



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

Episode Seven: The Ken Jennings Roadkill Show

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV

Buzzy Cohen: In 2004, Ken Jennings changed *Jeopardy!* history forever.

ARCHIVAL: And our returning champion, a software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ken Jennings, whose five day cash winnings total \$150,000.

And our returning champion, a software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ken Jennings, whose 13 day cash winnings total \$440,150.

And our returning champion, a software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ken Jennings, whose 29 day cash winnings total \$972,960.

And our returning champion, a software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ken Jennings, whose cash winnings total \$1,976,300.

Buzzy Cohen: Over the years, Ken has spoken a ton about this 74-game historic winning streak. In addition to talking about it, he also wrote a book about his experiences in 2006, called *Brainiac*. And we interviewed him about all of that in the last episode. Press pause — go listen to that first, if you haven't.

Ken has always been at the center of the story. And it makes sense. It all happened to him.

After earning more than 2.5 million dollars during his run, there's no doubt: Ken cemented his legacy in the *Jeopardy!* hall of fame...long before earning the Greatest of All Time title or becoming a host of the show.

But in listening to Ken, I found myself getting curious about the *other* voices in the story...

Ken Jennings: Mostly you spend all day with the other contestants and they're lovely. You know, they're all bright, fascinating people. They're telling you about their interests.

But you know what, at the end of the day, after the game, those people didn't really wanna chat so warmly. You know, they didn't want to trade email addresses. They had kind of had a bummer of a day and their family was in the studio audience giving the stink eye to my wife or my parents or whoever had come to see the show.

Buzzy Cohen: I mean, all due respect to the G.O.A.T — I probably would've given him the stink eye too.

Because back in 2004, Ken was a formidable foe.

And as he was gaining glory and setting the stage for his future reputation, he was also crushing scores of contestants who just wanted the same thing that he did.

Ken Jennings: And honestly, like I did kind of feel some survivor guilt. Every day these two lovely people would show up all with the same dream as mine. They just wanted to do well on *Jeopardy!*.

And then they show up and here's me ruining their dream. And I felt like a heel.

Buzzy Cohen: When you sit down and count it, Ken Jennings defeated 148 contestants — not including Nancy Zerg, who defeated him — or David Hankins, who came in third after Nancy and Ken.

MUSIC: Whimsical, spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: The 148 came from all over.

They had diverse careers and impressive resumes. Veterinarians. Administrative assistants. College professors. Musicians.

The oldest was sixty-eight years old. The youngest was just nineteen.

Eight came from Tennessee. Six from New Jersey. Two from Minnesota. Four from Vermont. They represented thirty-five states total...plus Washington D.C. and Canada.

Many shared a common dream — being on their favorite quiz show.

The 148 didn't really know what they were getting into. And how could they? No one had ever gotten this far on a streak. The producers didn't even know what was going to happen themselves.

Now, it's been almost twenty years. What would the 148 say today?

What do they remember? What do they wish they could forget?

Larry Bellinger: When I arrived in the studio, I felt like I was like a boxer getting hyped up for the ring. Then he walked into the green room and whoosh — out with all the air in the place.

Beverly Fazio Herter: He showed up with extra clothes on hangers, draped over his arm. No suitcase or bag, just shirts, ties, jackets hanging out there.

Sarah Jane Woodall: I came in third place. Okay? I came in dead last, and that's what I always tell people. I lost on *Jeopardy!*...baby! Woo!

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: I'm your host, Buzzy Cohen. And from Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV, This Is *Jeopardy!*: The Story Of America's Favorite Quiz Show.

This week: the hundred forty eight have their say.

<AD BREAK>

ACT I

ARCHIVAL: *This is Jeopardy!. Here are today's contestants, a fundraiser from New York, New York, Julia Lazarus. A software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ken Jennings. And our returning champion, a freelance educator...*

Buzzy Cohen: That's how it all began. Ken Jennings' very first appearance on *Jeopardy!*.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Here we go into the Jeopardy! round. Categories. Check 'em out. We have Biography Subtitles, followed by Let's Clean Up.*

Buzzy Cohen: It was a seemingly ordinary *Jeopardy!* game. A returning champ...who *wasn't* Ken, obviously.

