

Ken Jennings Extended Biography

Born in Edmonds, Washington, Jennings grew up in Seoul, South Korea (1981–1992) and Singapore (1992–1996), where his father worked for an international law firm and then as Asia Pacific Division Counsel of Oracle Corporation. He watched *Jeopardy!* on American Forces Network television while growing up.

Jennings graduated with a degree in Computer Science and English at Brigham Young University, where he played on the school's quizbowl team for three and a half years. He graduated from Seoul Foreign School where he completed an International Baccalaureate diploma, and achieved honors at Brigham Young. ^[citation needed] Jennings attended the University of Washington during his freshman year.

Jennings is a Mormon, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He served a two-year mission in Madrid, Spain from 1993 to 1995.

Now residing just outside Seattle, Washington, Jennings identifies himself as an avid comic book and movie buff with a website listing his top 4,000 favorite movies. He also writes questions for, edits the literature and mythology categories of questions of, and is otherwise active in the National Academic Quiz Tournaments (NAQT), a quiz bowl organization; in particular, he moderated (i.e., read questions) at the 2005 and 2006 NAQT National High School Tournaments in Chicago.

During his *Jeopardy!* winning streak, Jennings was a software engineer for CHG Healthcare, a healthcare-placement firm in Salt Lake City, Utah.

He and his wife Mindy have a son, Dylan, born in 2003, and a daughter, Caitlin, born in 2006.

Streak on *Jeopardy!*

Before 2003, *Jeopardy!* contestants were limited to five consecutive games. At the beginning of the show's twentieth season (in 2003), the rules were changed to allow contestants to remain on the show as long as they continued to win. After this rule change, and until Jennings's run, the record winning streak was set by Tom Walsh, who won \$186,900 in eight games in January 2004.

Jennings had long prepared for *Jeopardy!* by competing on BYU's Quiz Bowl Team. Jennings also studied the book *How to Get on Jeopardy! and Win* by 1996 *Jeopardy!* Tournament of Champions winner Michael Dupee. Jennings's run began during *Jeopardy!*'s 20th season with the episode aired on

Wednesday, June 2, 2004, and continued into Season 21. The 2004 Tournament of Champions (aired from September 20, 2004 through October 1, 2004) was taped without his participation, as he was not yet defeated. (In theory, if Jennings had remained undefeated through the 2004–2005 season, there would not have been a Tournament of Champions for that season because Jennings would have been the sole champion.)

On November 30, 2004, Jennings' long reign as *Jeopardy!* champion ended when he lost his seventy-fifth game to challenger Nancy Zerg. Heading into Final Jeopardy, the third contestant, David Hankins, had a negative score and thus was not allowed to participate. Jennings responded incorrectly to both Double Jeopardy! Daily Doubles, losing him a combined \$10,400 because of his high wagers, and the Final Jeopardy! clue, which lost him an additional \$5,601. The Final Jeopardy! category was Business & Industry, and the clue was "Most of this firm's 70,000 seasonal white-collar employees work only four months a year". The correct response was "What is H&R Block?"; Jennings responded with "What is FedEx?"

Zerg responded correctly, and she and Jennings shook hands and hugged as the audience gave him a standing ovation. Immediately after she won, Alex Trebek dubbed her a "giant-killer" for her accomplishment of finally beating the long-standing champ. Jennings's final total, along with his consolation prize for finishing in second place, was \$2,522,700. Jennings' running time period totaled 182 calendar days, including his first and last appearances.

Jennings said in an interview that the loss was "no fluke" and that Zerg was a formidable opponent. She was defeated the following day, finishing in third place with \$2.

Along the way, Jennings defeated at least three contestants who are current quiz bowl players; Matt Bruce, a fellow NAQT quiz question editor, was selected to appear on the show during Jennings's run, but, as someone with more than a casual acquaintance with Jennings, could not compete against him because of standards and practices rules.

Jeopardy! implemented some backstage changes during Jennings's run. Normally players only get a short time of practice with the buzzers; however, more rehearsal time was added so that the new players could get comfortable. Additionally, the person who managed the buzzer system was changed.

