

DENNIS JAMES



Q: Tell us about *The New Price Is Right* and how you got to be the MC.

D: Years ago I did a show for Goodson-Todman called *Name's the Same*, and I was on many, many Goodson-Todman shows but not working for them. When I was working for Kelloggs, we sponsored *What's My Line?* and I was a spokesman for Kelloggs for 11 years. About January of this year I replaced Monty Hall on *Let's Make a Deal*. It so happens that Bill Todman caught that show. Monty got ill and they called me at the country club, and I jumped in and did it. Todman wanted Mark Goodson to see it. So he asked if there was any videotape. Well, I had a videotape of my own. I record almost all of the shows I do. And so I mailed that tape out to them, and that is how the deal came to be. They signed me to do it. I'm very excited about it.

Q: Do you remember where you first heard of television?

D: Yes, I was in radio in New York doing soaps and commercials, and my brother was with Dr. Dumont in New Jersey. They wanted to do experi-

mental TV in 1938. So he said, I have a brother in show business and maybe he'll help us. So I jumped in and said sure. It was fascinating to me, and I did two shows a week. One was called the *Dennis James Sports Parade* and the other was called *Television Roof*. On the *Sports Parade*, I used to interview a sports luminary for five minutes and then participate with him in his sport for 10 minutes. If he was a wrestler, I wrestled with him. If he were a fencer, I fenced with him. If he were a tennis player, I'd play tennis with him. Not one of them well done. But I would do it. The other show was a variety show because I was a disc jockey at WNEW. I could ask stars to come on television and guarantee them that nobody was going to see them anyhow. But I would play their records on radio, and they would come on and do this television with me—like The Pied Pipers and Connie Haynes and Sinatra and people like that. There were 300 sets in operation at that time in New York, and about 200 of them were not working because they were changing over channels.

Q: How many "firsts" do you have on television?

D: Well, they say about 25. I was one of the very

first ever to do a videotape commercial. I'm very bad on dates. But I did the first Easter Parade, and the Easter Parade was very successful in New York. I was the first variety show host and sports announcer. The first one to ever do a commercial on TV; the first to ever do a commercial half-hour show; the first to do wrestling; and the first to do a game show.

Q: What was the first television commercial?

D: It was for Wedgewood China. The whole half hour was a commercial and I starred as a soldier. The soldier was coming home from the war and he had seen Wedgewood China, and he was describing the Wedgewood China. A very interesting thing happened—they were going to run a piece of film on how the china is made from mud, and the film chain broke. They gave me a "stretch" because everything was live and I just kept on talking about mud. How they handle the mud in England and how they took this mud and developed it and how you were going to see it in a moment. I went on about mud for three and one-half minutes and I got an extra \$25 for that.

Q: How did you get to do the first TV wrestling?

D: I came out of the war in 1946 and my first assignment was to become the prosecuting attorney on *Famous Jury Trials* which went on television at that time. And then Dumont came to me again and said we have a wrestling thing. Would you do it for us? Well, I'd never seen a wrestling match in my life. I got hold of a book and got in touch with Sam Lane who had worked with me before and who was an authority on sports. I sat at ringside and would thumb through the pages of the book. When I would see a hammerlock, I would see the pictures and say, oh yes, mother, that is a hammerlock. I started to gear all my commentary to mother, because I figured all the guys in the bar (and bars were very important to TV in those days) knew more about this than I did. So I would say, "Mother, that is a hammerlock"—so that if she wanted to say to her husband, "Is that right, John?" he could say, "Yes, that is right." and so he would be a hero. I used to do the fights too—from Sunnyside Gardens, Jamaica Arena, from Park Arena and then I did the Wednesday Night Pabst Blue Ribbon fights. But the important thing that I was always gearing this to mother. The president of Sterling Drug called me and asked me to do a daytime show for them and we called it *Okay Mother*. It was one of the first audience participation shows ever (around 1947).

Q: How long did you do wrestling?

D: Until about 1951.

Q: Did you work with the big ones?

D: Oh, all the big ones. Gene Stanley—Mr. America, Sandor Koufax, Gino Garibaldi, Georgeous George, Bibber McCoy, Tarzan Hewitt. I used to do whole wrestling matches in spontaneous poetry, and one day I said, "Look at the suet on Hewitt." Now this is a man who wrestled for \$50 a night

and before I got finished playing with him, he became a headliner. So one night in the dressing room before we started, he grabbed me in this hammerlock that I'm talking about and almost broke my arm. He said don't ever talk about the suet on Hewitt—say anything else you want, but don't call me fat. Well, two weeks passed, and Milton Berle, who was hot in television in 1948, asked me to do a guest shot with him and asked me to bring a wrestler to wrestle with him. So I brought Tarzan Hewitt. Now he gets \$1500 for this performance. During the spontaneous commentary with Berle I forgot and said, "Look at the suet on Hewitt." Tarzan Hewitt jumped out of that ring, grabbed me, and I am down on the floor and he wasn't kidding, and this is coast to coast on the Berle show. He never appreciated my making him a star.

Q: How did "Hat Pin Mary" come into existence?

D: Very simple. She was in the Jamaica Arena on the other side of the ring within camera range (these people always know how to get in front of a camera, better than an actor) and she would run up and stick a hat pin in the derriere of a wrestler. There was always a villain and always a hero, and she would stick this hat pin into the villain. So we ran a contest with the viewers and "Hat Pin Mary" was the name we selected. There was another loud guy back there and we ran a contest on him and settled on the name, "Heckleberry Finn."

Q: How did the wrestlers put up with getting jabbed? Did it hurt?

