



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

Episode Six: Ken's Historic Run

A Production of Sony Music Entertainment and Sony Pictures TV

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Mindy Jennings: We were pretty happy where we were. At least I was pretty happy. Ken was starting to show a little bit of, um, unhappiness about his job.

Ken Jennings: I didn't love it. Um, so I was having a bit of an early midlife crisis as to like, what is my life gonna be?

Buzzy Cohen: That's Mindy and Ken Jennings.

You probably know Ken as the current host of *Jeopardy!* and the winningest of all *Jeopardy!* contestants.

But back in 2004, he was a software engineer living in Utah with his 18 month old son and his wife Mindy in their first home...a little house in Salt Lake City.

...and he was wondering...what were his dreams, anyway?

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert: *This is Jeopardy!*. Now entering the studio are today's contestants — a graduate student originally from Whiting, Iowa — Bill Hines...a homemaker...

Ken Jennings: I'd been a *Jeopardy!* fan my whole life. Um, every day after school, *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel* were on. So me and all my friends ran home from school every day — got off the bus, ran home and watched *Jeopardy!* obsessively.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Thank you, Johnny. Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to our show. As we wrap up the week, we have three newcomers with us...and the reason of course...

Buzzy Cohen: This was in South Korea, where Ken spent most of his childhood.

His father's work had brought the family to Seoul — and there weren't many reminders of the U.S.

Ken Jennings: If somebody sent home a videotape that had a bunch of Burger King commercials or SNL sketches or whatever it was, we would just wear that thing out. Because we had so little of it. So we treated American culture the way a thirsty person treats water.

MUSIC: String beat with momentum begins

Buzzy Cohen: Ken's love of *Jeopardy!* endured, even after they moved back to the States.

He went on to be captain of a quiz bowl team in college.

At the age of 29, Ken was looking at his life laid out in front of him...and he thought, it's time to take a chance. So he reached out to his college roommate, Earl Cahill.

Earl Cahill: He called and said, *Do you want to drive down and audition with me?*

Ken Jennings: Let's do it. Let's drive all night and go try a *Jeopardy!* audition.

Earl Cahill: And I thought about it for maybe two seconds and said, *Sure! Why not?*

Buzzy Cohen: Ken convinced Earl to drop everything and drive from Utah to LA. That's a 10 hour drive...over six hundred and fifty miles...

Earl Cahill: The plan was if one of us got on and the other didn't, the person who didn't get on didn't have to pay for gas.

Maggie Speak: I remember Ken's audition very well. It was at the Radisson in Culver City.

Buzzy Cohen: That is the inimitable Maggie Speak...former producer whose entire job was finding contestants for each show.

Ken's college roommate, Earl, remembers it feeling like pretty long odds.

Earl Cahill: There was some staff, they walked us through what the day was gonna be like. Then they said something like, *We were just in Vegas and we gave the test there and there were 300 people and no one passed.*

Ken Jennings: You took a 50 clue written test, and they graded papers and whoever made the cut got to stick around and do a little mock game.

Maggie Speak: I kept a copy of the notes I made on Ken. What I wrote was *PLAYS*. All in caps. I can remember just watching him play and I, and a smile coming onto my face. 'Cause I thought, *Oh God, this kid is just terrific.*

Ken Jennings: Earl and I both made the cut and we were ecstatic. We were in the *Jeopardy!* pool and we went to *In and Out* to celebrate.

Earl Cahill: As soon as we got there, we ate a double double with grilled onions and fries.

Buzzy Cohen: After burgers, it was time to go back to Utah — do that long ten-hour drive all over again — just to wait...and wait...and wait for “the call”...the one every fan hopes for...

THEME MUSIC

Buzzy Cohen: To find out if they've been chosen to appear on their favorite show.

Earl Cahill: Years later, I talked to Maggie and I said, *I guess you were only gonna pick one programmer from Utah. And she said, Oh, no, you're on the list. Like as soon as Ken lost, then we were gonna call you, he just...[Laughs]. He just never lost.*

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

In this week's episode, Ken Jennings: The man who nearly broke the game.

THEME MUSIC**ACT I**

Ken Jennings: Almost a full year after I tried out, I was just sitting at work and the phone rang in my cubicle. *Hey Ken, this is Bob from Jeopardy. We'd like you to be on the show in three weeks.*

And he said, Well, we just barely made this change where contestants don't get kicked off after five days. They can play until they lose. And I, I remember laughing, I was like, Well, thanks, thanks, Bob, for that life-changing announcement. I'm, I'm sure that's very important.

Buzzy Cohen: Yeah, it was very important.

It was everything.

So he got the call, but wait:

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music beings

Buzzy Cohen: This one single decision entirely changed the course of *Jeopardy!* — and transformed the game as we knew it.

Here's the thing. Up until that point, *Jeopardy!* had always had a five-game limit.

Meaning: contestants could only win five consecutive games before stepping down from the lectern. Almost 150 contestants had made it that far — to five games.

