

Lucky Drake

TV's top teen star back from car wreck in March

By MICHAEL GILTZ

The hottest couple on teen TV nearly broke up over New Year's.

Not Jessica and Nick.

Drake Bell and Josh Peck, stars of the hit Nickelodeon series **"Drake & Josh,"** nearly came to an end three weeks ago today when a guy fell asleep at the wheel and slammed head-on into Drake's vintage Mustang.

The Mustang, a 1966 model, of course had no air bags and no shoulder harness.

Suddenly, a week before their first TV movie, **"Drake & Josh Go To Hollywood,"** was set to debut, the highest-rated show among tweens — that awkwardly named group of 9- to 14-year-olds — was in serious trouble.

"I don't have kids, but I imagine the feeling I got when I got the call was very much like a parent's feeling," the show's creator, Dan Schneider, says.

"I knew his face had been cut pretty bad and his jaw had been smashed," he says. "But that stuff is cosmetic, and we all knew we could fix that.

"But he also had a slight neck fracture, and that was what was really scary.

"He easily could have been

killed or found himself in a wheelchair."

"Drake & Josh Go To Hollywood" aired as scheduled last Friday to an audience of over 5 million viewers — the biggest thing on Nick in five years.

The series, now in its third season, is about two high-school classmates who know each other only slightly — until Drake's divorced mom and Josh's father started dating and eventually marry.

Suddenly the boys — Drake, the handsome, rock-band leader who gets all the girls, and Josh, the exuberant, portly tag-along — are stepbrothers and roommates.

The act is pure Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis — and it still works. Both actors are 19 years old.

Schneider — a mini-mogul around Nickelodeon who has created a string of hit shows for the network, including **"Zoey 101"** and **"Kenan & Kel"** — built the series around their chemistry.

"Drake has the market cornered on cool," says Schneider.

Josh "has got this Jackie Gleason quality," he says. "Not only can Josh do the physical comedy and the pratfalls, but he can also sell a sophisticated joke and a touching moment."

As is often the case, Drake and Josh did not hit it off right away. But things improved when both were cast on **"The Amanda Show."**

"I walked into 'The Amanda Show,'" remembers Josh. "And he said, 'You do comedy, huh?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Tell me a joke.' So I told him a joke from my act, and he laughed hysterically. So I thought, 'He can't be all bad if he thinks I'm funny.'"

Now they're best pals. Josh was one of the first people at the hospital the day of the accident.

Drake is out of the hospital, recovering at home. He is sitting around and playing his guitar, says Schneider. But his jaw is wired shut, and he is restricted to a liquid diet until it heals.

Plastic surgeons will take care of the scar on his jaw after that, says the producer.

Production on Season 4 of **"Drake & Josh"** was halted, but is expected to resume in mid-March.



Josh Peck, left, and Drake Bell are expected to resume filming their popular Nickelodeon show in March, following Drake's recovery from a car crash.