In his very first *Jeopardy!* game, Ken was one of the new challengers, standing next to another fresh-faced *Jeopardy!* noob...Julia Lazarus.

Julia Lazarus: **I am ground zero in the long, long line of Ken Roadkill that followed.**

Buzzy Cohen: Over the past few months, our team reached out to as many of the 148 as we could find.

Julia was one of the first people to respond to our call.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: As you can imagine, a lot has changed in the almost two decades since the 148 faced Ken. People moved, got married, had children. Grad students became professors.

But almost everyone we reached out to responded — and they took the time to send us a voice memo about their experiences playing Ken.

Julia Lazarus isn't the only one who willingly refers to herself as one of the "Ken Roadkill." Others called themselves "Ken's Victims" or members of the "Ken Jennings Losers Tournament."

But in that very first game, Julia really held her own.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: *I'll take movies for 800.*

Alex Trebek: *2003. God doesn't take vacations, does he? Do ye? Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *What Is Bruce Almighty?*

Alex Trebek: *Yeah.*

Ken Jennings: *Movies for a thousand, please.*

Alex Trebek: *2002. There's a monster outside my room. Can I have a glass of water?*
Julia.

Julia Lazarus: What is Signs?

Alex Trebek: That's good for another thousand dollars...doubling your score to 2000.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken also remembers it being a close match between them.

Ken: The woman next to me, uh, suddenly figured out her buzzer timing in, in Double Jeopardy, and she started beating me to everything.

Buzzy Cohen: In the end, Julia placed second...only 4800 dollars behind Ken. It wasn't a slam dunk defeat...but it was over.

Julia Lazarus : Losing still feels, weirdly, really exciting. I was looking forward to meeting up with a friend who was in Los Angeles, which I did after the game. And, uh, we went out and had a couple too many drinks, so that was fun. And I dropped my earring down the sink in the hotel and had to call them to come help me get it out.

As embarrassing as it is to feel like that's always gonna be a little asterisk that's gonna follow me around for all of my life, I'm really, really proud that I was part of the beginning of someone who's gone on to make history with *Jeopardy!*.

MUSIC: Exciting slow building techno beat begins

Carrie Youngblood: My name is Carrie Youngblood. I was Ken Jennings' second game on *Jeopardy!*.

Clinton Wiedon: My name is Clinton Wiedon. I played against him in his fourth game.

Josh Hornick: My name is Josh Hornick. I played Ken Jennings in his original run on just his fourth game.

Buzzy Cohen: In those early games, of course, Ken wasn't the household name he is today.

Carrie Youngblood: I played him before he was Ken Jennings. He was just the guy who'd won the last game.

Clinton Wiedon: He was simply a three-day returning champion at that point, and we knew he was very good. But we didn't know what was going to happen over the next weeks and months, uh, as his run continued.

Buzzy Cohen: Again, none of Ken's games had aired yet...so all those early contestants knew was he had won a few.

Even when he surpassed the five-game limit...it wasn't that big of a deal.

Here's Al Arsenault, from game eight.

Al Arsenault: I was nervous. I was eager, I was ready to play. I knew that it would be very difficult to beat Ken, but I knew that he could be beaten.

Buzzy Cohen: But as the games ticked away, that possibility of breaking through? It seemed to fade away.

Here's Joe Riley, game nine. He remembers that when he learned Ken was the returning champion...he asked Ken about it.

Joe Riley: And I said, *How many days consecutively have you been the returning champion?* And he said he had won eight previous games. And it was just incredibly shocking to hear. I tried to, you know, psych myself up a little bit. I was working as a bartender at the time and I was saying, you know, maybe if I get the board that is ideal for me, uh, maybe some potent potables, some stuff of that nature. Maybe, uh, I could compete in that game against him.

Buzzy Cohen: Potent potables wouldn't save Joe. Actually, it's probably for the best they didn't appear on the *Jeopardy!* board. Ken may not be a drinker himself, but he definitely knows a harvey wallbanger from a manhattan.

Ken's winning record also threw Vid Hardt off balance when Vid, game ten, got to the studio...

Vid Hardt: I was probably the only person there who didn't know that the five-game limit had been lifted. So when they said, *This is Ken and he's won eight times*, I went *Homina homina homina* like Ralph Kramden on *The Honeymooners*.

