

IDOL SPECULATION

Simon says his money is on two Southerners

By MICHAEL GLTZ

Grinch-like "American Idol" judge Simon Cowell has anointed the two contestants he believes could win the latest round of the hit talent show — and has done a backflip on his own future with the top-rated program.

The most likely idols-to-be, Cowell says, are health-care worker Clay Aiken, 24, of Raleigh, N.C., and partly singing powerhouse Ruben Studdard, 24, from Birmingham, Ala.

"In the next few weeks, I think the person you're going to see getting stronger and stronger is Clay. I think he's the person to beat," Cowell said.

And the always-smiling Studdard is "very, very marketable."

Both contestants have already received standing ovations from Cowell's fellow judges — Paula Abdul and Randy Jackson — and even the hard-to-please Cowell has used "outstanding" and "excellent" to describe their performances.

Meanwhile, Cowell has announced exclusively to The Post that he has had a change of heart: He will return for another season of the show — but not if Fox insists on airing "Idol 3" in the fall.

Cowell believes Round 3 should be put off until next year to allow the winner more time to be turned into a star — and to protect against brand-name overkill.

For Cowell, postponement is good business — his recording company provides the "million-dollar" contract to the series winner and has first pick of the other contestants.

In addition to inaugural winner Kelly Clarkson, 22, Cowell also signed runner-up Justin Guarini and the popular Tamyra Gray. And he has already signed Frenchie Davis, who was dumped from the current

HERMITAGE, Pa. — An Ohio man booted off "American Idol" after he allegedly took part in a fatal bar fight has been ordered to stand trial in the altercation.

Jaered Andrews, 24, was charged with simple assault for allegedly punching a man in the face Nov. 16 at the Blue Ribbon Grille in Farrell, about 60 miles northwest of Pittsburgh. He was ordered on Friday to stand trial.

Thomas Blakeley, 39, died after hitting his head on the sidewalk outside the bar, authorities said.

AP

show because she had done a soft-porn video several years ago.

Before the audition process for this year's series got under way, Cowell expressed concern about it running so close behind last year's debut season — and before Clarkson's album release.

But he lost out to Fox executives who wanted to ward off copycats.

Cowell says he has a "gut feeling" that "Idol 3" won't run in the fall.

"That's what I've been told," he said, vowing to walk if Fox insists on a September start.

"If they decide to do it without me, I think that would be a mistake," he said. "If they do it in the fall, I'll have nothing to do with it." But Marc Berman of MediaWeek suspects Fox will move mountains to get "Idol" on screens in September.

"I think Fox is going to beg and throw money on the table," said Berman. "Without 'American Idol' and 'Joe Millionaire,' Fox doesn't have much of a schedule."

Cowell also revealed that Elton John is being wooed as a celebrity judge.



CLAY AIKEN
"Person to beat."



RUBEN STUDDARD
"Very marketable."



FRENCHIE DAVIS
Already signed up.



JUDGMENT DAY: Simon Cowell gave his favorites on the second "American Idol" — and waved off claims he's quitting . . . for now.

Shannon Sweeney