

Comics go for the 'gold' in national search

By Bob Sadler
special writer

The "Olympics" of comedy. That's how Budd Friedman, founder of The Improvisation and so-called United States "father of comedy," describes it. He is talking about the Second Annual Johnnie Walker National Comedy Search, which brought a semifinale competition to Chaplin's Comedy Club in Fraser on Thursday. A total of 55 comics vied for the eight final spots in the competition, which also visited Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago and 10 other cities.

The Detroit winner would receive a check for \$1,000 and a trip for two to Los Angeles to compete in the finals. The Grand Prize winner, who will be chosen April 12 at the Los Angeles Improvisation, receives \$2,000 in cash, bookings worth \$5,000 at improv across the country, and an appearance on the improv's nationally syndicated television show.

With a plethora of prizes like that and the possibility of making it big in the ultra-competitive world of comedy, you can understand why Detroit's funniest went in full force.

"I've always wanted to be in comedy," said Joyce Nader, 24, of Birmingham. "I started doing voices when I was 12."

NADER'S COMEDIC credits include a stint doing the voices of Princess Di and Barbara Streisand on the Dick Purtan show on WZZM-FM, work at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle and some opening slots for comics like Joe Bolster at Chaplin's. She is a graduate of Central Michigan University and works during the day in the media department of a local advertising agency — comedy at the beginning level does not pay well.

Everyone knows about Chaplin's that morning, filling out registration cards and figuring out their best two-minute set, has the same goal: "We're looking for exposure," Nader said. "The key is to get people like Friedman to see you."

Some comics have been traveling to more than one semifinal city in an attempt to win that spot in the finals. Harry Artin of Southfield is one of them. He narrowly missed the cut in New York and Boston, but was determined to do it in Detroit.



Harry Artin of Southfield has been traveling from one semifinal city to another in an attempt to win that spot in the Johnnie Walker National Comedy Search finals.

"I'm penniless and living off my father," said Artin, 22. He is a 1988 graduate of the University of Michigan, and has been seriously pursuing comedy since he first got paid for it in August.

JENNIE MCNULTY, 26, of Bloomfield Hills only started testing the comedy waters in October, but she earned once-over status at the Holly Hotel in Holly and showcased (tried out for opening slots) at Chaplin's West last month. She has a master's degree in kinesiology — the science of movement — and is employed as a research assistant at U-M.

"Right now, woman comics are in," McNulty said. "If you're funny, they'll give you a shot." Her goal is to simply be able to make a living

out of comedy.

Of the 55 comics competing for eight spots in the evening's semifinals, a small percentage are firing a shot in the dark. Not possessing a great deal of experience, these courageous souls just want to feel the spotlight and see if they could be funny in public.

"I've done a couple of open mike nights and that's it," said Rich Higginbottom, 35, of Livonia. "I'm here to give it a shot."

Formerly a public relations professional, Higginbottom is a student-teacher at Livonia Stevenson High School and pursuing a teaching certificate at Eastern Michigan University. He once participated in a comedy how-to seminar offered at Ridley's Comedy Castle.

It is getting close to showtime.

Each comedian has two minutes to impress the judges, including Friedman and a few local and regional booking agents.

ONLY EIGHT advance to the evening's competition, where they will have up to 10 minutes with the same judges and a capacity crowd. They are scored 1-10 each for the judge's overall impression, their technique and material and audience response.

Higginbottom is No. 20 on the list. He is now "in character," using comedy terminology. Wearing a fluorescent yellow leisure suit, white turtleneck and silver peace sign chain, just call him "Johnny the Fabulous," Las Vegas lounge lizard extraordinaire. He gets up on stage and does two minutes of his pseudo-nightclub act.

"I was pretty nervous up there, but I think that got me even more pumped up," Higginbottom said later.

No. 21 is Nader, one of only eight women in the competition. She is a bit nervous, emphatically telling no one to speak to her during the five minutes preceding her audition. Nader's act showcases her voices, most notably an impression of Ellie Mae from the "Beverly Hillsbillies."

"I changed what I was doing at the last minute," Nader said afterward.

Artin is up two comics later, and has the audience of his competitors rolling with a barrage of rhythmic one-liners, vaguely reminiscent of Steven Wright. "I must be like a drug because when I go up to girls at clubs and ask them to dance ...

they just say 'No'."