If they knew the correct responses to more *Jeopardy!* clues? Didn't matter. If they wanted to win more money? Didn't matter. Five games was all they got.

Well, except for the *Tournament of Champions* — but we'll deal with that another time.

Let me give you a little bit of backstory...

In the early aughts, with decades under its belt, *Jeopardy!* was like a well-oiled machine. The format worked, and people tuned in. There was something really comforting about knowing what you were going to get every single night.

But it's also the producers' job to make good television. And they were wondering — how many times could they put the same show on the air, just with different contestants and different clues? Was that enough to keep viewers returning?

Executive producer Harry Friedman started advocating to shake things up...by lifting the five-game limit.

Harry Friedman: There was a lot of, uh, resistance, a lot of trepidation. The executives at the studio, I think they were really ambivalent about this whole endeavor...about making such a significant change.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: Harry was no fool — he knew *Jeopardy!*'s format was, well, sacred. That's what kept viewers coming back. But he also knew when to push for change — to keep the game fresh.

From a ratings standpoint, it was kind of an easy pitch. Harry had noticed that every time a contestant won three or four times, the ratings went up.

Viewers loved watching contestants go on a run. They got to know the champion and they could root for them.

Luckily, Harry also had a history of making good changes on the show. Just the year before, he'd suggested doubling the dollar amounts on the *Jeopardy!* board.

Harry Friedman: And, um, the studio went along with it. They agreed that we needed to keep up with the times. We were starting to feel a little bit cheap in comparison to the primetime show that was getting all the attention at that time, which was *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*.

Buzzy Cohen: So he kept pushing...

And then by 2003, just months before Ken received the call, Harry Friedman won support — and the five-game limit was lifted.

MUSIC: Bright music with momentum begins

Harry Friedman: Finally it was agreed. We would do it.

Maggie Speak: The change of the rules in some ways to me was exciting.

Buzzy Cohen: That's contestant producer Maggie Speak again.

Maggie Speak: I saw people do five times. And it was wonderful and it was hard work. And so then you think to yourself, *How far could somebody actually go?*

Buzzy Cohen: The truth is, when Harry first made the change, it was kind of anticlimactic.

Two contestants made it to five games and then lost on their sixth. One guy got to seven.

Back to Ken, in Salt Lake City.

So he'd gotten the call...and he had three weeks to prep. He needed a plan.

MUSIC: Exciting beat with wooden blocks begins

Ken Jennings: I decided I was gonna do, like, a *Rocky* training montage, but with a quiz show. I would watch *Jeopardy!* 12 times a week. Mindy was such a good sport. For three weeks, I think she thought, *I can put up with Ken doing this weird thing.*

Mindy Jennings: He had this idea that he needed to be sort of physically prepared for what it felt like to stand behind the podium, to hold a buzzer in your hand.

Ken Jennings: So I stood behind my armchair at home thinking, *Well, this is probably about the height of a Jeopardy! podium.*

And my two year old son...

Mindy Jennings: Dylan had a Fisher Price ring stacker toy.

Ken Jennings: ...with the colored plastic donuts, if you can picture that.

And I took off the ring pieces. And I just kind of held onto the center core of it and thought, *I bet this is about the same diameter as a Jeopardy! buzzer.* So I would watch the show in real time, standing up, pretending to buzz in on my little plastic Fisher Price toy, yelling an answer at the TV, and then pretending to call the next category in dollar amount.

Mindy Jennings: He would answer aloud with the contestant. And he did this every night. He had these pink index cards that he cut down. And so we started, um, running the flashcards.

Ken Jennings: Countries and their capitals, presidents and their first ladies and their vice presidents. We did every sitting U.S. senator. We did cocktails 'cause *Jeopardy!* has potent potables often, and I don't drink. So we had a stack of flashcards where, you know, the front would say vodka orange juice galliano.

Mindy Jennings: And then you'd flip it over.

Ken Jennings: Uh...that's a Harvey Wallbanger. And she'd say, *That's correct!*

Mindy Jennings: He was definitely nervous, but was trying to keep his expectations in check. I just kept saying, of course you're gonna do well. And he was, you know, he was saying, *Well, I think you don't really know what the competition is gonna be like. Um, everyone is the smartest person that their family knows, and they all feel this way.*

Ken Jennings: My goal was: do not be the person who's in the red going into *Final Jeopardy!*. Where, where, you know, you kind of mysteriously disappear from the third act of the show.

MUSIC: Fast moving techno beat begins

Buzzy Cohen: Finally...it was show time for Ken. And once again, possibility was in the air.

Now that the five-game limit was gone, would someone hit it out of the park? They had yet to see it.

Harry Friedman: Is this the guy who's going to break *Jeopardy!*?

Buzzy Cohen: And what would that mean?

Harry Friedman: Had Ken's run been disastrous for the show, I'm sure that I would've been let go.

