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Fan of the Year

Matt Kennedy Gould had no idea he was the star of "The Joe Schmo Show." That didn't stop him from sharing his passion for Pittsburgh with 3 million viewers.

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Start at the moment of truth: It is 10:35 p.m., the last Tuesday in October 2003, and three million television viewers tuned to the new Spike TV cable channel have just watched 28-year-old Matt Kennedy Gould learn that he is *not*, as he thought, one of nine contestants on a "vote-'em-out-of-the-mansion"-type reality show called "Lap of Luxury." In fact, to his utter shock, he is the unwitting star of a 10-day-long practical-joke series called "The Joe Schmo Show," and the other supposed "Lap of Luxury" contestants are actually professional actors, all doing their best to maneuver Matt into an unending series of awkward and ridiculous situations -- just so the camera can see how he'll react.

It's "Candid Camera" to the nth degree, and Matt -- who, scarcely five minutes prior, thought he had painfully, narrowly lost a \$100,000 first-place prize to the "boorish jerk" of the show -- is flabbergasted to hear that, to the contrary, he's won the money, simply by virtue of being the only real person on this ostensible reality program. As he reels between manic laughter and tears of relief, he gathers enough presence of mind to address the camera and the cast: "Ask me, now that I've won, where I'm gonna go," he says. They oblige him, clearly expecting the cliched "Disney World!" response. Instead, Matt leans back, pumps his fists in the air and cries with gusto: "I'm going to *Pittsburgh!*"

On another show, coming from another speaker, this would have been a joke. Pittsburgh would once again have been the punch line, as it was last fall when the syndicated comic strip "Get Fuzzy" cracked its "Pittsburgh smells bad" joke. But no: Matt Kennedy Gould -- Mount Lebanon native, Penn State grad, Steelers fan and the man who has been repeatedly called "the nicest, sweetest guy on earth" by his eight co-stars -- is totally sincere, and everyone who's seen him wear his Pittsburgh-themed shirts and caps over the course of two months' worth of "The Joe Schmo Show" knows it. This is his hometown, and it is his favorite place on earth.

His exclamation of joy is, quite possibly, the single most triumphant moment Pittsburgh has experienced on national television since the Steelers last won the Super Bowl. That was 24 years ago.

It's about time.

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Now fast-forward two weeks.

"This is my mall," Matt says, pulling into the parking lot outside Kaufmann's department store at South Hills Village. He means it in the same sense any Generation -Xer would: *Yes, I know all suburban shopping malls are the same, but this is the one where I grew up.*

He heads into the store, a man on a mission: to find exactly the right Steelers sweatshirt to wear later that night during an appearance on the Pittsburgh Cable New Channel's evening talk show "NightTalk." The day marks one of his first hometown media jaunts since "The Joe Schmo Show" concluded, and he's eager to tell people that she show wasn't a fluke: Spike TV has hired him to do more, non-"Joe Schmo" work on camera as one of the network's regular faces.

That's later, though. Right now, he just wants one thing: "I want a plain gray hooded sweatshirt that says 'Steelers Football,'" he insists. "If I have to be on live television while the Steelers are playing on another channel, I've got to do at least that much. And, you know," he adds, his tone taking on a certain fervor, "it's almost like sacrilege to me that a Pittsburgh station could even *have* another show on during the game."

He finds the sportswear section of the store and starts flipping through rack after rack of black-and-gold clothing. His hawk-eyed determination to find what he's looking for -- his refusal to give up until he's seen every shirt in the department -- serves as a reminder that, while the news media insist on playing along with the "Schmo" label and referring to Matt as a "law-school dropout" (he was on hiatus from Pitt Law and working at Bado's pizza shop when he was cast for the show), he is, in fact, a pretty smart and strong-willed guy -- a graduate of Penn State University with a degree in speech communications.

After a careful search of the Steelers shelves, though, he finally acknowledges that none of the shirts is exactly what he's envisioning, and eventually he finds one he decides is close enough. "I shouldn't be allowed to walk through here," he says, looking at all the Steelers gear as he heads toward the checkout counter. "I could just buy all of this stuff."

It's the first time all day Matt has alluded to the money he won on "The Joe Schmo Show." He's stated both publicly and privately that he has no intention of spending that \$100,000 on extravagances; instead, he's turning it over to his parents to handle responsibly. But still -- there's got to be *something* he's going to splurge on, right?

"I want to get an iPod," he admits. "A digital camera, a handheld recorder." He pauses. "Hmmm -- I'm getting all stuff to record my life. Isn't that weird?"

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And now rewind a mere few hours to 9 a.m. that morning. Matt and his parents sit whispering in the KDKA-TV studio downtown, waiting for the moment when they'll be called on camera for a live "KDKA Morning Show" interview. "I'm gonna go out there and do a stand-up routine," Matt says. He plasters a big Fozzie Bear smile onto his face and starts pointing as if to an audience: "'Thank you, thank you and thank *you!*'" In that instant, he's the very image of an overly rehearsed TV personality -- and then he relaxes his facial muscles and becomes a three-dimensional human being again, and they all laugh.

