



NBC Counting On 'The Contender' To Beat 'Idol'

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LOS ANGELES -- Touting its roster of fall plans to TV critics over the weekend, NBC executives also took time to respond to what it called another network's rip-off.

"The Next Great Champ," a reality-based boxing show with Oscar de la Hoya set to start on Fox before the end of the summer, seems intent on stealing the thunder from the Sept. 9 premiere of NBC's "The Contender," which involves such high-power producers as Jeffrey Katzenberg and Mark Burnett and such big names associated to boxing as Sugar Ray Leonard and Sylvester Stallone.

"Quite frankly, they used to be innovators, and now they're imitators," NBC Universal Television Group President Jeff Zucker told reporters Saturday.

"If imitation is the highest form of flattery," Katzenberg said, "theft is the lowest form of creativity."

"I'd like to add that bootlegging has finally made it to primetime," said Stallone.

Boxing in the international arena will be one of 28 sports to get unprecedented coverage on NBC associated channels Aug. 13-29, comprising 1,210 hours of coverage on seven channels, including six on cable: CNBC, MSNBC, Bravo, USA, Telemundo and HDtv.

Taking advantage of the high viewership expected for the games in Athens, NBC announced it would start its fall season nearly two weeks early, with new shows like the drama "Hawaii" premiering as early as Aug. 30.

The previously announced fall schedule on NBC has been altered somewhat, with another full season of "Last Comic Standing" immediately following the end of the current one, "because of the terrific success of this summer," says NBC Entertainment Chief Kevin Reilly.

"The Contender" will follow in that time slot Nov. 9 to get a head start against the Fox hit "American Idol" returning in January. Zucker said "we think we finally have something that can compete with

'Idol.'

Despite the No. 1 ratings for "American Idol," Zucker called "The Apprentice" the "single most valuable show on network television."

When it returns with two back-to-back seasons Sept. 9, first season winner Bill Rancic will be in the boardroom as an additional Trump adviser.

The summer TV Critics Association press tour is an opportunity for all networks to trumpet their new shows, but NBC has only five newly scripted shows. The most anticipated is the last vestige of the "Friends" juggernaut, a spin-off called "Joey" starting Sept. 9.

There are three new fall dramas on NBC, "Medical Investigation," first airing Sept. 9; the airport saga "LAX," with Heather Locklear Sept. 6; and "Hawaii" on Aug. 30.

The riskiest new offering is "Father of the Pride," a randy computer-generated comedy from the makers of "Shrek" to fill the timeslot left by "Frasier."

Surrounded by overcompensating publicists nearly apoplectic with laughter, critics largely sat in stunned silence at a screening of a full episode rare for the sessions.

"This is not a kids' show," warned Katzenberg, who also produced the project based on the lions of Siegfried & Roy.

Zucker said placing the show in a 9 p.m. timeslot when it starts Aug. 31 will send the message that it's meant for their prized 18 to 49 audience

Countering the contention that the episode screened was solely about sex, Zucker said that "it was about mating."

Of other NBC announcements, "Frasier" star Kelsey Grammer will return, albeit as Scrooge in the holiday movie "A Christmas Carol - The Musical."

"The West Wing" will return Oct. 20 with "a run of originals throughout the entire season," said Reilly. "All I can tell you is it's not going to be business as usual. The Bartlet administration is clearly coming to the end of its term and I think that's going to foster some really interesting developments."

Other premieres include "Fear Factor," Aug. 30; "Scrubs" Aug. 31, "Las Vegas" Sept. 6; "Will & Grace" Sept. 16; "Third Watch" Sept. 17; "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" Sept. 21; the original "Law & Order" with Dennis Farina added to the cast Sept. 22; "ER" Sept. 23; and "American Dreams," "Crossing Jordan" and the **third chapter of the franchise, "Law & Order: Criminal Intent" all on Sept. 26.**

Fox will get a chance to present its schedule and defend its shows starting Thursday.

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