Buzzy Cohen: That's after the break. Stick around.

<AD BREAK>

ACT II:

ARCHIVAL: *This is Jeopardy!*

Ken Jennings: It's just such a terrifying day when you're on *Jeopardy!*.

ARCHIVAL: *...a fundraiser from New York, New York, Julia Lazarus. A software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah, Ken Jennings.*

Ken Jennings: *It's hallucinatory... stepping onto the stage for the first time. I feel like our brains haven't really evolved to cope with, um, seeing this environment hundreds or thousands of times for the whole course of your life.*

And then suddenly being inside it, like, the stage that you've seen on TV just kind of immerses you in living color, and there's the cameras and there's all the lights.

ARCHIVAL: *<Sound of the Jeopardy! board>*

Ken Jennings: *Oh my gosh...that's the board. It seems like it's just feet away. You really feel like you can't cope with so much going on. And your brain shuts down a bit.*

ARCHIVAL: *Alex Trebek: Here we go into the Jeopardy! round. Categories. Check 'em out. We have Biography Subtitles...*

Ken Jennings: *I noticed as I stepped behind the podium, Hey, this feels about the height of my recliner at home. And I picked up the buzzer that the stage manager was showing us how to use and I thought, Oh, I'll just hold this the way I held my Fisher Price toy.*

ARCHIVAL:

Contestant: Let's try episodes for 200, please.

Alex Trebek: A fast spreading outbreak of a disease. Jerry?

Contestant: What is an epidemic?

Alex Trebek: Correct.

Contestant: Uh, epi for 400, please.

Alex Trebek: A short section at the end of a book. Ken.

Ken Jennings: What is an epilogue?

Alex Trebek: Right.

Ken Jennings: I'll take epi for 600.

Ken Jennings: *I guess decades of listening to Alex's cadences had kind of prepared me for the rhythm, and I immediately had kind of figured out how the signaling device worked and what the right timing was.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Nice Greek girls who don't find a husband work in the family restaurant.*

Ken.

Ken Jennings: *What is My Big Fat Greek wedding?*

Alex Trebek: *Correct.*

Ken Jennings: *And I would just kind of give it about a syllable, an extra syllable.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *I shall take you to the Black Pearl and your Bonnie Lass.*

Ken Jennings: *And then I would buzz.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *What is Pirates of the Caribbean?*

Alex Trebek: *Right.*

Ken Jennings: *Movies for 600, please.*

Ken Jennings: *So maybe I have a shot at this.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *And you've got \$17,201 more for a \$37,201 total. And you become the Jeopardy! champion. Great game, players, Thank you so much. We'll see you again next time.*

Ken Jennings: *And suddenly I realize, Oh, I'm a Jeopardy champion. Like I somehow I'm gonna, I'm a Jeopardy! champion. This is all I wanted. And I — it's more than I ever expected and it actually happened and you know, this kinda wave of euphoria washes over me.*

Buzzy Cohen: After that first win, Ken Jennings won four more times. Five games, recorded across two days — cinching it, easy peasy.

Just, you know, five games, the most natural thing anyone could do.

Ken's gameplay wasn't particularly daring — he didn't jump around the board, or make crazy high wagers.

But he was deadly on the buzzer. And he knew his stuff. Here's game six.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: If this were last year, Ken Jennings would've said goodbye to us after our last program. He would've won \$156,000 after five victories, and he would stand on the sidelines and wait for the Tournament of Champions. But this year we've allowed our champions to keep going as long as they keep winning...

MUSIC: Exciting beat with momentum begins

Ken Jennings: The first thing that happened is the panic started to go away. You know, I'd still get butterflies and adrenaline before every game, but it would be more like, *All right, it's this game I love. Like, let's see how this one goes.*

Buzzy Cohen: Game ten, with \$341,158...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: This country has numerous national parks, including Fjordland, Tongariro, and Abel Tasman. Ken.

Ken Jennings: What is New Zealand?

Alex Trebek: Yes.

Buzzy Cohen: Game Fourteen...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: My Golden Bengal is this country's national anthem. Ken.

Ken Jennings: What is Bangladesh.

Alex Trebek: Correct.

Ken Jennings: And you know, it became less intense, you know, it kind of became almost like a summer job where, *Oh hey, I get to show up and uh, and see the gang and do my thing.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Ken Jennings is a software engineer from Salt Lake City, Utah. Ken, tell us about yourself. [Laughs.]*

Ken Jennings: *I'm a game show contestant, an occasional software...*

Alex Trebek: *Professional game show contestant. Is your wife in the audience again today or is she back home?*

Ken Jennings: *She is here today.*

Mindy Jennings: *At that time I was just starting to do crossword puzzles. But, um, during one of the breaks when Alex was taking questions, he's looking out into the audience and he looks at me and he says, *Is Ken's wife doing a crossword puzzle?* [Laughs.]*

*And then he said something like, *Well, I guess she's gotten really comfortable here. Everyone's laughing and I'm sort of turning red, and I was like, *No, I'm just, I'm just trying to keep my head down. That's all.*** [Laughs.]