Buzzy Cohen: Maggie Speak was a contestant producer on the show at the time. She remembers walking into the green room to brief the contestants.

Maggie Speak: I would introduce the returning champion, *Here's Ken Jennings. He's a 50-day champion*. Well, the looks on people's faces! They want — it was like they wanted to scramble out of the room. You know, because we taped so far ahead, they weren't sure how many shows he'd actually won. And I think just the idea of seeing him in the room was enough to let them know that he was still on the show and that was who they were gonna have to go up against.

Buzzy Cohen: Yeah, the contestants we spoke to remember it that way too.

Bryan Givens: I still remember when he was first introduced to us in the green room, um, and they said that he was going into his 13th game. And a kind of chill fell over the entire room with that announcement.

Gregory Narver: You could just kind of feel the hopes and dreams of 12 people sinking into the floor right away.

Buzzy Cohen: If first came shock...what happened next was...why me?

Bret Bradigan: My first thought was, *Wow, why did I have to go up against this guy?*

Buzzy Cohen: Was it just circumstance?

Stephen DiGiulio: Bit of a bad luck that you're going against the, the Michael Jordan slash Wayne Gretzky slash Joe Montana of *Jeopardy!*. And, uh, your bad luck is that they change the rules so that you have to play him.

Buzzy Cohen: Yep, you had to play him...and if you weren't called up to play right away, you had to play him after watching him decimate the others.

Bret Bradigan: I had sat in the stands and watched him destroy one contestant after another.

Ellen Cook: I dubbed him the Juggernaut because he was unstoppable.

Josh Hornik: What happened when I played Ken Jennings? Well, simply put, he killed me.

Buzzy Cohen: For new contestants, that moment when they first met Ken? The memory is still fresh today.

MUSIC: Suspenseful fast paced beat with wooden blocks

Buzzy Cohen: Ryan McClarren played Ken in game twenty-one. He remembers getting on a shuttle bus that took all contestants from a hotel to the *Jeopardy!* set.

Ryan McClarren: When Ken got on, the driver said, *Hey Ken, good to see you.* And in hindsight, that was a very important moment of the day because, uh, it was clear that

he had been there before and the people that worked there knew who Ken was 'cause he had been there so many times.

Buzzy Cohen: Chris Mason, game twenty-two, was on that same bus, next to Ryan. And he remembers that exact same moment.

Chris Mason: I sat next to a contestant named Ryan, who was around the same age as me. He leaned over and whispered that the guy in the back had a large winning streak going, and Ryan was, of course, referring to Ken. My response was, *Great. It'll be that much sweeter when we beat him.* We fist bumped, but we all know how that worked out.

Buzzy Cohen: Even though at this point, people knew Ken was on a big run, they often didn't know how big that run was until the producers announced it.

Here's Nick Aretakis. Game twenty-four.

Nick Aretakis: One of the producers introduced us to the returning champion who was already in the makeup chair and said something like, *Everyone, this is our champion, Ken Jennings. Ken, how many games have you won so far?* And then Ken said, *18.* Uh, which elicited some laughter, some nervous laughter, from us, uh, until we realized he wasn't joking.

Buzzy Cohen: Beverly Herter. Game thirty-four.

Beverly Fazio Herter: The contestant coordinator didn't even have the heart to tell us contestants how many wins he had racked up. She made Ken do it — twice, in fact, since at first we all thought he was joking. Reactions ranged from shocked to angry to amused.

Buzzy Cohen: Here's Ken again.

Ken Jennings: You immediately become the least popular person in the room when you're the returning champ. And I would always just show up at the last minute because those conversations were so awkward.

Buzzy Cohen: With each defeat, the loss lingered.

Bob Joseph: Does it hurt a bit being part of the Ken Jennings Roadkill group even 19 years later? Yes, it does.

MUSIC: Slow building techno beat

Buzzy Cohen: And that's because...they wanted it just as much as he did. Just like Ken, they'd arrived with big dreams — dreams they'd nurtured for years and years. Dreams they were ready to realize.

More on that, after the break.

<AD BREAK>

ACT II

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: Before they arrived on the *Jeopardy!* set, before they ever heard the name Ken Jennings...what did the 148 dream of?

