

THE COMEDY GAZELLE



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle – to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger. It was also the pandemic and I had shit else to do.

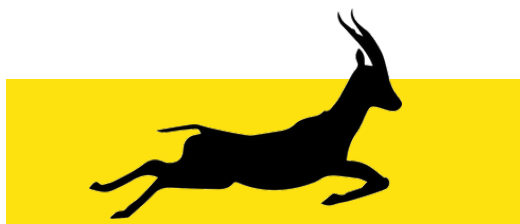
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– Jerry

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INTERVIEW: TYLER HORVATH

I sat down with New York superstar Tyler Horvath (@tylerjhorvath) for one of my absolute favorite interviews yet. We cover: getting your shit together, avoiding bitterness, finding your own stage time, and so much more. For the love of God, read this one.

I know you've been working on yourself a lot. Are you sober now?

No, but I'm working on drinking a lot less. Just doing like 10-15 days at a time, trying to make the default not anytime there's a drink available. I just want to feel good and have energy. It's like, "Okay, well, what is the biggest lever to pull on to improve that?" And it's for sure booze, especially for comics, and especially for Chicago comics.

It adds up fast. I'll have one after work, then I'll have a few at a show or mic. Suddenly I've had like four or five beers.

That's what I mean by changing the default. If the default is, "Alright, I'll grab a beer whenever I'm in a place that one's available," I'm around that so much that it's just gonna be constant. That's what it was for years. But your goals change and you're like, "I don't have the energy." I just moved to New York and it's not very common for comics to hang around at the clubs and have four or five drinks, like they will at Laugh Factory. You're going to do your spots, you're bouncing around, and then after you might go have a beer or two somewhere else. It's not like Chicago at all.

Everyone's just working.

Yeah, and every professional comedian that you respect is there and they're taking a bunch of spots. It's very clear, "Oh, if I want to do well here, I have to really work hard." So it's like, "What are the ways that you can work hard?" And I think one is just having a lot of energy, not being hungover all the time, and having a clear head to work during the day. Then, at night, when you're going to do your spots, actually working on your act. It's so hard to get spots that when you do get them, you really wanna make the most of it. I've noticed more of an ability to focus when I am on stage and I can more consciously tweak a line or an emphasis. It's just more presence and clarity. You're so much more available to yourself when you're not feeling like shit.



Since I've known you, you've really had your shit together. It's crazy to me you used to be a degenerate Chicago comedian.

Oh yeah, for years. It's that whole thing of, "Yeah, I clearly could have used my time better." But that's where I was. The first few years of being in Chicago, it's really hard to get stage time. It's a lot of jumping around bars, open mics, staying out late, drinking with your friends. It was a blast, but my apartment was like a horrible place. But for the past five years, I haven't been living like that at all. It's just refining and refining and growing up a little bit. I got into a relationship with my girlfriend and we started living together, so I started living a real human life. It's something I think more comics should focus on early: make your life good and work on yourself. It's hard to afford it, but getting into therapy helped me immensely in the last few years. When John Gasper and I met early on, we were running into these walls of like, "Fuck, what do we need to do to progress here?" And we were like, "I think what we need to get better at comedy is to grow as human beings." And I think that is what happened for me: living a full life allowed me to get out of my own way in comedy. It also freed me up to not be miserable up there. I remember discovering smiling on stage and being like, "Oh shit, this is like cheating!" If you're in a decent place in your own life

and in your own brain, it makes it a lot easier for you to have fun on stage and for the audience to see that. We know all that, but it's just hard to be disciplined and figure it out.

How do you stay disciplined? I feel like that's the hardest part.

I'm not by any means a picture of discipline, but what I've learned is that when you fall off whatever good habit you're trying to do, don't beat yourself up about it. Just get back on track as quickly as you can. That's a great tool to have: as soon as you have the shame thought, instead of letting it spiral, just try to train yourself that that's the trigger to go do the good thing, like, "Oh my god, I'm falling behind my peers in comedy because I'm not writing or sending emails." Go send an email right now, instead of letting that trigger you into this downward spiral of self-hatred.

