

CURLY KID IS A LOCK

Fans' 'Idol' worship gives him the edge

By MICHAEL GILTZ

The most predictable outcome of this week's finale of the summer hit show "American Idol" is that it will end in tears.

And while Kelly Clarkson has been consistently rated the best singer of the series, many expect the Texas rose to be left sobbing in defeat when she goes head-to-head against Pennsylvania's mop-top heartthrob Justin Guarini in the finale Tuesday on Fox.

"If I had to put my money on anyone winning this at the moment ... I'd put it on Kelly," said judge Simon Cowell.

His assessment makes sense: Clarkson has the best voice, the nicest personality and all the online and newspaper polls show her far ahead of Guarini, who still is trying to overcome an aura of arrogance.

But the truth is Clarkson likely won't win.

The reason: While Clarkson is the judges' pick, Guarini is the viewers' choice.

Millions of loyal teenybopper fans have ensured Guarini's safe passage through each knockout round of the show by registering millions of telephone votes in his favor every week.

Clarkson's fans have done the same, but the depth of their loyalty will be fully tested this week.

Guarini-mania has grown to such a level that even if he sings a Metallica cover, forgets the lyrics and mumbles, "I love me, I love me, I love me," over and over again, his supporters will still vote over and over again to en-



LAST MAN STANDING? Justin Guarini and Kelly Clarkson at the MTV awards. Kevin Mazur/WireImage.com

sure he comes up a winner.

Clarkson doesn't appear to have the same safety net. If the unthinkable happens, and she stumbles for the first time in the series, those more independent voters are likely to go with their conscience and give it to Guarini, even if they think Clarkson is the better talent.

Finally, reality shows never turn out the way you expect.

Who thought the devious Richard Hatch of "Survivor" would triumph after spending weeks telling anyone who would lis-

ten, "I'll stab you in the back if I get the chance?"

Who thought Colby on "Survivor 2" would let a sweet little lady who hadn't impressed anyone get to the finals? (She beat him, of course.)

And who thought the Bachelor would go for the girl with the big front porch?

The first rule of reality shows is that reality is a lot more surprising than scripted series. And that's why you shouldn't be surprised if Guarini, who deserves to be runner-up, is crowned as "American Idol."