What were their hopes? their fears? their expectations?

How did *Jeopardy!* fit into how they saw the rest of their lives unfolding? And how did it affect how others perceived them?

Sarah Jane Woodall, from game sixteen, felt like she had something to prove to the people in her life.

Sarah Jane Woodall: I was pretty good at academic stuff, but I decided I'd rather take the fun, easy route through life. And be a cocktail waitress or something like that in Las Vegas. So I moved to Vegas. I never did become a cocktail waitress, but I did all kinds of other stupid looks-based jobs, and I was always trying to prove to people how smart I was and nobody believed me.

So I thought, Well, I'm just gonna have to explain it to them in a language they can understand, which is TV. What better way to prove to everyone that I'm smart than by appearing on Jeopardy!?

Buzzy Cohen: When she got the call, Sarah Jane didn't know who Ken was...she was mostly focused on getting herself ready to be on national TV for the first time.

But the night before...the nerves were really getting to her.

MUSIC: Suspenseful slow music begins

Sarah Jane Woodall: I stayed at a friend's house and he told me, *Okay, I'll take you to the studio in the morning.* And I go, *Well, listen, there's no way I can sit there all day sober. I'm way too nervous.* I needed some potent potables, as it were. Obviously they search your bag when you go on set. You can't just bring a bottle of Jack Daniels. So what I did is I went and got a bunch of those Starbucks bottled Frappuccinos. Dumped out the Starbucks and filled them with milk and Kahlua. So I basically was drinking white Russians all morning long, waiting for my turn to get up and face off against Ken Jennings.

Buzzy Cohen: Sarah Jane did say the Kahlua made her feel more relaxed during her interview with Alex. But...maybe not so much else.

Sarah Jane: I've actually never watched the, uh, taping of the show because I was, I'm too embarrassed to this day.

ARCHIVAL:

Sarah Jane Woodall: *I'll have Dear John for 800, please.*

Alex Trebek: *In 1997, as he declined to seek a fifth term as Ohio Senator, he said there is still no cure for the common birthday. Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *Who's John Glenn.*

Alex Trebek: *Right.*

Ken Jennings: *John for 1200.*

Alex Trebek: *Answer. Daily Double.*

Buzzy Cohen: It was a brutal game. At one point, Alex even comforted Sarah Jane and the third contestant.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *It's discouraging, isn't it, Cathy and Sarah Jane? I know. I know exactly how you feel.*

Sarah Jane Woodall: *Uh, my consolation is that in the Final Jeopardy round, Ken Jennings and I both had the same incorrect answer.*

ARCHIVAL: *Sarah Jane, did you come up with the correct response? You put down "Who are Lewis and Clark?" No, sorry. That'll cost you 5,200.*

Now we come to Ken Jennings. 30,500 going in. He picked Lewis and Clark. He will lose how much money? 4,500. That will leave him today with 26,000 and now a 16-day total of more than half a million. 512,959...and he keeps coming back as long as he keeps winning.

Sarah Jane Woodall: I came in third place. Okay? I came in dead last, and that's what I always tell people. [Sings.] I lost on *Jeopardy!*...baby...woo.

Buzzy Cohen: This wouldn't be her last hurrah on a game show, though.

Sarah Jane Woodall: I was on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* stone cold sober, and I won \$16,000 on that. I think I lost because I was playing against Ken Jennings.

MUX: Slow building beat with strings

Buzzy Cohen: For John Cook, game forty-seven, being a *Jeopardy!* contestant was a lifelong aspiration...one that went back to his childhood.

John Cook: Getting the call that I was going to be a contestant on *Jeopardy!* was a moment where time stopped. *Jeopardy!* was for me, not just a game show, but uh, sort of a pathway to life change on a fairly dramatic scale. I grew up in a rural part of New England. Poor, uh, overweight a lot, as a kid. And, uh, I watched a lot of game shows and they were great escapist fantasy for me.

Buzzy Cohen: When he was fifteen years old, John wrote a play for a state contest.