What kind of advice would you give to a younger version of yourself, or someone who is in your place right now, grinding out the Chicago mics, trying to get their shit together?

There's no substitute for stage time, and there's no substitute for writing. Every joke that you write that ends up working is so monumental; it's just such a weapon that you now have. Write as much as you can, and actually write. Spend time on it and prioritize it. The earlier you can get good at turning ideas into jokes that work, the better. I also spent a lot of time early on worrying about what things other people were getting. That's just a complete waste of time. It's a waste of time to worry about any particular opportunity, because everything that I've done now was the product of me not getting something else. I think it's important to have goals: try to get on Tight Ship and CYSK, try to become a regular at the Laugh Factory, or get a host weekend at Zanies. But if you don't get them, it's fine. Don't stop trying to find a way, and just keep going up. It seems so silly for me to repeat these things, because every comic that you've ever heard has said all of this, but that's because it's true. I wasted a lot of energy and time going, "Okay, why won't this person book me?" or "How is that person getting that?" and there's no benefit to doing that. Not only does it not help you, it really hurts you. Bitterness can absolutely kill you because you're not doing constructive things for yourself. It becomes this narrative in your head where you go, "It doesn't matter what I do, I'm not getting anything." That is just gonna kill you. And if it comes to a point where you're like, "I don't want to do this anymore," let it be because you don't want to do it

anymore, not because "I'm not getting this or that, so I'm not cut out for it."

I think that's an important distinction: quitting because you want to quit, versus quitting because you're upset you're not getting any opportunities.

Yes, because there are opportunities. This is a crazy time for comedy. You can go to any city and there's an amazing indie comedy show and like ten okay comedy shows. There's a lot of people that get further into this and they're like, "Oh, this is what this life is like? I actually don't want this. I don't actually want to go on the road 30 weeks a year; I don't want to be on planes all the time; I don't want to be on buses and trains and entertaining drunk people all the time." That's totally fine, and I think that might be a better life choice. But I think it's sad when the world gets to you in that way of like, "Oh, I'm not getting these things so I'm not gonna ever be good enough." No one opportunity is going to make or break your career. That's something I carry into everything, like an audition for a club or a festival. Not getting any one opportunity didn't kill me and getting one opportunity isn't going to make my career. That's really been liberating for me. I've been drilling this into myself in New York, cause you meet some bookers in New York and you're like, "Oh, I don't know what this person wants. Maybe I should do this," and you just put your hands up, like, "I'm going to show them what I do. If they don't like that, that's okay."

I think a lot of people understand that intuitively, but when you're about to go on stage, it's hard to not put that pressure on yourself.

I think it comes with time. There's so many things you don't get that you realize, "Oh, I'm fine." You have the little mini auditions in your head where you're at a mic and you see there's a producer of this show that you want to get. You see that person in the room and you go, "Oh my god, if they see me do well, that's

gonna be everything!" Now I've been through so many of those where it didn't matter one way or the other at all. That moment right before you go on stage, you probably will feel a little nervous, but it's like, "Yeah, good. I should be a little nervous." I just try to tell myself, "This is a normal reaction to what's happening." It would be weird as fuck if you weren't nervous to audition for JFL. Be a little nervous. You're not doing something wrong by getting nervous to go show these people that matter this thing that you care about. I truly try to not treat anything like, "If this goes well, my life is going to be incredible. And if it goes bad, I'm fucked." That's just a horrible experience of life. Whether it's true or not, it's really a bad internal experience for me and I just won't have it anymore. I'm not going to indulge that anxiety brain. But that's all practice. I mean, that's therapy and that's a lot of things for me to have gotten to that point. It's so funny, you're like, "What's the stand up advice?" And I'm like, "Therapy."

You're convincing me! I feel like I'm still in my own way with negative thoughts.

Yeah, and where you are right now is exactly okay. You can improve if you want to improve, but the first step is to not beat yourself up about not being further along. Like, my approach is very ground up. I'm trying to write comedy, right? Well, how do I make myself better at that? For me, one is therapy. One is drinking less. One is working out, and all those things just to feel good so I can have a foundation of clarity in my life to be able to generate material. Athletes have their diet, sleep, all these things. I don't think of myself as a comedy athlete or some dumb shit like that, but I'm just saying, there's a lot more that you can do for your comedy that isn't necessarily just sitting down and writing. What can you do for yourself that makes it so that when you do sit down and write, you have more of yourself available to draw on?

