



Pat Sajak and Vanna White spin ABC's 'Celebrity Wheel of Fortune'

If you're playing "Wheel of Fortune," you have to know which letters you want to choose.

However, for a new celebrity version, three letters – namely, ABC – did the choosing.

The network adds Pat Sajak and Vanna White to its roster of primetime game-show personalities as "Celebrity Wheel of Fortune" launches a new Thursday slate of contests starting Jan. 7. (In the others, "The View's" Sara Haines hosts "The Chase," and Craig Ferguson presides over "The Hustler.") Even with stars taking the spins, "Wheel of Fortune" remains the familiar game that's long been a syndication powerhouse, with the celebrity players donating their winnings to charities.

The game itself always is the ultimate "star" of "Wheel of Fortune," though, and Sajak says, "That's been part of my success, recognizing that. It's not 'The Pat Sajak Show.' I may be the most charming and delightful host in the world – and I probably am! – but if there's no game, there's nothing there. You can't get in the way of it."

Viewers "want to see the puzzle and solve it," reasons Sajak. "Unlike most shows like 'Jeopardy!,' the object is not to try to solve the puzzle first; it's to try to make some money (by picking as many individual letters as possible), so it's leisurely in that sense. The player's not trying to solve it instantly."

That should remain the case as celebrities vie to win money for the organizations they designate. With the late Alex Trebek having hosted a playoff between "Jeopardy!" champions in a special ABC series last winter, Sajak believes that "greased the wheel a little bit" for the "Celebrity Wheel of Fortune" order.

"It's a tricky business," Sajak notes. "The one thing you don't want to start doing is to overexpose the show. In some markets, you'll have a half-hour of (the syndicated) 'Wheel of Fortune' followed by an hour of (the ABC) 'Wheel of Fortune,' and I don't think you can do that too often without watering it down. But for a limited run like this, I think it's fine."

Sajak appreciates the career longevity he's had thanks largely to "Wheel of Fortune," which he has hosted since 1981. His popularity was reaffirmed by the fan outpouring during his absence after emergency intestinal surgery in late 2019. (White moved over and filled in as host, and Sajak's country-singer daughter Maggie was a guest letter-turner.)

"What I take the greatest pride in personally," Sajak reflects, "is that it's very tough to be welcomed into a house for nearly 40 years. The fact that Vanna and I still are is the best thing I can say about it, from a talent or skill point of view."

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