John Cook: The play's main character was a woman who, uh, was really good at *Wheel of Fortune* and she harbored dreams of going on and changing her unhappy circumstances. And she did get a spot on her favorite show, *Wheel of Fortune*, only to find that the format had changed to an eating contest, *Meal of Fortune* and, uh, that the returning champ she had faced had won.

There's a saying that art imitates life or life imitates art. Um, and maybe it's pretentious to, uh, call my 15-year-old play any form of art. But, um, that was definitely on my mind when I got to the Sony Studios that morning in March 2004.

Buzzy Cohen: On his tape day, John didn't play Ken until the afternoon...and watching Ken at work did a real number on him.

John Cook: I think I started entering some of the stages of grief during lunch, the bargaining phase. Um, because I watched, uh, it was the first two or three shows,

where everyone got demolished by Ken. I said something to the effect of, like, *Well, you know, at least, you know, we're gonna go up against the best of all time if we, if we lose. And, um, and you know that — that turned out to be true.*

Buzzy Cohen: The moment when John finally stepped behind the lectern? It was over in what felt like a split second.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: The median age in California. It's also the speed of an old vinyl record album. John.

John Cook: What is 33...and a third.

Alex Trebek: All right. [Laughter.]

John Cook: Uh, finish the category — a thousand.

Alex Trebek: Marley's ghost might be surprised to learn that this was the most popular name given to boys in 2002. John.

John Cook: What is Jacob?

Alex Trebek: You're right.

John Cook: I did better, I think than other opponents to that point in the day. I got a Daily Double right. Um, but I went in with no strategy and naively thought that just quick recall would be enough. Um, I had no plan to manage my nerves, to bet intelligently. I was fortunate enough to have guessed right on Final Jeopardy, and I did end the show with, uh, a five digit amount, but of course that was, uh, less than half of what Ken had.

Buzzy Cohen: When it came down to playing Ken Jennings, many of the 148 shared a common struggle.

Ellen Cook: I could not get in on the buzzer.

Carrie Youngblood: Every time I was trying to ring in, I would hear Alex Trebek say Ken.

Gregory Narver: I remember watching a recording of my show and the main thing I remember seeing was my arm flailing around when I was trying to buzz in for those answers.

Marielle Poss: One of the early questions was on the Broadway show, Annie. Now, I was a little girl in the seventies and I knew nothing if not Annie. I wore that album

out. But I wasn't quick enough. My brother told me later that when he saw that I couldn't answer the Annie question, he knew it was all over.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken had had so much practice on the buzzer that *Jeopardy!* actually decided to change the rules...to give others a fighting chance.

Ken Jennings: **They made sure that the practice game that all the players get to do was more substantial and more like the real game. You know, everybody got more warm up on the buzzer.**

Buzzy Cohen: It's true — to this day, contestants get two rounds of practice on the buzzer during the morning rehearsal — playing against different opponents. That is a Ken Jennings-inspired change of rules that has lasted to the present day.

But even with that extra practice, it was still hard to match Ken. The more games he played, the more he felt comfortable on stage, just doing his thing.

Robert Kirkpatrick, game sixty-nine.

Robert Kirkpatrick: **Ken was right next to me and he's looking, like, very much, very much like he's feeling right at home. And I was of course, like, nervous as hell.**

And then Ken looks over and he says, *Hey, um, when my hands get sweaty, I wipe them on this thing.* And he points out this kind of a fuzzy little patch on the podiums. And he said, *You can wipe your, your palms off on here, uh, if they get sweaty.* And you know, it showed that he was a good sport, right? But of course, you know, Ken had no mercy once the game got started.

Buzzy Cohen: It was salt in the wound when your own family was awe-struck over Ken's performance. As Nick Aretakis recalls...

Nick Aretakis: **My parents and my youngest brother had come down from Northern California to watch the taping. And they all marveled at how dominant Ken was, which didn't help me at all.**

MUSIC: Whimsical, spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: And when it came to the actual loss — the fact that they'd never get to be on *Jeopardy!* again — those feelings of disappointment would stay with some of the 148 for years.

That's after the break.

<AD BREAK>

ACT III

MUSIC: Fast paced theme begins

Buzzy Cohen: Ken Jennings taped his first game in February 2004. The show went on hiatus in the summer...and during that hiatus, his games began broadcasting.