I want to ask you about the path that you made for yourself in comedy. I know for a while, you weren't getting all the opportunities in Chicago you felt you deserved, but you still found your way and are doing great.

I learned a lot from not getting the things that I, in my bitter moments, thought that I did deserve. It seems so counterintuitive, but I think not getting opportunities early is the best thing that can happen to you. It makes you work really hard and makes you really strong mentally. You learn to handle rejection, and it's not even rejection, it's just you constantly getting ghosted by every club and bar booker. I didn't get regular stage



time at any one place – I don't have a home club – but I was always bouncing around everywhere. I would get up wherever I could, and then I started going out on the road more. It made me realize that when I do have opportunities, I need to make the most of them. Any relationship that I got with any road club where they let me do a guest spot or they let me host, I would always follow up and say, "Thank you so much for the opportunity. I appreciate it." You go host once or twice, then you come back and they let you feature, or now you have a relationship with a headliner that brings you to feature, and they go, "Oh, you're a feature," and then they give you a Thursday to headline. And this is over the course of like four or five years. But I want to be clear: I don't even think that I did deserve more opportunities back then. At the time I was like, "What the fuck?" But now I look back and I go, "I wasn't as good as I thought I was." I'm really grateful that I didn't get the stage time that I thought I deserved, because that made me go, "Alright, I gotta go find it." And then I would come back better because I was doing a bunch of stuff on the road. It's been a very valuable lesson: if you aren't getting the opportunities you think that you deserve, check in and be like, "Well, do you actually?" A lot of things that I was bitter and pissed off that I wasn't getting, I couldn't handle at the time. I thought I should be a feature at Zanies five years ago. I could have probably

gotten through the time, but I wouldn't have been strong. And anything that you don't get now, if it happens next year, are you going to be less ready? No, you're going to be way more ready, and then when you finally do get this thing, you're going to be so much better. If you think that you're ready to feature, I bet that you are a solid host. I'm only speaking from my experience, because looking back, I wasn't ready for that. And that's another reason to not give in to bitterness, is that you're probably wrong. To some degree, you probably are not ready for the things you think you're ready for. But if you allow yourself to learn the lesson of, "Okay I'm going to find a way and I'm going to keep working," I promise it'll make you better over time.

I think it's so interesting how time passes and then suddenly you're like, "Oh, I'm somehow better because I've been working at it."

Absolutely. And at some point one of your friends is gonna start doing well, or you're gonna start doing well and helping your friends. It's a very obvious thing, but find a crew of people that have the same attitude about what you're doing. I'm lucky that I found a bunch of people, and now we are all in New York for the most part. We were all like, "Oh, we gotta work at this because we want to actually do it." I think if you find that, then some of you are going to start getting opportunities and you can all help each other.

I was going to ask you: when you started getting out on the road, was that through friendships, or how did you get some of those opportunities?

Well, first, people come through Chicago all the time. Try to meet all the comics that come to town and be nice and put yourself out there a little bit. It's crazy how big of a world and how small of a world it is at the same time. The more people you meet, the more places you have to crash and connections that can help you do a few shows, even if it's just five minutes on some bar shows. You can get better stage time in any city that you don't live in.

That's so true.

They just go, "Oh, there's a Chicago person, alright, we'll give them 10 on our best show because he's visiting." That's incredibly valuable and everyone should do that. I would do that, and then any club within a reasonable distance that I could get on a bus or borrow a car or take an Amtrak to, I would be emailing that club all the time: "Can I host or come up for a guest spot?" The first time I did Comedy on State, they had me come host and it was for [Paul] Virzi. We hung out that whole weekend, and then COVID happened, and then I hit him up again after

