably fractions of a second of when I'm gonna open up the buzzers.

And with Alex, if it finished in a blank, sometimes he'd say blank. Sometimes he'd say nothing.

Archival of Alex Trebek: Duma musketeer, who got his own fragrance in 1964...

Michael Harris: So it'd be da da da da da blank. But it could also be da da da da da.... and I know the blank's there, so now i have to hit it because he didn't say blank. So that's gonna be a slight change in timing too.

Whereas if I were a machine, maybe it would be scheduled to hit at, you know, like a metronome every time.

MUSIC: Bright beat with momentum begins

Buzzy Cohen: At the end of the day, one thing is clear. If you don't know the trivia, you're going to be in trouble the second you step onto stage 10. *Jeopardy!* is, at its core, a game of knowledge first.

But we were a little bit curious.

If you had to put it into numbers...what percentage of the game is straight-up buzzer?

Fritz Holznagel — buzzer guru.

Fritz Holznagel: I'm gonna assign it 33%, and that's because if everyone was able to buzz in equally randomly, everyone would get in 33% of the time. Each of the three contestants would get in one in three times.

Buzzy Cohen: Michael Harris — the Enabler.

Michael Harris: it's probably...maybe 40% buzzer, 60% knowledge. If you've made it to the podiums here on the show to be a contestant, chances are your depth of knowledge is pretty vast, um, and pretty solid.

Buzzy Cohen: Matt Amodio — superchamp.

Matt Amodio: From my experience, 90-10 sounds about right. that, uh, 90% of the game is knowing the trivia.

Buzzy Cohen: Those are all pretty different percentages from three people who have all spent a lot of time thinking about buzzing in on *Jeopardy!*

So what do we do with that?

Maybe a better way to think about it is to stop thinking so much about it.

Fritz Holznagel: The bottom line message about buzzing is the same way it's always been about everything with *Jeopardy!*, which is...this is a once in a lifetime chance to be on the show, go in there and have fun and do your best. That's the secret for success for most people who've done well on the show and probably can be your secret for success too.

Buzzy Cohen: To this day, the buzzer guru has never met the enabler. *Jeopardy!* keeps a tight lid on staff members getting friendly with contestants.

But if Fritz Holznagel could say one thing to Michael Harris...

Fritz Holznagel: I would say, uh, job well done. [Laughs.] and, uh, I would love to come and sit and watch you work sometime.

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: Next time on This is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show...

Michele Loud: I was driving home from work and Whitney Houston was playing on the radio and I happened to be stopped right by an ad for apollo 13 and I looked at it and I thought, *Whitney Houston, we have a problem.*

And so I wrote that as a Before and After clue.

CREDITS

Buzzy Cohen: This is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show is a production of Somethin' else, Sony Music Entertainment, and Sony Pictures TV.

It's hosted by me, Buzzy Cohen.

This episode was produced by Mia Warren.

The series producers are Julia Doyle, Sylvie Lubow, and Mia Warren.

Associate Producer is Serena Chow.

Our series editor is Sarah Kramer.

Executive producers are Lizzie Jacobs, Tom Koenig, Sarah Kramer, Michael Davies, and Suzanne Prete.

Production Management help from Susonya Davenport, Tameeka Ballance-Kolasny, and Ike Egbetola.

Our theme music was composed by Hannis Brown.

Our engineer is Cedric Wilson.

Special thanks to Charlie Yedor and Steve Ackerman.

And a big, big thank you to the Jeopardy! staff and crew for all their time and help on this. Shout out to Alexa Macchia.

If you loved the show, follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.

CITATION

“Both Sides of the Buzzer.” *This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America’s Favorite Quiz Show.*, Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV. https://www.jeopardy.com/listen/this_is_jeopardy