As the American public got to know Ken, the overwhelming response was mostly wonder and awe. especially in national news coverage.

ARCHIVAL:

Announcer: There's one guy that's dressed for success these days on Jeopardy!. His name is Ken Jennings. He's won 14 straight episodes. He's won almost \$500,000.

Announcer: And this Jeopardy! guy keeps winning. Winning.

Announcer: They got a kid now by the name of Ken somebody, and he's won like, uh, 20 shows in a row, and he's racked up close to a million dollars.

Buzzy Cohen: Though, as Ken remembers, it was a bit of a different story in the *Jeopardy!* fan world.

Ken Jennings: I did just start to see on various kind of *Jeopardy!* forums and blogs and message boards, there would be people saying, *Well, I like this guy, this is great.*

And other people would be saying, No, this isn't, this isn't good for the show. Why should somebody be on this long? Um, I got letters from nice old grandmas saying, Well, dear, maybe you should give someone else a chance.

Buzzy Cohen: A few did give Ken a run for his money...like Matt Ottinger from game fourteen.

Matt Ottinger: So our game starts and lo and behold, I have no idea why, but I'm pretty good on the buzzer. I'm getting in and I'm answering.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken: Wartime images for 1200.

Alex: Timothy O' Sullivan's 1863 shot of its aftermath is titled A Harvest of Death.

Ken.

Ken: *What is Antietam?*

Alex: *Nope.*

Alex: *Matt.*

Matt: *What is Gettysburg?*

Alex: *Gettysburg. Yes.*

Buzzy Cohen: Matt was a tough challenger. By the end of the *Jeopardy!* round, Matt was actually in the lead.

Matt Ottinger: *At one point I ran a category in the Jeopardy! round against Ken. I'm not sure anybody else did that. So for 10 or 12 minutes I was beating Ken Jennings.*

ARCHIVAL: *In 1957, E.B. White was called in to edit this professor's The Elements of Style. Matt.*

Matt Ottinger: *Who is Strunk?*

Alex Trebek: *William Strunk. Correct. And you have the lead. [Audience clapping.]*

Buzzy Cohen: But...the tables turned in Double Jeopardy.

Matt Ottinger: *That's when Ken's incredible depth of knowledge takes over.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Ibadan, Abuja and Ogbomosho are all cities in this African nation of over 125 million. Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *What is Nigeria?*

That's it.

Ken Jennings: *Africa for 1600, please.*

Alex Trebek: *Answer...Daily Double. [Audience clapping.] You have almost a \$5,000 lead over Matt.*

Ken Jennings: *And I'll bet 6,000.*

Alex Trebek: *6,000 it is. Here is the clue and let's visit Africa. The country of Namibia was once known as this, and that's also where it is on the map.*

Ken Jennings: *What is Southwest Africa?*

Alex Trebek: *Correct. [Audience clapping.] Gutsy move...paid off for you.*

Matt Ottinger: *I guess there's only a small handful of us who managed to play against him to the point that it wasn't a runaway game. So that's a notch in my belt, I guess.*

Buzzy Cohen: In a way, getting *that* close to taking Ken Jennings down...*that* was almost harder for Matt to stomach in the aftermath.

Matt Ottinger: For a while, it didn't really hit me. The whole experience didn't really hit me. But I have to admit that when it did hit me, it hit me pretty hard. I was, I was pretty disappointed about — not the way things turned out because I played very well, and you know, people win, people lose, but...you have that enormous *what if* of the experience and *what could have happened* if you didn't play the greatest player of all time.

MUSIC: fast paced beat with wooden blocks

Buzzy Cohen: So...that hiatus between seasons?

Remember, that was in the summer of 2004.

When *Jeopardy!* resumed taping in August, the contestants facing Ken had been watching the first games of his streak from home.

Jennifer Lord Bessen, game fifty-two, was one of them.

And she was hoping that Ken would be defeated by the time she got to set.

Jennifer Lord Bessen: So imagine my chagrin when I approached the contestants and saw Ken Jennings sitting there. Turns out it was the first day of taping for the fall season. He was very polite with the group, but some of the other contestants talked among ourselves and we realized that we might have a chance because so much of the show is getting your timing right to buzz in, and Ken was likely going to be a little rusty after the summer break.