He is fairly satisfied with his performance. "I blew my cow joke, though," said Artin, laughing during a break.

McNulty came in at No. 36. Her opening bit about Moses and his wife at the parting of the Red Sea got a decent scattering of applause, providing an early taste of confidence.

THE WAIT for the tabulation of votes is tense for many, relaxed for others. A tie producer is a semifinalist instead of eight. They will join a quarter final winner from St. Louis in competition in a matter of hours. Artin is among them.

Higginbottom, Nader and McNulty are not.

Nader is disappointed for herself, but happy for Harry. "There's always next year," she said.

McNulty is in better spirits. When asked if she'll return next year, a resounding "you bet" comes from her lips.

The material is turned up a notch later that night. The Detroit winner's chances have to be good in the national finals because Heywood Banks, a Detroit, won it all last year. Ten comics all delivering their sure-fire stuff, and watching the laughter combust throughout the room.

Artin is eighth. He takes a deep breath as he reaches the stage, grabs the microphone and waits. Silence. The audience thinks he's too shaky to speak. The roll continues.

"I'm so evil that if the devil heard a record backwards, he'd hear my voice."

"I HATED my grade school. The kids over there used to always call me nicknames. 'Hey Nicknames, come here!' 'Hey Nicknames, your mama's calling you!'"

"My first experiences with religion weren't that positive. My father is an atheist, and he used to teach me: 'Here is the church, and there is the steeple. Open the doors ... and it's just a bunch of fingers.'"

Though the audience response is good, Artin did not place in the top two comics. Someone else will go for the big time in LA this year.

But don't be surprised if Artin, Nader, McNulty or Higginbottom find their way back in 1990.

Because these "Olympics" don't take place every four years.


COMEDY CLUBS

- Here are some listings of comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send us the information: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eclectic, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.
- **BEA'S COMEDY**
Allan Shelton and Downtown Tony Brown will perform on Friday and Saturday, April 7-8, at Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 Larned, Detroit. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For information, call 961-2051.
 - **CHAPLIN'S EAST**
Mark McCollum will appear Wednesday through Saturday, April 5-8, at Chaplin's East, 34244 Groesbeck, Fraser. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 792-1902.
 - **CHAPLIN'S WEST**
Den Creed will perform Tuesday through Saturday, April 4-8, at Chaplin's West, 16890 Telegraph Road, south of Six Mile, Detroit. For information, call 533-8866.
 - **COMEDY SPORTZ**
Comedy Sports at the Heidelberg will have improvisational comedy at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For reservations, call 995-8888.
 - **HOLLY HOTEL**
Jeff Brannan will perform along with guests, Richard Chasler and Bill Hildebrandt on Thursday through Saturday, April 6-8, at the Holly Hotel, 110 Battle Alley, Battle Creek. For information, call 634-5208.
 - **JOEY'S**
Richie Minearini will perform Wednesday through Saturday, April 5-8, at Joey's Comedy Club, 36071 Plymouth, west of Wayne Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and at 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Thursday is no smoking night. For information, call 261-0555.
 - **MAINSTREET**
Steve and Leo will perform on Friday through Sunday, April 7-9, at

- Mainstreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, between Division and Fifth, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Tickets are \$13. For information, call 996-9080.
- **SIR LAFF-ALOTS**
Jeff Neiss will perform on Friday and Saturday, April 7-8, at Sir Laff-Alots Comedy Club, 26745 Michigan Ave., just east of Inkster Road, Inkster. For information, call 551-1225.
 - **COMEDY CASTLE**
Kelly Montella will appear Tuesday through Saturday, April 3-8, at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, 2503 Woodward, Berkeley. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 542-9900.

- **BOB GOLDTHWAIT**
Bob Goldthwait will perform at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, April 9, at the Royal Oak Music Theatre. Tickets are \$17.50. For information, call 546-7610.
 - **STEVEN WRIGHT**
Steven Wright will perform at 8 p.m. Thursday, April 20, at the Power Center in Ann Arbor. For information, call 423-6666.
 - **SANDRA BERNHARD**
Sandra Bernhard will perform at 8 p.m. Saturday, May 6, at the Power Center in Ann Arbor. For information, call 423-6666.
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