

ENTERTAINMENT

Tyra Banks wanted 'America's Next Top Model' to fix fashion. Now, some contestants say the show was 'psychological warfare.'



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"America's Next Top Model" was, in theory, a modeling bootcamp cum competition meant to echo Banks' runway days in Paris and Milan. The show was supposed to be a golden ticket for contestants across the US who never would've had the opportunity to break into the fashion industry. But many insiders said contestants' well-being was sidelined for ratings.

Challenges became only more preposterous as the seasons — or cycles, in "ANTM" parlance — progressed. In season seven, on-set medics had to treat CariDee English after she was pulled out of a swimming pool convulsing, with the "Top Model" judge and creative director Jay Manuel saying English had hypothermia. There was a runway with a pendulum to knock contestants over (season 14); one on a conveyor belt (season 15); another that went down the side of a building (season 20). In season 16, contestants sashayed down a runway with their hands set on fire. That same season, the women had to walk a 12-inch-wide runway over water in inflatable human-size hamster wheels. The contestant Hannah Kat Jones said that when no one fell into the water the first round, the models were forced to walk again until someone did.

Tyra Banks was at the top of the "America's Next Top Model" food chain. She owned a 25% stake in the show, and as an executive producer she had a final say in what aired. Producers picked challenges before contestants were cast, but they made tweaks to pile on the drama.

"Andrew Patterson, who oversaw all creative across photo shoots and runways for seasons 15 to 20, said producers sought to include an "element of fear" in photo shoots. If a contestant was nervous, producers would purposefully photograph her first or last to escalate the tension; if she mentioned she was afraid of a specific animal, she would be paired with that animal in a photo shoot. While photo shoots were constructed to play on contestants' fears, makeovers could be the most dangerous of all. Producers said Banks personally brainstormed or approved makeovers — later rebranded to "Ty-Overs" — which were executed every season in one exhausting day that could stretch more than 20 hours."

One person told Insider that he'd come to believe "America's Next Top Model" put contestants in a "harmful environment for the sake of TV." "You're not looking at lifting women up," he said of Banks. "You're not looking at giving them a real opportunity. You're looking at trying to pit them against each other in a barrel full of crabs that are all trying to claw their way out." Banks worked closely with her other executive producers, especially the "ANTM" co creator Ken Mok, and insiders said she ran the creative side of the show. Banks assigned makeovers and brainstormed photo shoots.

The supermodel abhorred repetition, producers said, and was intent on outdoing the previous season. In season 17, the show struck a deal with the Greek tourism board to travel to Crete for the season's international trip. Patterson, the creative producer, asked Banks to name the "most Greek thing" she could think of for their photo-shoot theme. "She looks at me with the most serious face and she says: the Greek salad," Patterson said. "And I'm like, how am I going to explain this to the tourism bureau of Greece?" Patterson ended up putting contestants in massive vats of oil, tomato, cucumber, and feta for a Greek-salad-themed photo shoot. Ultimately, he said, "they looked pretty good — except I think we used oil, and the girls ended up frying a little in the sun."