Buzzy Cohen: Sunny Schomaker, game fifty-four, was in the same group as Jennifer. She was thinking along the same lines — that it was a potentially weak moment for Ken.

Sunny Schomaker: Ken was actually out of his groove a bit, and that first episode in particular, he was beatable.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: This artist was born in Figueroa, Spain on May 11th, 1904 and died there January 23rd, 1989. Ken.

Ken Jennings: Who's Picasso?

Alex Trebek: Nope. Amy.

Contestant: Who is Dali?

Alex Trebek: Salvador Dali. Right.

Buzzy Cohen: Beatable, but still not beaten.

Sunny Schomaker: The contestant coordinator would come over during the breaks and have me test the buzzer to make sure it was working. It was working. I was the problem, but I did okay. I didn't humiliate myself. I even got a Daily Double, uh, which I successfully answered based on my knowledge of both Romance languages and dairy products. It was the Italian word for cheese, *formaggio*.

Buzzy Cohen: What Jennifer and Sunny were thinking about...that Ken might be a little rusty after a break in taping? Well, Ken didn't say that, exactly. But he had been doing a lot of media appearances.

ARCHIVAL:

David Letterman: Thank you so much. The category tonight: Top 10 Ways to Irritate Alex Trebek. Top 10 Ways to irritate Alex Trebek, the, uh, longtime, uh, host of, uh, TV's Jeopardy!.

Guest: Sure.

David Letterman: And top 10 ways now to irritate Alex. Canadian.

Guest: Yes.

David Letterman: Used to have a mustache...no longer.

Guest: Oh yeah. Oh, he doesn't have a mustache. Yeah.

David Letterman: And here now presenting tonight's top 10 list, please welcome the man who has won over \$900,000 on Jeopardy!. Ken Jennings. Come on up, Ken!

Ken Jennings: There had started to be some, like, fun things. Yeah, I'm gonna go read the top 10 on Letterman. That sounds fun. Um, and so I, I don't know if I was off my game, but um, yeah, I was a little the worse for wear.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken was still winning...but maybe he was getting tired...or maybe it was just a matter of time...whatever it was, everything has to come to an end eventually.

Ken Jennings: End of the run, the games were getting a lot closer. And I think all told there were maybe a dozen games where if one clue goes differently, I lose. So by the law of averages, I had long outlasted my streak.

Buzzy Cohen: But Ken's mistakes weren't the ones that stuck with the 148.

Most of them instead focused on their *own* perceived shortcomings.

Here's Larry Bellinger. Game fifty-six.

Larry Bellinger: My biggest regret is that I didn't spend enough time taking brutal beatings from my son on Tekken, the video game. More video gaming might have increased my hand-eye coordination...made me a little more competitive on the buzzer.

Buzzy Cohen: Rob Kimbro. Game seventy-four.

Rob Kimbro: I confused, uh, Kyoto and Ito as being predecessors of Tokyo — as capital of Japan.

Buzzy Cohen: Sandy Grimwade. Game sixty-three.

Sandy Grimwade: The *Jeopardy!* round was a disaster for me. One of the categories was the Book of Genesis and Ken, with his deep biblical knowledge, cleared the category before I or my fellow victim had a look in. I think I got two answers in the first round and I was quite sure that my buzzer had stopped working.

One of the squares was, *It's the genus of the plant known as marijuana*. I quickly buzzed in and answered, *What is cannabis?* After the show, my son called to console me, saying, *Well Dad, at least you got the weed question*.

Buzzy Cohen: Jeff Hoppes. Game seventy.

Jeff Hoppes: At the first break in my game, Maggie Speak, the contestant coordinator, came out to give me a pep talk. She said, *Hey kid, you're all over the place on the buzzer timing. We need you to calm down out here*. After the commercial break, I was able to calm down. I found the Daily Double, and for a brief moment, I was ahead of Ken Jennings on the scoreboard.

Buzzy Cohen: Jeff didn't keep his lead, but four years later...

Jeff Hoppes: My wife, Larissa Kelly, appeared on *Jeopardy!* in 2008 and won six games in a row. I'm taping this in the house that we bought with her winnings.