COVID, and was like, "Hey, I saw you're gonna be in Tampa. My family's from there, could I come? Nobody's got to fly me out or put me up." He was like, "Yeah, maybe that could work. I got a feature, but maybe you could host." And then nothing happened. It was months out and I followed up with him probably five times, which was an internal battle every single time because I felt annoying, but by the end of it, he was like, "Yeah, I got you. You're hosting." And then when I hung out with him in Tampa, he was like, "I'm glad you followed up that much. That's the kind of persistence you need. You weren't rude." Then we just got along as people, and then after that he took me other places and bumped me up to feature. Now I've been on the road featuring for him for a couple years. Then Geoff Asmus, also a friend, started to see that I was trying and going out on the road and doing things, and started taking me also. I'd be featuring for Paul and Geoff, and now some of those clubs that I've featured for I've headlined a Thursday or a Sunday. If there's someone you get along with, just put yourself out there, like, "Hey, I would love to open for you." And if you follow up in a polite way, that's just you pursuing what you're trying to do. Eventually you'll be in a position where someone will follow up with you and you'll go, "Oh, fuck, thanks for reminding me." Also, don't ever stick too much in one place. I think that's what happens sometimes to people that become a regular at a certain place early on, is they go, "Why would I go anywhere else? I'm getting great stage time here." That can work out great, but a lot of times they don't get the relationships that you get by going elsewhere. Then later on they go, "Wait, how is this person going to this club?" and it's like, "Well, they hosted there five years ago, so now they're headlining."

Something I'm very cognizant of is that the goal isn't to be a showcase comedian, it's to have a career in comedy.

You're 100 percent right that the goal isn't to have a fucking bulletproof 15. You should get that, but once you have that, it's like, "Okay, now what?" I think while you're working on one goal, have the next thing in mind, like, "What am I trying to do? If I get into this club and they let me perform there a bunch, what am I gonna do with that?" Is the goal to be a regular at XYZ clubs, or is it to be able to make a living? Because you're not gonna make a living doing spots at XYZ clubs. The whole game is selling tickets. All these people who've been so kind to give me opportunities and take me on the road to open for them, there's only so much that they can do for you. At the end of the day, you have to get your own fans that want to come see you do an hour of comedy. I mean, it's an incredibly daunting task. It's so crazy. It's unfathomable, but that is the goal. This is a later stage problem; if you're an open mic comedian, just think about putting together three minutes for your open mic set. But if you want to be what I want to be, which is a club comic getting headlining weekends, that's so hard to do. Because they have to believe that you can sell tickets. There's only so much that anyone can do for you. You have to put yourself out there and go out and get fans.

You told me before that you've established a trust with Virzi. Can you talk about how your relationship changed over time? I imagine you were super nervous at first, like, "Oh, this is a huge opportunity."

I can go through it chronologically, but an overarching thing is just showing up on time, doing your time, and being a human being in the green room. The first time I featured for him was in Nashville and it was like, "Okay, be at this place at this time." He knows if he books me four months out to be in San Diego at 7pm on the 15th, I'm gonna be there at 6:45 in four months. Becoming reliable is the most foundational thing. But he helped me immensely because I was super, super nervous at the beginning in Tampa. I was pacing around; I was super fucking nervous. It was packed out, like 250-300 people, at the club in Tampa that I would nervously hang around when I first started. And now I'm there and I'm hosting, it's sold out, and I'm so nervous. And he just saw me that nervous and he goes, "Hey, it's okay, man. I don't care what happens up there with you. Worst case scenario, you bomb. You're still on the next show. It's all good. You're gonna be fine."

"IS THE GOAL TO BE A REGULAR AT XYZ CLUBS, OR IS IT TO BE ABLE TO MAKE A LIVING? BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT GONNA MAKE A LIVING DOING SPOTS AT XYZ CLUBS."

That's cool as hell.