On December 1, 2004, the show broke with tradition by having Jennings make a "guest appearance" at the start of the broadcast, during which host Alex Trebek acknowledged his success and enumerated the various game show records he had broken.

Ratings impact

According to the Nielsen TV National People Meter, *Jeopardy!*'s ratings were 22% higher during Jennings's run than they were during the same period the previous year. For several weeks of the winnings streak, *Jeopardy!* was ranked as TV's highest-rated syndicated program. By the end of *Jeopardy!*'s 20th season several weeks later, the show had surpassed *Wheel of Fortune* in the ratings (the first time any show had displaced *Wheel* as the highest rated syndicated television show since 1984), but *Wheel*, which is usually paired with *Jeopardy!* in programming, also benefited from Jennings's streak.

Other media appearances

Jennings has received a good deal of American media coverage. After his 31st win on *Jeopardy!*, during the summer break between tapings, Jennings made a guest appearance on *Live with Regis and Kelly*. There Jennings revealed that he had failed to qualify for *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, once hosted by Regis Philbin. During that guest appearance, Jennings said, "*Jeopardy!* is a man's game... it's not like *Millionaire*."

Jennings appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman* to present Letterman's "Top Ten List". He appeared again on the program on the night his final show was televised, in addition to interview segments airing that night on local 11 p.m. news programming and on *Nightline*. Barbara Walters selected Jennings as one of the "Ten Most Fascinating People of 2004" for her twelfth annual ABC News special, which aired on December 8, 2004. While on his media tour following his final game, Jennings taped a segment for a future episode of *Sesame Street*. *TV Guide* featured a segment of "The Top Ten TV Moments of 2004", in which Ken Jennings' loss placed third.

A&E aired on December 1, 2004 an episode of the *Biography* television program on Jennings and other *Jeopardy!* notables, including Frank Spangenberg and Eddie Timanus.

He also appeared twice on NPR's *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* program. In his Feb. 25, 2006 appearance he answered all three questions correctly leading him to say "This is, this is the proudest moment of my game show life."

In 2006, Jennings was a celebrity member of the Mob on *1 vs. 100*, beginning with its October 13 premiere. He was eliminated on October 20 when he missed a question about roulette, leaving with winnings of \$741.29 (part of a \$35,000 prize shared among 49 Mob members). He made another appearance on February 9, 2007 on a special episode that brought back a number of notable mob

members for a winner-take-all showdown; there, he was eliminated from the final five on a question about which celebrity had had the most marriages. If he had won this tournament, his \$100,000 prize for winning *Grand Slam* would have returned Ken to first place in the game show winnings world.

Jennings is the champion of the 2007 US version of *Grand Slam*, a single elimination tournament among top quiz show contestants.

After Jeopardy!

When asked what he intended to do with his winnings, Jennings said that he intended to tithe ten percent to his church, donate to public television and National Public Radio, go on a trip to Europe, and invest the rest for his family. *Jeopardy!* contestants typically receive their winnings approximately 120 days after their last game airs in the form of a check. Taking advantage of its notoriety from the crucial clue, H&R Block offered Jennings free financial services for the rest of his life. H&R Block senior vice president David Byers estimated that Jennings would owe approximately \$1.04 million in taxes on his winnings. Combined with a ten percent tithe, this would leave him approximately \$1,230,430 to use for other purposes.

According to Variety.com, Jennings and television producer Michael Davies teamed up as executive producers on a new game show format for Comedy Central. According to Comedy Central execs, it was planned that Jennings would co-host and participate. The series was planned to air in late 2005 or the first quarter of 2006, but as of April 2006, development had stalled, and the show's future remains uncertain. Jennings explained on his website that "Stephen Colbert's show was doing so well in its post-*Daily Show* spot that Comedy Central decided they weren't in the market for a quiz show anymore." However, he is still shopping for a network for a potential game show titled, *Ken Jennings vs. the Rest of the World*.

Jennings later appeared as a guest on *The Colbert Report* in September 2006.

