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● REALLY BIG SHOW

Amazing Race

Ready, set, go — around the world in 30 days

By MICHAEL GILTZ

WIDELY considered the smartest, best-produced reality show, "The Amazing Race" was on the verge of cancellation — until it beat out the heavily favored "American Idol" at the Emmys last fall. Now it's launching a new 13-hour season, the show's fifth.

According to host Phil Keoghan, you can thank the Emmy for all this attention.

"I certainly believe it was a huge factor in people saying, 'Hold on a minute,'" says Keoghan, a native New Zealander. Now he says the "Race" team is determined to turn the cult hit into a mainstream phenomenon.

This season, which kicks off at a pier in Santa Monica, Calif., fans can expect 11 new teams. They include a Christian couple who are also models, and — in the show's most noteworthy addition — a pair of cousins, one of whom is a little person.

"A lot of people are asking me, 'Have you made changes for them?'" says series co-creator Bertram van Munster about the team of Charla and Mirna. "We have not. Our experience has taught us that teams can catch up if they use their brains."

Indeed, one of the highlights of the 90-minute opener is watching Charla, the little person, try to hail a cab by seeming helpless. The film then cuts to a pre-show interview where she observes that when people see her, they feel sorry and want to help. "We're definitely going to use that," Charla says, like a seasoned pro.

There are also three big innovations this season. Teams who come in next-to-last get all their traveling cash taken away. The Fast Forwards, which allow teams to skip select legs of the race and proceed to the pit stop, have been cut way down from one per team to two per season. And there's now a Yield, a ploy which lets one team force another to stand still for a certain amount of time.

"That turned out to be very, very effective," says van Munster.

For Keoghan, "Amazing Race" has proven the ideal job. He knew the show was working early in the first season when he was stopped on the street in New York and asked to repeat his signature line, "You've been eliminated from the race!"

"I said the line and the guy says, 'No, no. Like you do on the show, with the eyebrow,'" Keoghan says. "'We're going to run up [again], and we want the eyebrow.'"

THE AMAZING RACE
Tuesday, 9:30 p.m., CBS

Contestants take off from a Santa Monica pier.