Super, super cool. And it freed me up completely. It was just what I needed to get out of my own way and not be so nervous. Then we did that whole weekend, and by the end of it, he was like, "Hey, we are friends now. Any time we work together, what I said before, that applies. Any way I can ever help you, I will." He's just a great guy in that way, and I am very grateful to have that. A few months after that he was like, "Hey, do you want to come feature at Zanies Nashville?" So I go there. I'm fucking dying of nerves and he's like, "Hey, same thing. You're good. I don't care what happens. If you bomb and bring me up to nothing, I'm going to do fine. It's not on you to make it okay for me." That was very calming and freed me up to be like, "Okay, I got this. Let me figure it out and have mediocre sets and not be freaking the fuck out." Then I just kept showing up on time, always trying to get better, writing new material, and every time I'd feature, I'd have a few new minutes, and I'd be watching his set, learning from him. There's another piece of advice: just watch headliners. Watch as many headliners as you possibly can, because they're pros. They're what we want to be. It's just so valuable the stage time that I've been able to get from doing that with him and with Geoffrey Asmus as well. I think just establish yourself as a reliable person. Be reliable, funny, and cool. If you can make yourself into those three things, when you get opportunities, you'll make the best of them.

How was the transition from featuring at some of these clubs to headlining them? What was it like taking that step?

Absolutely terrifying. You go from doing 25 to 45 minimum, and it's a lot. That's a huge jump, but it's just like every other step where you go, "How the fuck am I gonna do five?" Then you put yourself in situations where you've

committed to do it. You go to the place, and when they say your name, you walk up there. Now you gotta do it. If anybody will let you headline a show that's going to have an okay audience, go do it. I was really, really terrified to do it the first time. It's another level of preparation for the first few, where you're like, "Wait, how much time?" And then you go through and you find every joke that you've ever written, stuff you threw away years ago, you bring it back and put it in the middle so if it dies you can recover from it. And you just find a way to make it be somewhat cohesive, and you just suffer through it. And I don't think there's any shame, especially early on, in bringing up a sheet of paper. When you're starting to headline and it's probably not a big audience, it's better to have the notes there and do well, then blank 20 minutes in and just die completely and the show goes off the rails. It was really fucking stressful and then I did it a bunch of times to where now I'm pretty comfortable doing 45. I'm sure in a year, two years, 10 years, I'm gonna look back and go, "God, those were horrific headlining sets," but it's better than going, "I'm not gonna give myself that opportunity because I'm not ready." You gotta start and you gotta fail. It's the same at every level.

"YOU GOTTA START AND YOU GOTTA FAIL. IT'S THE SAME AT EVERY LEVEL."

You said you worked a lot with Geoff and obviously Paul. Did either of them ever give you any specific advice that still resonates with you?

Virzi told me, "When you're about to go into something that you know will do fine, and you've said it a million times, and you're sick of it, and you have the new thing that you want to say, but you're scared it won't go well, say the new thing. Say the thing that you're excited about because it's gonna come through. Even if it doesn't go well, it'll go better the next time, and at least you're not going through the motions of this old shit that you're sick of." Obviously, you can't do that for your whole set – and this almost is not even good advice until you are at a certain point – but try new things. And that's another thing that he always encourages me to do now, too. He's like, "Take risks. You have this stage time and I'm not going to fire you. Try new material." I think there's times for that and there's times like, "Hey, do your act, kill, and make a good impression." Figure out the difference and know when it's a great opportunity to do new stuff. And Geoff has always been like, "Hey, it's not lame to try. It's not lame to post and promote and spend time writing." You wonder how he generates so much material, well, he fucking writes all the time. Then before the show, he's reading his notebooks and making notes. He's working. All the headliners that I've worked with are doing that. They're actually working on their act.

As a former Chicago comic, what would you want to change about the scene if you could change anything?

It might just be nostalgia, and it also might be already happening, but when I got here, there were a lot of amazing independent shows. COVID fucked up that ecosystem and I hope it's coming back. There's still CYSK, Tight Ship, Humboldt Jungle, Kibbitznest. These shows are great and I'm sure there are a bunch of others that I just don't know about, but I think it's an incredibly valuable thing to have a bunch of really great, well-attended, local shows. That just breeds a cool fucking vibe to the scene. I remember getting to Chicago and being like, "Oh my god, this is so cool. This show is a little bit more alt, this show is just killer stand ups, and this show has music." Again, that might already be happening, but the more people can foster that, the better for everyone.