Jennings has written two books, both published by the Villard imprint of Random House. The first, *Brainiac: Adventures in the Curious, Competitive, Compulsive World of Trivia Buffs* (2006, ISBN 1-4000-6445-7, trade paperback ISBN 0-8129-7499-9) details his experiences on *Jeopardy!* and his research into trivia culture conducted after the completion of his run. The second, *Ken Jennings's Trivia Almanac: 8,888 Questions in 365 Days* (released in January 2008, ISBN 0-345-59997-2), is a compilation of trivia questions.

Jennings also has a column in *Mental Floss* magazine, in which readers give him two wildly different things and he has to connect them in exactly six moves, much in the same vein as the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.

Ken Jennings also appeared on the NBC game show *1 vs. 100* on October 13, 2006 as a mob member. Ken was a mob member until he lost on the second episode. The question Ken Jennings answered incorrectly was "What color is the number 1 space on a standard roulette wheel?" While the correct answer is red, Jennings answered black. Jennings also appeared in a special "Last Man Standing" episode of the show on February 9, 2007. He was eliminated on the final question, where he was asked who of a selection of three people were married the most times. He answered King Henry VIII, while the correct answer was Larry King. This episode was the first time Jennings had a chance at a rematch against rival Brad Rutter. After waiting three years, Jennings finally beat Rutter by making it to the final 5, whereas Rutter only lasted to top 25.

In Summer 2007 Jennings appeared as a contestant on the game show *Grand Slam* hosted by Dennis Miller and Amanda Byram. The show debuted on GSN on August 4, 2007, and featured sixteen former game-show winners in a single-elimination tournament. Jennings, the second seed in the 16-player tournament, won the competition and became the 2007 Grand Slam Champion after defeating Ogi Ogas in the finals. (Ogas had defeated Rutter in an earlier round.)

Blog entry misinterpreted as critical of *Jeopardy!*

Jennings made the news in July 2006 when a news article was published claiming that he was critical of *Jeopardy!* on his blog. Citing statements that he wrote there, the article focuses on his "criticism" of the show and host Alex Trebek.

"Nobody knows he died in that fiery truck crash a few years back and was immediately replaced with the Trebektron 4000 (I see your engineers still can't get the mustache right, by the way)."

"You're like the Dorian Gray of syndication. You seem to think 'change' means replacing a blue polyethylene backdrop with a slightly different shade of blue polyethylene backdrop every presidential election or so."

However, the article failed to quote obviously satirical sections of Ken's blog post, such as the following:

Fourth, why are there no physical challenges? It doesn't have to be Nickelodeon déclassé, buckets of green ooze falling from the ceiling. It could be tasteful and restrained. Like, if you know

the answer, you have to run from your podium to the game board, jump up to touch the clue in question, and give the answer. "What is an Arby-Q?" Then you run back to your podium to select again. Some of these contestants, frankly, could use the exercise. Oh, also, there are angry bees.

Jennings responded on his blog saying,

"...there's no way I was genuinely calling for angry bees and ventriloquist's dummies to be added to the *Jeopardy!* format. It's a humor piece, and one which gets its laughs from the outrageous non sequiturs it proposes, not the ripeness of its target for criticism."

Jennings had already posted a more serious comment on Trebek that remains on his website:

"The first thing you notice is that the seriousness-to-the-point-of-pomposity thing that he does on air is mostly a put-on. In person, he's a lot looser, prone to little jokes, accents, snippets of song and even soft-shoe. Like Alex or dislike him, you have to admit that he has one of the toughest jobs in show business—reading 61 clues flawlessly while running a fast-paced game show is an amazingly difficult task—yet he's made it look easy, every weekday for the last two decades. So ease up on the Trebek-hatin', y'all."

Jennings also appeared on *The Colbert Report* on September 14, 2006. During the interview, Colbert discussed Jennings' book, *Brainiac* and mocked him not knowing how many pages the book contained. After Colbert coined a word to describe intellectual nerdiness, *poindexterity*. Jennings stated that after winning on *Jeopardy!*, he ceased to be a "poindexter". Jennings noted, as he had done earlier that day on NPR's *Talk of the Nation* that since his streak, people "seem to have an extra-hard trivia question" in case they run into him. In keeping with his hyper-American TV personality, Colbert asked how Jennings could stand Alex Trebek, a Canadian. Jennings jokingly responded that "Trebek did not smell of" his native country.