Buzzy Cohen: Game twenty, with \$662,760...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard. What can I tell you about our current champion Ken? He's been around longer than I have. [Laughter.] By now you know everything there is to know about him. You either love him and want him to continue, or you're saying, *Hey, he's got enough money. Let somebody else pick up the cash.**

Buzzy Cohen: Ken was settling in and finding his rhythm, his groove. But he was also breaking records. Remember — the last contestant to surpass five games only got to seven. And Ken eclipsed seven easily.

Ken was winning more games — and more money — than anyone ever had...and he didn't seem to be stopping.

But the calmer Ken got, the more white knuckled folks at *Jeopardy!* became.

Here's Maggie Speak:

Maggie Speak: I think at first it was just really exciting and then when it got past like 10 shows, I think I could see a little worry from some of the other producers, like, *How are we gonna handle this? What's gonna happen?*

Harry Friedman: I absolutely was worried.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: Okay, so — there were a few things for Harry and his staff to worry about.

You might think it would be the money. After all, Ken was raking it in.

But the biggest concern? It came down to what made *Jeopardy!*... *Jeopardy!*— the material.

For the first time, *Jeopardy!* writers were creating clues...while knowing that Ken might be one of the contestants. And that was kinda weird.

Harry Friedman: The studio was concerned that he was being helped either accidentally or intentionally. And so the subject came up. And in one meeting I said, *Do you really, really think that the ratings are so important to me that I would risk going to prison by giving a contestant answers? I don't think so.*

It presented some challenges that we had never encountered before. For example, 20 or 30 games in, we knew all of his strengths and all of his weaknesses. At least we thought we did. And so it was very, very important for the game material to be written in a way that respected that understanding. In other words, we had to be very, very careful not to write in a way that would make it appear that we were trying to trip him up or make it appear that we were trying to aid him in any way.

Ken Jennings: I started to see clues again.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *This country singer who did time in San Quentin was pardoned by Governor Reagan in 1972. Jerry.*

Contestant: *Who's Merle Haggard?*

Alex Trebek: *Yep.*

Ken Jennings: Then it came up again like a month later.

ARCHIVAL:

Video Clue: Hi, I'm Joe Nichols. My favorite song Footlights was sung by this country legend, whose name appropriately means tired looking.

Ken Jennings: And I was like, Oh, I remember. This is Merle Haggard.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Ken.

Ken Jennings: Who's Merle Haggard?

Alex Trebek: Yes.

Harry Friedman: We had a database and we would go through a process called de-duping where we would try to determine if anything is being duplicated either in tone or in substance. And, uh, you know, I guess that one slipped by us.

Buzzy Cohen: Twenty-six games, with \$828,960...

ARCHIVAL: When Ken made his first appearance on Jeopardy!, it was still spring. [Laughter.] Today we're into, uh, July and it's gonna be over 90 degrees outside.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken was approaching thirty games, and he wasn't losing any steam.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: Uh, Marvel Comics Heroes 400.

Alex Trebek: The Incredible. Ken.

Ken Jennings: Who's the Hulk?

Alex Trebek: Yes.

Ken Jennings: Marvel Comics Heroes 800.

Alex Trebek: The Amazing. Ken.

Ken Jennings: Who's Spiderman?

Alex Trebek: Yeah.

Ken Jennings: Marvel Comics 1200.

Alex Trebek: The uncanny. Ken.

Ken Jennings: Who are the X-Men?

Alex Trebek: Right.

Ken Jennings: Marvel Comics 1600.

Alex Trebek: The Man Without Fear. Ken.

Ken Jennings: Who's Daredevil?

Alex Trebek: *Right.*

Ken Jennings: *Marvel Comics 2000.*

Alex Trebek: *The Invincible. Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *Who's Iron Man?*

Alex Trebek: *Ken, have you done anything except read comics and watch television?*

Ken Jennings: *Being a nerd really pays off sometimes.*

Alex Trebek: *My gosh, it sure does, but you're no nerd.*

Buzzy Cohen: By game thirty, Ken had won over a million dollars. One million, four thousand, nine hundred and sixty bucks, to be exact.

And by the way, none of the shows had aired yet...*Jeopardy!* tapes a few months in advance...but we'll get to that later.

Typically, *Jeopardy!* mails you a check after your run is over. Uh, except, when your run never ends...

Ken Jennings: *Once in an interview, Alex asked me, you know, how the money had changed my life. And I said, Well, I wouldn't know, Alex. Generally you, you show up and play for a day or two and then a few weeks later the check comes. But in this case, I was still on the show, so nobody had written the check yet. [Laughs.]*

Buzzy Cohen: The *Jeopardy!* staff quickly corrected that.