The Comedy Gazelle

Presents

VOUCHER

Featuring

Dan McCarty
Marcus Hendricks
David Feinberg
Melvin Stewart
Amy Shanker
Luke Neumann
Tracey Carnazzo



Hosted by
Jerry Hamedi

Thursday, February 29 – 8:00pm

Laugh Factory

3175 n Broadway, Chicago, IL 60657

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

DREW GREGORY

"Drew is a really talented joke writer, a great open mic host and just naturally hilarious. His style feels familiar yet totally unique at the same time and I always love seeing the new bits he has cooked up."

GWEN ROSE

"Gwen is one of my favorite writers and performers in Chicago. Every time I see her perform I learn more about her. It is objectively very cool that her personality shines through in her jokes. She deserves so much stage time!"

MO BURNS

"Mo Burns has been not only kicking comedy's ass since he hopped into the scene, he's one of the biggest sweethearts I've met in comedy. His material is always turning over and his stage presence is class and cool. Comedy and performance feel like his bread and butter and his hot streak should be watched by comedy fans all over the city. Print it."

DAN DOCIMO

"Dan is an absolute motherfucker and should be doing every spot under the sun. Top notch writing and delivery."

MARCUS HENDRICKS

"I saw Marcus at the ComedyPlex open mic and he brought the place down. Most North Side comics don't know who he is, but they absolutely should. Great comedian with very creative jokes."

JAKE SMITH

"He moved here from Indianapolis and has been killing it. I really enjoy his stuff and think more people in the city should know who he is."

JASON MELTON

"Jason is one of the funniest comics, and he should be booked and killing everywhere. He is also very supportive and encouraging of other comics and is a huge asset to the scene."

NOSHOD BARROW

"Noshod brings a clever chaos to the stage with his ability to deliver a charming button pushing energy that you can't help but find yourself laughing at regardless of how you feel about what he's saying cause funny is funny."

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

RICARDO ANGULO

"A young, hard working comic with great on-stage charisma and hilarious bits on his personal life."

PETER RITT

"Peter is one of the best writers in the area. He has a distinct authentic voice which perfectly matches his joke writing, to the point where he gets overlooked as a performer. Not only does Peter consistently write funny, clean, smart, original jokes, but he is also finding success as a playwright. Peter should be on stage."

NOAH WATSON

"Noah is fairly new to Chicago but he's already killing it. Super well written jokes and a really likable demeanor and vibe on stage. He has this one joke about the Golden Gate Bridge that is phenomenal and plenty of other jokes on that same level. He will definitely be getting booked a lot so do it early so you don't seem like you're just copying everyone else."

CASSIDY KULHANEK

"Truly THE best comedy producer in the city and one of the top comedic writers. She puts up the best shows, working tirelessly to hoist up other comedians and make community stronger. And her jokes are some of the best written and creative stuff on the scene."

MATHEW MITCHELL

"I recently saw him feature and he undoubtedly has one of the strongest, tightest 20 mins in the scene. He has rapidly improved in the past few years but you wouldn't know it because the man stays humble. He is an absolute killer on Roast Battle Chicago and is every comic's go-to ghost writer for roast jokes and beyond."

MICHAEL THOMAS REGAN

"Michael and I went to war on Roast Battle Chicago at Zanies. Beyond that he puts in a lot of work into not only performing stand up, but producing it with his own successful show, West of California, his Roast Battle Chicago video/photo work, and much more. HE IS FUNNY AND KIND. Why shouldn't that be rewarded?"

MELVIN STEWART

"He's putting in the open mic work, getting better, always has a fresh take, and is producing shows to give others stage time!!"

DYLAN MAHLER

"Truly one of a kind. Great writer, even better delivery. Dylan is consistently working on and coming up with new material - I always make it a point to watch his set at mics/ shows to see what he's been cooking up."

SHOW SPOTLIGHT: 2024 ROAST BATTLE TOURNAMENT

Winner of the 2023 Gazelle for Best Independent Show, Roast Battle Chicago kicks off its annual five-week-long, 32 person tournament on Thursday, February 29. I sat down with producer Chris Grieco to discuss the tourney, opportunities for comedians, his advice and pitch to roasters, and more.