D: Well, sure it hurt. It was all part of it to them. But then the boxing commission, which supervised wrestling, said you cannot use the hat pin. So she took cold Popsicles and ran up to do the same thing, which was a very funny picture.

Q: One of the things we all associate you with is telethons for cerebral palsy. Could you tell us how you got into your first telethon?

D: My first telethon was done in New York about 22 years ago. The first telethon ever was with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, and it was almost the end of all telethons because it was a complete fiasco. They talked about raising two million and they didn't collect \$200,000. Anyhow, the first telethon I ever did had a different MC every half hour. Jackie Gleason and all the big names of that time. I was scheduled to come on because I was doing a big show at that time, and I came on at 11:30 at night. Luckily the phones started ringing, and the producer said this kid stays on for the rest of the telethon. Other succeeding MC's just came on as guests. That is the way it started where I did the whole thing for 20 hours.

Q: How much money do you think you have raised for cerebral palsy?

D: I used to do New York and maybe one other city. But I did 10 of them last year and will do about 12 of them this year. So now it has come to over \$20 million.

Q: What did you think of the Democratic National Telethon?

D: I will be very honest with you. I can't stand watching a telethon more than 10 minutes. I don't mean to cut them down by saying that. If you do a telethon for 20 years, you get sick and tired of hearing yourself anyhow. Now if I watch somebody else do a telethon, I say to myself, do I sound like that? Is my appeal anything like that? Then I lose something in my appeal. Because I think it has to be a genuine, sincere feeling every time you say something, and a lot of people I hear on there are not very genuine and sincere.

Q: You did the first commercial for Wedgewood. What other companies have you been a spokesman for?

D: Well, that is another interesting thing. People always like to think of me in terms of being a commercial announcer, but I never really was a commercial announcer. I was a commercial spokesman for Lorillard-Old Gold cigarettes and Kelloggs. You will never see me in a film commercial on the air. I never made commercials for anybody else. I starred in a show like *Chance of a Lifetime* and I did the commercials live for Bromo Seltzer as the star but never as an announcer.

Q: What was the most money you made in a year?

D: About \$850,000. I worked for P. Lorillard for a tremendous amount of money—\$350,000. With Kelloggs it was \$250,000 a year.

Q: How many game shows have you done?

D: About 55 or 51. I don't know. I am not very good at statistics.

Q: Which game show do you feel best about?

D: Well, there are a couple of shows I really enjoyed doing. I don't know whether you would call it a game show, but we did a show called *First Impressions*, and I wasn't the MC—I was a panelist. I enjoyed doing that show because I am a frustrated psychologist anyhow, and this involved three panelists trying to guess who the guest star was in a sound proof booth behind us, and I got a kick out of that. I guess my record was pretty high. Another show I enjoyed was called *Club 60* from Chicago. It wasn't a game show. It was in color everyday with a three-piece orchestra on NBC at 1 p.m. I loved it.

Q: How did you start giving away your tie on *Okay Mother*?

D: Someone said, gee I love that tie, and I said, look, if you love it, you can have it. Then I gave it to her. So a little secretary devised a bow tie that said "Okay Mother" on it and I used to keep an extra in my pocket. The first one who thought to ask me for a tie, I gave it to her. I guess I gave away 15,000 ties, which was expensive—especially in the beginning. But then a tie manufacturer came along and said we can make these ties for you, special for Dennis James. I did that for seven years.

Q: How did you come to California?

D: Monty Hall asked me to come out here to do

First Impressions in 1961, and I said okay for 13 weeks. So we came out here and I fell in love with it. I had never been to California before and being a golf nut, this was for me.

Q: You have been a target for television critics because you have been tied up in many areas that those people think are not important. What is your reaction to this?

D: My answer to whether they are important is look at the resurgence of game shows right now. And CBS who never wanted game shows just put three game shows on the air. So they know they had better join the fight or lose out. Because game shows have a tremendous appeal. The critics will always look down their noses, but you can't have the *Bell Telephone Hour* on and still stay in competition. That is going to have to be left to educational TV. That is the answer for the critics. They can sit around and talk about the great wasteland and everything else. If you want to read books, read books. My own housekeeper does not watch *The New Price Is Right*. She is in a meditation class on Monday night.

Q: Do you watch TV?

D: I am a TV nut. I have three sets upstairs that I watch at the same time.

Q: What is your favorite program?

D: I like action stuff.

Q: Are all of your sets color?

D: No, one is a little black and white by the bed.

Q: What time do you watch TV? Do you watch during the day?

D: Very rarely. My parents are nuts for game shows. They will watch all day long.

Q: Does your mother think you are the greatest?

D: I think she thinks Monty Hall is the greatest, and Monty's mother thinks I am the greatest.

Q: How much recognition do you get in public?

D: Years ago I was in 13 shows a week. I guess I was the most recognizable guy in the business because I did not just do a show on Tuesday night. I did a show every day and night.

Q: When were you doing that?

D: In the early Fifties. I was doing five *Okay Mothers* a week. I was doing *Chance of a Lifetime* at night and I was doing *Two for the Money* with Herb Shriner. I was doing three sports events at night—wrestling and two boxing. And I was doing the *Amateur Hour* with Ted Mack. In those days there was no way they could miss me.

Q: Do you get much fan mail these days?

D: No, it will start now. It started already with *The New Price Is Right*. But you have got to be actively on the scene. When you are out of TV for two years, popularity drops completely.

Q: You did *Chance of a Lifetime*, *Amateur Hour*, and *All-American College Show*. What stars did you introduce for the first time?

D: There were a lot of those, like Jonathan Winters, Dianne Carroll, Roger Williams, Dick Van Dyke, Barbara McNair and The Carpenters.