Ken Jennings: *And after the show, they said, Well, let's do that interview again. And I said, Yeah, yeah. You know, I get it. And Alex reaches into his pocket and pulls out a seven figure check made out to me, and he said, Let's do that interview about the money again. Here you go.*

And I realized, Wait, I'm gonna have to play three more games. What am I gonna do with this? And luckily, my friend Earl, who had tried out with me, had come to that show just to sit in the audience.

Earl Cahill: *And so he gave me a check for over a million dollars and I put it in my wallet.*

Ken Jennings: *He and a friend went to get tacos with this million dollar check in his pocket, and I guess they passed a check cashing place.*

Earl Cahill: *For a few good hours then, I had a million dollars of Ken's sitting in my pocket. And for like half a second I thought, Hey, maybe we should pop by. Should*

have gone to Check City and committed massive fraud. I was not going to cash his check and steal his money, but, uh, it was kind of fun.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Ken Jennings is our champion. I have wondered in some of your previous appearances, because we on occasion have potent potables as a category, and you have done very well, even though you do not drink. Correct?*

Ken Jennings: *I'm a teetotaler.*

You're a teetotaler. You're Mormon. A teetotaler. How come you know so much about booze, young man?

Buzzy Cohen: Past thirty games, you can watch Ken and it's sort of like he's coasting.

When Ken's games finally hit the airwaves, *Jeopardy!* fans would meet a contestant who was really in a league of his own. Ken was chipper. He was cheerful. He wisecracked with Alex like it was his second job. And I mean, at this point, it kind of was.

This was good TV.

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: *Well, my wife, uh, apparently...*

Alex Trebek: *Oh, she taught you how to drink. She's the boozer.*

[Laughter.]

Ken Jennings: *Sort of. She made some flashcards and put all the ingredients of the cocktails on the back. And so, uh, people who overheard our conversations probably thought we were a bunch of lushes...*

Alex Trebek: *And she did that to prepare you just in case that category came up.*

Ken Jennings: *Just in case it came up.*

Alex Trebek: *And it has. You owe her a big debt of gratitude.*

Ken Jennings: *I'll buy her a drink.*

[Laughter.]

Buzzy Cohen: I was nineteen when this was going on. and I remember it.

Before that, we only had Albert Einstein to compare people to. But now, if you were a Brainiac, your friends could say, *Hey you're a regular Ken Jennings.* That doesn't happen that often.

MUSIC: **Bright curious music begins**

Both Ken and the staff settled into the new normal — or rather, the Ken show.

Here's Harry Friedman.

Harry Friedman: As I recall, we knew that we were in truly uncharted waters, and no one had ever dominated the way that he did. So it was just kind of, you know what? Fasten your seat belts. Here we go.

Buzzy Cohen: Maggie Speak.

Maggie Speak: When this run was happening, I got there early, I got there before 5:30. I got there as early as I could. I couldn't wait to see whether he was gonna break a record, whether someone was gonna beat him, like, what the heck was gonna happen? And what were he and Alex gonna talk about. [Laughs.]

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Ken Jennings is our champion. He is the only person that we have had as a contestant on Jeopardy! who admits to really liking airline food.

Ken Jennings: Airline food gets a bad rap. I think it's just great. It's a uniquely American art form. [Laughter.]

Alex trebek: You have a favorite meal?

Ken Jennings: Uh, usually the chicken's better than the fish. That's my advice.

Ken Jennings: [Sighs.] I felt a little bad about lying to Alex. It's a little bit like lying to a priest, but, you know, I figured he just wants something to talk about. Every day I would show up on *Jeopardy!* and they'd be like, Hey, can you give us 10 more of those boring stories? And I'd think, *No! I was out of stories weeks ago!*

Harry Friedman: Ken was on the show for so long that he ran out of different ways to write his name on the podium, different styles. And Alex was running outta things to ask him about.

Buzzy Cohen: But the show had to go on...

Game Forty-Nine...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: This type of sugar that's less sweet than sucrose is found only in milk. Ken.

Ken Jennings: What is lactose?

Alex Trebek: *Right.*

Buzzy Cohen: Fifty-Nine...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *The Trinidad completed the circumnavigation of the world in the 1520s. Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *Who's Magellan?*

Alex Trebek: *Yes.*

Buzzy Cohen: Sixty-Three...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *God breathed life into some of this to create Adam and told Adam he'd return to it. Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *What is dust?*

Alex Trebek: *Dust is right.*

Buzzy Cohen: Sixty-Five...

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Let's go to Ken Jennings. He was nodding approval when he looked over at Denise's response, and I guess that's because he put down the same thing. He has 7499 and a total of 45,099 today and now the new all time record, 2 million 197,000...*

Buzzy Cohen: Over time, things started feeling more and more comfortable between Ken and the *Jeopardy!* staff. A little too comfortable. A little too cozy.