You've got the tournament coming up this month. How's it different from the past couple of years? I know last year you guys took a big leap with the roast battle tournament.

Yeah, so every year has been different. This year is different just because with the move to Zanies, I feel like the show is in a different era than it was before. It just feels different.

Is the tournament at Zanies?

Zanies has been a great venue for us and a really great partner. And I wouldn't wish 32 comedians in the Zanies green room upon my worst enemy. So the preliminaries, the very first round of prelims, is going to be at the Lincoln Lodge, and then the rest of the tournament, the other four weeks, is going to be at Zanies.

The prelims, is that multiple shows?

Yeah, we're doing an 8:00pm show and a 9:30 show so we can get all the prelims done in one night. All 32 people. We're preparing for a larger tournament next year with the amount of interest there's been. We had over 100 people sign up this year.

Can you talk about the selection process?

Yeah, it's tough. The reality is you want the show to be good. So somebody like Mathew Mitchell or Katie Kincaid who've done the show a million times, obviously you want them competing in the tournament. But also, the whole point of the tournament is to showcase a lot of people we haven't seen. Like, I know what Mathew can do. So we picked six regulars, and then six people that we think are just really weird. Like, there's this guy that dresses up in a lab coat. I swear to god: "Doctor of Laughter." There's another guy that's a magician. A fucking magician signed up for a Roast Battle tournament!



I was like, "Hell yeah, the magician's in!" Or somebody that's from another country that is a year into stand up and can't fully speak English. And you're like, "You're in, let's go for it!" Cause that's some of the best. It sounds mean, but some of them end up being the best people on the show ever. I think Ruslan [Hafiz] was our best find ever. He was so close to never being in the tournament, but Vladimir, who's another guy who came out of nowhere, was like, "I got this guy, my friend Ruslan." We put him in and he's been on so many shows since then. And every single time, it's such a great battle. So we choose people that aren't just normal joke tellers and we throw them in there. And then the rest of it we just do a random number generator so it's fair.

You guys are doing a bracket as well, right?

This year we're doing a prize pool where people can tip and donate, and half of it goes to the winner of the bracket and half of it goes to the winner of the tournament as an additional prize pool. I'm sure we're going to learn a lot this year and we'll see how it goes. Even if you're not a comic participating in it, you could still have a little bit of skin in the game.

So as a comic in the tournament, you can win money and clout, but now that you're in the Roast Battle League, you can also travel and do shows. Can you touch on that a little bit?

I think about when we started the show and the amount of pulling teeth it was to get people to do it. Nowadays, it's not like that at all. Once we got into the Roast Battle League, more people wanted to get in because they were like, "Oh, I can go out to LA or something." And now there's a real, direct track to The Comedy Mothership, which has obviously caught a lot of people's attention. Roast Battle League has league events monthly at The Comedy Mothership in Austin. Every month, people are invited from all of the league cities to battle it out in Austin, Texas at the league event in the main room. And it's awesome. We've seen it a lot now that a comic that does our show a lot will get booked on that show. Then they book a bunch of shows around that in Austin and use it as an excuse to go out there and network. They get to meet a bunch of people at one of the best clubs in the world and they get paid to do comedy. It's so cool to see that, and that's because of what Pat Barker and Brian Moses are doing. It's their vision and they're executing on it, and they've just allowed us to be a part of it. And I'm just really grateful for that. So as long as comics are killing it on our show, they'll get opportunities to roast in other cities, too. It's not just Austin. That might be the most fulfilling part of doing this show: seeing those things come to fruition. It's not really us giving the opportunity as much as it is comics finally being able to be seen. Brandon Kiefer is a perfect example of that, right? He did our show a bunch and is like funnier than fucking everybody. Then he goes out to the Mothership, murders. Does Kill Tony, murders. Then a few weeks later he's doing the Chicago Theater. Like, holy shit, right? Did Roast Battle do that? No, Brandon did that because he's fucking hilarious. But I think people finally feel like the show is worth sinking their time into, in a way that it wasn't before.

I love Roast Battle because it is very merit based. Like if you do well and win a bunch, there is a direct opportunity there.

