



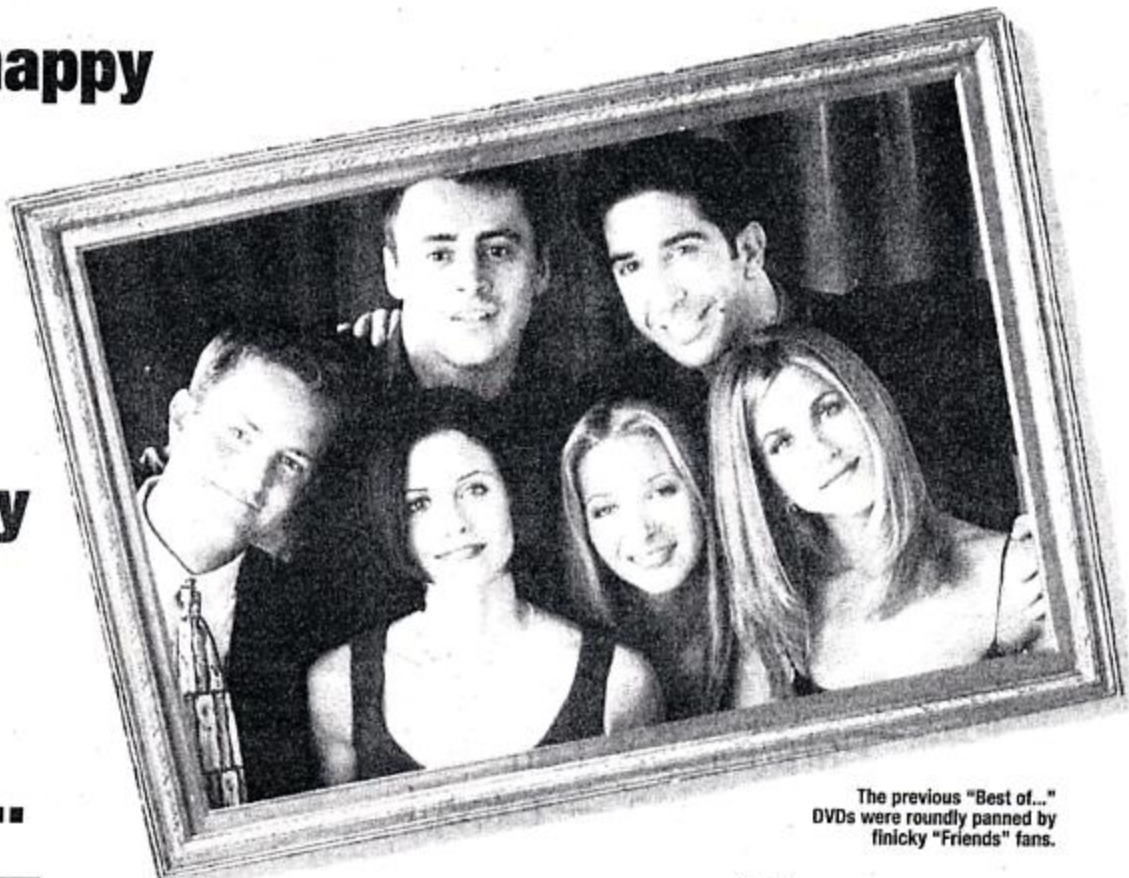
Poor hard hat Bob can't get a girl: P.104

TV Sunday

Oh, bro! The Coens' new DVD: P. 105



When unhappy fans of 'Friends' complain, the show listens. That's why the new de luxe series of DVDs are...



The previous "Best of..." DVDs were roundly panned by finicky "Friends" fans.

Picture perfect

By MICHAEL GILTZ

FRIENDS is finally coming to DVD the way fans wanted.

The No. 1 show in primetime, the No. 1 series in syndication and currently one of the most expensive sitcoms in history, "Friends" gets the deluxe treatment with the release of "Friends: The Complete First Season" (\$69.99; Warner Bros.) at the end of this month.

All 24 episodes from the '94-95 season are included, such as "The One With the Blackout" and "The One with the Dozen Lasagnas." The show's immediate blockbuster status is proven by the starry guest list, which includes George Clooney, Helen Hunt, George Stephanopolous and Jill Goddard.

"It's really the way to go," insists John Thrasher, vice president of home entertainment for Tower Records and a strong booster for releasing TV shows season-by-season.

Fans love watching an entire season at once because they can follow the characters and their romances (and their haircuts) from beginning to the end. (Season One, of "Friends," for example, focuses on Ross and his unspoken love for Rachel.)

"With a lot of these shows, 'Friends' included, there are master story arcs that you pick up on," says Doug Pratt, editor of "The DVD-Laser Newsletter." "There are references from one episode to another episode that you may miss when they're broadcast but you pick them up when they're all lined up like ducks."

Warner Bros. previously released two "Best of..." sets. Those releases were roundly panned by fans and critics alike who complained — and rightly so — that anyone can watch a random episode of "Friends" anytime they want by simply turning on their TV.

Worse, one disc carried three Thanksgiving episodes from different years — about two too many.

Apparently, fan unhappiness and less than stellar sales convinced Warner Bros. to rethink its strategy.

"Basically, they were working on a videocassette marketing plan and DVDs are different," says Pratt, who notes similar bad marketing of "Star Trek," "The Twilight Zone," "I Spy" and other shows.

Thrasher of Tower Records says the newly refurbished boxed sets look to spark much higher sales.

"We're expecting really good things from 'Friends,' says Thrasher. "We did fairly well in terms of sales with the 'Best Of...' sets, but it's nothing like we expect to do for the 'First Season.'"

"Friends" joins the growing ranks of other classic TV shows given the season-by-season, red-carpet treatment on DVD: "The X-Files," "The Sopranos," "The Simpsons," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and recent additions "M*A*S*H" and "All in the Family" all came out that way. (According to Thrasher, "M*A*S*H" did very well and "Family" a little less so.) Currently on the DVD sales chart is "Oz: The Complete First Season."

This isn't the first time studios have paid attention to fan complaints and reworked their DVD strategy.

Warner Bros. put out the classic family film "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" in a cropped version, but rushed out a widescreen edition within weeks when fans emailed their distress. And Paramount did a terrible job with one of its crown jewels: the classic "Star Trek" series.

"It took the guys from Paramount forever to release 'Star Trek' a few episodes at a time," says Thrasher, who hated the measly two episodes per DVD that were

included and the fact that Paramount stretched out the series over 40 DVDs.

"You just can't have that many titles," he says. "We just don't have the space."

The endless cries of fans prompted rethinking when Paramount tackled that show's sequel.

"They're finally releasing 'Star Trek: The Next Generation' in full season boxed sets every few months," says Thrasher. "They've been really pleased with sales for Season One and Season Two comes out May 7. I think the whole series will be out on DVD by the end of the year."

He's also optimistic about sales for "The Dark Shadows" — a soap opera that released an ungodly number of VHS tapes — around 180, according to Thrasher.

"Each individual video was \$19.95," says Thrasher. "The people who collected them all had some dough. As well as some issues."

"Dark Shadows comes out in deluxe boxed sets starting May 28 from MPI. "I can't wait for that," says Pratt. "I am so excited about it."

As for the packaging of 40 episodes in each boxed set, Thrasher laughs, "I'm just very grateful."