Ken Jennings: *I was wearing a tie that was kind of fuzzing up on camera, and they said, You're gonna have to change that to a different tie, Ken. And I said, Yeah, I thought I might. Like, I was kind of a pro at this point. Like I had a spare tie in my pocket and I was like, I'll just put on the spare.*

Maggie Speak: *I'd put Ken up on stage and all of a sudden Ken wasn't on stage. And I go running backstage and the stage manager had Ken checking his tie in Alex's mirror behind the game board.*

Ken Jennings: And, and you know, the producers were like, *Wait, no, he can't, he can't go over there!*

Harry Friedman: The compliance and practice people nearly had a cow because they said, *Well, you know, what is he doing backstage? He's not allowed to be backstage. You know, what if, what if he sees some of the answers?*

Maggie Speak: My stomach fell to the floor. 'Cause I thought, *Oh shit.*

Ken Jennings: You know, *Jeopardy!*'s rightly concerned about the appearance of everything being fair and above board.

Maggie Speak: It was just like a moment of pure panic, like, *We can't do that. We can't, you know, our eyes have to be on him at all times.*

Harry Friedman: He must have felt like kryptonite because we, we had to keep our distance and we even avoided eye contact and he had sort of a, you know, a wrangler that helped, you know, had to stand outside the door when he went to the men's room. And it was, it was awkward at times for all of us because we had never experienced anything like this before.

MUSIC: Techno beat with slow building momentum begins

Buzzy Cohen: So remember: *Jeopardy!* tapes five games in a day, and then the games are broadcast...a few months later.

That means for the contestants, in those in-between months, time is sort of weirdly suspended.

Ken's first show taped in February 2004. But that first show didn't air until June...when he'd already taped almost fifty games.

He and the *Jeopardy!* staff knew the outcome of his run before everybody else did, but...no spoilers!

Ken Jennings: Having to keep a headline size secret was no fun at all. These are all games that were not gonna air for months. So I had this double life, like, like a spy where I'd have to secretly fly down to LA a couple times a month and then come back with this amazing life changing news and that was it. My parents didn't know, my friends didn't know, my coworkers didn't know.

Buzzy Cohen: This wasn't unique to Ken. It's actually a *Jeopardy!* rule that contestants have to keep mum about being on the show. You can tell one or two people — but that's pretty much it until your show goes to air, usually a few months later.

As you might have guessed, Ken told Mindy.

Mindy Jennings: It just was kind of a little bit isolating, I guess. But it also, it was kind of fun. Like we just had this secret, that just he and I knew and...well, him, me and his boss. [Laughs.] Only the three of us knew.

Ken Jennings: I'd call my boss every day and be like, *Hey Glenda, I won again. And my boss would say, Oh, are you, are you quitting? No, I'm not quitting. I'm just telling you I'm not gonna be at the meeting tomorrow. I gotta play five more Jeopardy!'s tomorrow maybe.*

But then I would go back to work and uh, you know, go to the morning meeting after winning a million dollars or whatever, and kind of just smile and nod because nobody knew. This weird thing was happening in this other planet, you know, Planet *Jeopardy!*.

Buzzy Cohen: As Ken's episodes began to air in the summer of 2004, the rest of America started arriving on planet *Jeopardy!*.

ARCHIVAL:

Announcer 1: Jeopardy! used to have a five-day limit for its champions...

Announcer 2: But now they've taken that week limit off and you can stay on as long as you continue to win. Well, they've got some kid, some kind of genius. His name is Ken Jennings.

Announcer 3: Guy's name is Ken Jennings. I think he knows...everything. [Laughter.]

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: Ken was a sensation — and Harry's idea was really paying off.

The ratings were soaring. Ken's episodes were averaging over 12 million viewers.

ARCHIVAL:

Announcer 4: Jennings' streak is unprecedented. And his winnings thus far total more than half a million dollars.

Announcer 5: Ken is like the Energizer Bunny. He just keeps going.

Announcer 6: Jeopardy! whiz kid Ken Jennings just keeps going and going! The 30-year-old Utah software engineer has asked the right questions for 19 consecutive episodes.

Announcer 7: 20 games! I said 18 before I lost track.

Announcer 8: I think they're giving this guy preferential treatment. This Alex Trebek is going to do hard time in the old Gray Bar hotel.

Announcer 9: These shows were all taped back in February. So when will Ken Jennings finally lose? He knows the answer to that too. Ryan Mooney, ABC News, Hollywood...

Buzzy Cohen: Ken's coworkers started to connect the dots on all those times he had missed work.

All those times their boss, Glenda, told them Ken was painting his basement? Oh...I see.

Ken Jennings: My friend Tom at work in the cubicle next to mine, um, started the ritual where every week, *Jeopardy!* would post the list of the new contestants that were gonna be on this week. And every week he would print it out and tape it to the wall of his cubicle. And every night he would x out the two people that lost, like, like I'm a serial killer.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken didn't know it, but as he continued to dominate the game, all the *Jeopardy!* wannabes and hopefuls out there were taking meticulous notes.