And here's an addendum to that: you don't even have to win. You don't even have to fucking win! You just have to be funny. Some of the biggest regulars on our show lose constantly, but it doesn't matter. No one gives a shit. No one cares about the actual win. I guess in the tournament, sure, but during every

other day of the year that we do the show, the only thing that any comic cares about is just doing well. The winning doesn't matter at all. You just have to worry about being funny. It's just like, "Did I do good? Did I showcase myself well on that?"

Do you think by trying to win, you can shoot yourself in the foot because you're not having fun? Like in the same way if you try really hard to kill in stand up, you're probably not going to?

That's a pretty good comparison because in both of them, it's a weird, fine line. You want to win, you want to do as good as you possibly can, hopefully that means you win the thing. But there's an attitude about people that get too competitive with it, and then people don't want to laugh now because this person is taking this too seriously, they're not respecting their opponent, they're being weird, they're genuinely insulting the person – and they forgot that it's about having fun. It's a performance. That's when it gets weird, when the comic forgets that they're a comic and this is a performance. You should want to do well with your partner and have a good time. I think definitely the thing you want to value more is: did you just put on a good performance? And by the way, every other top roaster you've ever heard of says the exact same thing. It's not just from old stupid Chris Grieco. Anyone who's been doing this way longer than I've been doing comedy says the exact same thing: you want to have fun and have a great performance more than you want to win. I just talked with Zac Amico about that last night.

That's actually really good advice. And hopefully that puts some people at ease that are willing to try it for the first time: you don't have to win, just have fun and be entertaining. You've had some great roasters on the show. Gotten any really good roast advice from any of them?

Zac Amico is top of mind cause I talked with him yesterday and I picked his brain. One piece of very specific advice to roasters he gave me is that you want to write

backwards from the punchline. Start with the fun. Don't try to start from the beginning of the joke and then find the punchline. Know what the punchline is about the person, and then you write backwards, because you'll always find a way to get there. Another thing that Mike Lawrence, who won season 1 of Roast Battle, told me is that if you know who you're going to be roasting against, you should get lunch with that person before you roast. Get to know them. Sit down and talk with them, because once again, it's not really about winning. It's about having a good time and having a good performance up there.

What would you say to the stand ups that don't do Roast Battle or might be hesitant to get into it? What's your pitch to them?

I've heard every single excuse. I've heard everything from, "I'm too mean, they can't handle me," to "That's just not the kind of comedy that I do." Which are two very different reasons, but I think it all comes down to really one thing: people are just afraid of trying something new. I look at roasting like storytelling; it's a tool in your tool belt of comedy. We've all seen it when it goes badly and it just looks like a mean asshole insulting you, but we've all seen it when it's done beautifully. No one's hurt, no one's offended. So it's like crowd work or something; it's just one of the tools you can use. Just try it. Whatever you think the reason is that you're not doing it, I guarantee you, you will be pleasantly surprised. More than anything else, I've seen people who have never seen a roast battle in person before come to a show and say, "I didn't think it would be like this. This is so much more fun than I thought this was." It's a writing exercise, man. It's just a different style of comedy and I recommend just doing it with a friend of yours and just having fun. It's a great way to activate the punchline muscle. You have to get to a punchline. You can't do some soliloquy. You can't go into a story that ties to your fucking dad. You gotta do a joke or you're gonna get embarrassed. It's a fun pressure cooker.

Anything you'd like to leave the people with?

Every year, the tournament is the biggest thing we do. We put the most effort into this every year, and it's five weeks in a row of what I think is the best of what makes the show great. It's the best of newcomers you've never seen trying something that's out of their comfort zone. It's the best of a single night experience that literally is impossible to replicate. We put more into this than ever, and this year is going to be the biggest one we've ever done by far. I think it's our strongest lineup of people, and the guests we have lined up for panel are the best we've ever had. If you were gonna go to one show and then write us off forever after, come to one of these shows. I promise you it will be something that you didn't expect and it'll definitely be fucking fun. I'm super excited and I know that the people that are going to be there are excited too. So come on out, support live comedy, and support Chicago comedy. Allah Akbar!

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