Buzzy Cohen: And almost ten years after that, Jeff's wife, Larissa Kelly, faced Ken.

She teamed up with a bunch of other *Jeopardy!* champs to challenge Ken's team in the 2019 All Stars Tournament.

Jeff Hoppes: My wife Larissa, my old birding friend David, and my high school quiz bowl Captain Brad Rutter, the man who taught me how to buzz in.

Buzzy Cohen: Yeah — Jeff's wife Larissa wasn't the only champ in his life. His friends were also *Jeopardy!* superstars...Dave Madden and Brad Rutter...

At least he felt he could get some kind of revenge.

Jeff Hoppes: When it came time to face Ken's team, my friends and family took care of business.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: For most of the 148, almost two decades has slightly softened the blow. They're able to see their *Jeopardy!* defeat as part of a larger legacy.

Adam Meyer. Game forty-one.

Adam Meyer: I tell people all the time, *If you're gonna lose at something like Jeopardy!, you might as well lose to the GOAT, right?* Uh, I, I joke that I'm the second best player ever 'cause I finished second to the best player ever.

Buzzy Cohen: Bob Joseph. Game sixty-two.

Bob Joseph: If I had to lose, I couldn't have lost to a more worthy opponent than Ken.

Buzzy Cohen: Clinton Wieden. Game four.

Clinton Wieden: I wish I'd done better. I'm glad to have been part of it, though. You know, it's something that, uh, I get to carry with me for the rest of my life, as somebody who got to go beyond *Jeopardy!* and be part of *Jeopardy!* history.

BEAT

Buzzy Cohen: It's a funny feeling. Almost two decades later...to still think back on what felt like a missed opportunity. Had the circumstances been a little bit different, had they faced someone other than Ken — or someone named Ken whose last name wasn't Jennings — how would they have fared as *Jeopardy!* contestants?

Had they not faced the greatest of all time...would they have emerged as superchamps in their own right?

MUSIC: Bright music begins

Buzzy Cohen: The what-ifs have swirled around in their minds for years...

Carrie Youngblood, from game two? She says she doesn't watch *Jeopardy!* anymore. Though in 2011, she did tune in to see a computer called Watson beat Ken...she says it gave her some guilty pleasure to see him finally get beat on the buzzer.

For almost all of the 148, life continued...

That bartender, Joe Riley, game nine? He earned his law degree and eventually became a judge.

Sarah Jane Woodall, game sixteen, who drank the white russians to get through her game? At the time, she described herself as super shy, but she got over that — and actually did nude modeling for about 10 years.

Matt Ottinger, game fourteen? He ended up hosting a high school quiz bowl on a local tv network in Michigan...and only just recently retired.

Jennifer Lord Bessen, game fifty-two, got a second masters degree and a PhD in psychometrics and quantitative psychology.

That one time with Ken Jennings? It faded into the tapestries of their lives...becoming another story to tell at a cocktail party...or over coffee with a new friend.

And the years marched on — with marriage, children, grandchildren, career changes, heartbreak, and all the successes and pitfalls that come with life.

Our final question for the 148: if they could speak to Ken today, what would they say?

Carrie Youngblood: If I could talk to Ken today, I would ask him if he has any say in how the contestants are called, it would be nice to call back some of the people who have been steamrollered by him in his 75 games.

David Oosterhuis: It'd be really cool to have a tournament of people who lost to Ken Jennings. Uh, I don't know if you can track us all down, but I think that'd be a great hook and, uh, boy, I'd love to play *Jeopardy!* again. It was so fun.

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: Next time, on This Is Jeopardy! The Story Of America's Favorite Quiz Show...

Ken Jennings: And they were just all cheering on their little darling. You know, they were cooing like pageant moms every time Watson got a clue right. And at home I would like to think some people were cheering for the humans, but boy, not in that room.

Buzzy Cohen: This Is Jeopardy! The Story of America's Favorite Quiz Show is a production of 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, Rob Dozier, 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 Preté.

Production management help from Susonya Davenport and Tameeka Ballance-Kolasny.

Our theme song was composed by Hannis Brown. Cedric Wilson is our engineer.

Special thanks to Charlie Yedor and Steve Ackerman.

And a big thank you to the *Jeopardy!* staff and crew for all of 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

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