That's after the break.

<AD BREAK>

ACT III

Maggie Speak: There were people that didn't wanna play Ken. Which makes sense to me. There were a few people I think, that, that had the flu for a very long time, or a gas leak for maybe two seasons.

And the people that really wanted to play Ken 'cause they wanted to show people that they could beat the big champ. Oh God. And they really wanted to, man, they would get into it. And that was really a fun thing to see.

Buzzy Cohen: By the way, the vast majority of Ken's games were runaways. Most people didn't even come close to beating him.

But a few did. And Jeff Suchard was one of them.

Jeff Suchard: My name is Jeffrey Suchard. I was a contestant on *Jeopardy!* in October 2004 and played against Ken Jennings.

Buzzy Cohen: Jeff competed in the 49th game of Ken's streak.

Jeff Suchard: The modified goal was to be within striking distance going into *Final Jeopardy!*, such that it was possible that I could win and ideally to have at least two thirds of his score.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: It's one of the leading US states in milk production. Jeff.

Jeff Suchard: What is Wisconsin?

Alex Trebek: That's it.

Jeff Suchard: Got milk for 400.

Alex Trebek: One of this unit of milk weighs about eight pounds. Jeff.

Jeff Suchard: What is a gallon?

Alex Trebek: Correct.

Jeff Suchard: Even if I got it wrong, as long as we had wagered logically, I could still win this game.

Buzzy Cohen: At the end of the *Double Jeopardy* round, Jeff wasn't so far behind. He was a little less than five thousand dollars off Ken's lead.

He was close...but not close enough.

Jeff Suchard: It is not a personal regret, but I regret that Ken was there. [Laughs.] Because that meant that I couldn't go on to win even one game.

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: Jeff was not the last contestant ready to take on the behemoth known as Ken Jennings.

Nancy Zerg: My name is Nancy Zerg.

Maggie Speak: Nancy Zerg was dressed impeccably and just was super kind and very smart. She had this warm and open, lovely face.

Buzzy Cohen: Nancy was called to compete in September — three months after Ken's games had started to air. Like the other contestants going up against him, she had watched his performance from her living room — over and over again.

But she was different from the others.

When she got to the *Jeopardy!* set, she noticed no one else was even meeting Ken's eye.

Nancy Zerg: *It was like they were pretending he didn't exist. And I thought, Well, he's a really interesting guy.*

Ken Jennings: *Normally Maggie would announce, Hey, and this is our returning champion, Ken, he's won 43 games or whatever it was. And you could just feel the air go out of the room. But Nancy Zerg was utterly unaffected by this.*

Ken Jennings: *She comes, you know, bubbly, bouncing up to me. Hey Ken. I just wanted to say hi.*

And I remember thinking, She seems utterly unintimidated. This, this might be trouble.

Nancy Zerg: *Everybody was looking at me like, What's wrong with you? You're talking to the enemy. [Laughs.]*

Nancy Zerg: *My biggest worry? That I would humiliate myself on camera, that I wouldn't be able to ring in on anything, that he'd beat me to the buzzer on every single question.*

ARCHIVAL:

Johnny Gilbert:...today's contestants...a college student from Minneapolis, Minnesota, David Hankins...a realtor from Ventura, California, Nancy Zerg. And our returning champion...

Nancy Zerg: *And, um, there I was, standing next to Ken and, um, a little nervous, but I just decided I would just focus and answer as many as I could and get in as often as I could.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Thank you Johnny Gilbert — ladies and gentlemen, welcome. I know, I know. You're wondering, has Ken Jennings quit his day job yet?*

Nancy Zerg: *I kept thinking if I can just stay within striking distance by *Final Jeopardy*, I've got a good shot because I'm usually pretty good at *Final Jeopardy*.*

ARCHIVAL:

Ken Jennings: *No soup for you for four hundred.*

Alex Trebek: *Billi bi, billet-doux, bouillabaisse. Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *What is billet-doux?*

Alex Trebek: *Yes.*

Alex Trebek: *Bourride, rond de jambe, asopao de pollo. David?*

Contestant: *What is bourride?*

Alex Trebek: *No. Nancy?*

Nancy Zerg: *What is rond de jambe?*

Alex Trebek: *Yes.*

Ken Jennings: *And in the *Double Jeopardy* round, I found two *Daily Doubles*, which normally would've been the way I put the game away.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *Answer: the other *Daily Double*. About a minute to go now, Ken.*

Ken Jennings: *And I didn't know either of them.*

Nancy Zerg: *When we got to *Final Jeopardy*, it was just the two of us.*

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: *The category is *Business and Industry* and here is the clue, ladies and gentlemen. Most of this firm's 70,000 seasonal white collar employees work only four months a year. 30 seconds. Good luck.*

Ken Jennings: *I got nothing. And I can hear Nancy writing immediately.*

Nancy Zerg: *I have a friend who's a CPA, um, and I know that it's really hard to get together with him during tax time. And I thought about that and went, oh, of course it's taxes.*

Ken Jennings: You can hear the light pen on the little screen.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Nancy, you wrote down your response rather quickly. I thought. I hope it's correct. Let's take a look.

