

Horsing around with Conan the non-barbarian on NBC

BY JEFF PLASS

Why is he the host of "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," which airs weeknights on NBC, beginning to look more and more comfortable in front of the camera?

"I'm on this horse steroid," O'Brien says, "that just makes you feel really good about everything. I get about three shots right in the butt just before we go out."

"No, ah," O'Brien begins in his best "but seriously" tone, "well, everything just becomes kind of second nature."

"It's also just that the more I do it, the more I like to do it. Now it's the fun hour of my day. Sometimes the rest of the day can be kind of hard, but I love that hour. The hour is a lot of fun."

With Conan O'Brien, the operative word is always fun. If something isn't fun, then there's absolutely no reason in the world to do it.

That "fun hour" of the day O'Brien refers to can be broken down into any number of smaller "fun" segments that, depending on the day, reach varying levels on the O'Brien fun-o-meter.

Take the monologue, for instance: "It's fun to do it and I enjoy it," O'Brien states. "I like to do deadpan. And then, it's fun if something doesn't work, like if a joke gets

nothing...that's fun too now, you know? I'll do push-ups or something and I'll enjoy that sometimes more than if the joke goes well."

And then there's "the desk piece, the piece I do when I get back to the desk. It's usually fun. Some nights it's a piece that I like more than others."

And then, of course, there is the reason talk shows were invented: guests.

"Some nights the fun thing will be the guest. Every night the highlight is a different moment. And that's a lot of fun. Do you know what I mean? I couldn't say, 'Well, it's always the comedy piece,' or 'It's always the guest,' or 'It's always the monologue.' It just does seem to change. Different nights it's a different thing that I like the most."

Since graduating from Harvard University (where he was twice elected president of the Harvard Lampoon) in 1988, O'Brien found work as a writer on such programs as HBO's "Not Necessarily the News," Fox's "The Simpsons" and NBC's "Saturday Night Live," which garnered O'Brien an Emmy Award for outstanding writer in a variety series.

More importantly, O'Brien's stint with "SNL" familiarized the budding young star with the show's cre-

ator, NBC heavyweight Lorne Michaels.

A year ago, when Michaels and NBC President Warren Littlefield were looking for a replacement for David Letterman as host of "Late Night," O'Brien's name was the one that inevitably kept coming up, leading Michaels to comment:

"I couldn't be more pleased with the choice of Conan as host of our 'Late Night' show. He has the three things I was looking for: vitality, wit and intelligence."

Since that announcement, O'Brien and his show have courageously triumphed over jitters (the host's pronounced initial uncomfortableness in front of the camera) and critical jeers to win a solid spot on the network's late-night lineup.

And does O'Brien still see room for improvement?

"Always, always, always," O'Brien emphasizes. "I think the show is several times better now than when it premiered and I think it can keep getting better. I can always continue to grow."

"I mean, if I've grown this much in eight months, what will I be like in a year? What will I be like in a year and a half? I can always grow, we can always keep pushing it."

"I'm hoping that if I'm doing this in five years, that I'm making it better," he concludes. "Look at Dave. He did it for 11 years, and he got better and better and better. Then he went to CBS and he's better there than he was a year ago. I'm really comfortable in the interviews now, but can I get better? You bet!"

Maybe there's something to those horse steroids.

TRIVIA

As a child, actress Patricia Arquette ("True Romance") appeared in a television commercial for Libby's canned vegetables and fruits.

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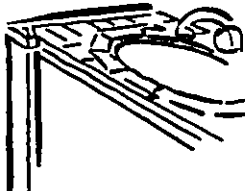
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