Nancy Zerg: I hope so too.

Alex Trebek: What is H&R Block? You're right. Your wager. 4,401, taking you up to 14,401. You have a \$1 lead over Ken Jennings right now, and his final response was FedEx. [Audience gasps.] His wager was 5601.

MUSIC: Dramatic slow music begins

Nancy Zerg: The immediate reaction in the studio was this huge gasp, this *huhhh* from the audience and suddenly it was over and, and I had won.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: He winds up in second place with 8799, and Nancy Zerg. Congratulations. You are indeed a giant killer.

Buzzy Cohen: Leading up to this moment, Alex and the producers could see the contestants' *Final Jeopardy* responses before anyone else.

And even they couldn't believe what they were seeing. They were in shock...they couldn't fully process that *the* Ken Jennings had just lost.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Our new Jeopardy! Champion. 14,401...Ken, take a look at the audience. The audience is paying tribute to not only Nancy, but to you...

Ken Jennings: And, and there's a big standing ovation from the crowd and I'm like, *Oh yeah, you know, Nancy just beat the big champ, you know?* So I'm giving her a big round of applause too. It did not even occur to me that they might be clapping for me as well.

ARCHIVAL:

Alex Trebek: Nancy will be back tomorrow to defend for the first time. We will see her...

Nancy Zerg: All the other contestants are coming up, just swarming around.

Buzzy Cohen: Here's Maggie Speak again.

Maggie Speak: There was a standing ovation, the staff, the crew, the audience, everybody was on their feet, half of us in tears.

Harry Friedman: I'm not sure if it was pent up emotion, pent up anticipation or, or just sheer relief. But a lot of the staff did cry when Ken was defeated because he had become a hero of sorts to a lot of people.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken's wife Mindy hadn't even heard the news yet.

Maggie Speak took Ken to the green room so he could call her.

Mindy Jennings: I knew right away that something was wrong because when he called me, it was midday. It wasn't evening.

Ken Jennings: And I remember this moment of relief, like...*Oh...this is it. This is how it ends.* I can go back to my normal life. This is fine.

Mindy Jennings: You know, he did something incredible. And now it was time for us to see what came next.

Ken Jennings: The next day, I woke up and I thought, *Oh, people are playing Jeopardy! today without me. You know, like I don't get to see my friends again.*

MUSIC: Whimsical spacey music begins

Buzzy Cohen: Ken had reached the end of his 74 game streak...winning two and a half million dollars.

Ken made a bigger splash than anyone has ever dreamed of...or fretted over.

Ken Jennings: My run shouldn't have happened. But I think it was really kind of good for reframing what the show can be.

Buzzy Cohen: It shouldn't have happened? More like, *how* could it have happened? So many weird things had to line up to make the improbable possible.

Maggie Speak: I did game shows my entire life. I started when I was 17 years old. And so to watch this all unfold with Ken, we had seen something that, and has never been seen since. Had never been seen before. And I don't know if it ever will be seen again, a contestant that was that successful, that belonged on that stage, that did what he had to do so well.

Buzzy Cohen: Ken has 19 of the 20 most watched episodes of *Jeopardy!* — led by his final appearance — losing to Nancy Zerg on November 30th.

More than 17 million people tuned in to watch that happen.

Harry's gamble paid off. And to this day, staffers credit him as a boss who kept *Jeopardy!* current — while preserving what made the game so special.

Harry Friedman: Now in, now in hindsight, 74 games still seems unattainable. He became a part of us and a part of, of who we were, and brought us a lot of recognition and a lot of viewers.

Buzzy Cohen: No one has come even close to beating Ken's record.

More than making careers or shattering the dreams of *Jeopardy!* hopefuls, Ken's winning streak paved the way for the rise of the super champ, forever altering the game of *Jeopardy!*

Back in the sixties, and up until the nineties...*Jeopardy!* wasn't the game you would recognize today.

Categories were printed on paper. Contestants won prizes like tubes of Crescent Rolls, or free laxatives for life.

But in the post-Ken Jennings era, *Jeopardy!* had evolved.

It was now a game where people played to win — and to win big.

The audience was still playing from the couch — testing their knowledge, and gathering with their family.

But now, fans rooted for their favorite contestants.

They cheered for some, they booed for others...

Heroes and villains were born...

The era of the super champ had begun.

BEAT

THEME MUSIC

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

Jeff Suchard: Given that he won over 70 games, there's over 140 people out there whose dreams were dashed just like mine. What I think would be really awesome is a Ken Jennings Roadkill Tournament.

THEME MUSIC

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 Preté.

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

Our theme music was composed by Hannis Brown, who also engineered this episode.

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

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