It's a telling moment -- the flip side, in a way, of his revelatory moment on "Joe Schmo." Then, he was reacting with utter spontaneity to the discovery that the TV-fashioned world around him was running according to different rules of reality than he'd thought. Now, he's showing he's perfectly aware of the various levels of sincerity and reality that can mash together whenever people try to compress their full selves into a sound-bite-driven medium.

Finally, after a half-hour in which host Jennifer Antkowiak deals with the much more somber business of reporting on the latest Western Pennsylvania hepatitis deaths -- during which time Matt has no wisecracks

to offer, just a pained look of sympathy and a sad shake of the head at the mention of survivors and funeral plans -- it's time for him and parents Jim and Bonnie to go on camera. It's the first time Pittsburgh television viewers are seeing Matt live from his hometown, instead of in a program that was taped and edited in a staged environment, and yet he's the exact same guy here he was there: big, likable, a little goofy -- your all-around guy-next-door. When he tells Antkowiak, "I bleed black and gold when I'm cut," it's clearly something he's said before, but it doesn't sound like a rehearsed sound bite -- it just sounds like something a guy from Pittsburgh has said so many times the very sentence is a part of him. Despite not having any acting experience, Matt is comfortable in the spotlight, comfortable in his own skin, happy to poke fun at himself even knowing that countless unseen people are watching.

Antkowiak plays a clip of the show's big revelation, then the four of them get down to the latest news: Matt's new job. After the tremendous success of "Joe Schmo," which built slowly but steadily over the course of its run to the 3-million-viewer figure of the finale, Spike TV awarded him his first gig as a *knowing* star: co-host of the network's one-hour holiday special. (The show aired in late November; Matt's hosting partner was "Talk Soup's" Aisha Taylor, and he got to interact with celebrities such as football great Deion Sanders. "When I met him," Matt jokes later, "someone asked me, 'Matt, did you bring your camera?' I said, 'Pffff! Did Deion bring his?'")

There in the quiet KDKA studio -- a cool, darkened, mostly empty room with two pools of light splashing around the news-anchor desks of Antkowiak and Bruce Pompeani -- the conflict between TV images and the more nuanced nature of reality seems particularly pronounced. On the monitor, close-ups of Antkowiak and her guests cut back and forth to prepared video snippets; it gives the impression that the four of them are in the middle of a bustling newsroom. But it's not true: There's nobody else present except for a couple of low-key producer types behind cameras and Pompeani across the studio floor. And even Pompeani isn't quite as he appears: On the air this morning, he's vibrant, energized, sturdy, but when he walks away from his desk, he lets his shoulders sag and his voice rasp, admitting that he's been walloped by the flu that's going around the city.

Once you realize how unreal the supposedly "really real" images in the media are, it leaves you with an awfully skewed frame of reference for assessing a "reality show" -- a genre that isn't very real in the first place -- that's faking it in order to give America a look at what a "really, *truly* real" reality-show contestant would look like.

But cut through all those layers, and it's easy to understand why "Joe Schmo" became so popular. Here was a show about a guy who never pursued fame, who was recruited by TV producers while he was playing basketball with a city intramural league in a beat-up old gym in a rough part of town. A guy who wasn't playing to the cameras -- at least, not to the *real* cameras.

Ironic, really: We needed a parody of a "reality show," starring a guy who'd never actively sought to be on one, before we finally got a TV star who was actually being *himself* for all to see.

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"I'm a junkie about reality TV," says Matt's older sister, Jennifer, a full-time mom who lives blocks away from the house in Mount Lebanon where the two of them grew up. Though Jennifer is six years Matt's senior, they've always been close -- and they were always TV-watching buddies. "'Who's the Boss,' 'Growing Pains,' 'The Facts of Life,'" Jennifer rattles off, naming the shows they watched together. "I specifically remember that we were huge *early* Oprah fans." Matt throws in a few more: "'Silver Spoons,' 'Diff'rent Strokes' -- 'Alice!'"

Jennifer's proud of the TV "character" her brother became on "Joe Schmo": the good guy, the hero. The one who helped his rivals because it was the right thing to do; the one who insisted on treating the show's "bad guy," Hutch, with the same compassion and courtesy he shows everyone else. "See, I never hated Hutch," Matt explains. "I just saw him as a scared little boy." Okay, so in reality Hutch was a figment of some scriptwriters' imaginations -- but even so, Matt's sensitivity and diplomacy stand out as the characteristics of a truly special man.

And as he's fond of saying, everything that he is, everything that makes him Matt Kennedy Gould, comes from his home. Rewind one last time: to Matt's teenage years, when his parents separated. He was angry about it; in fact, it made him angry in general. But he hung in there, and he tried to understand his parents, and himself, and their lives. And after four years, his parents finally worked out their problems and got back together. Matt's life lesson: If you care deeply enough, you can bring people together, make things right.

Seeing Matt relax in his sister's living room, talking intently with his preschool-aged nephew as if the kid's pseudo-decipherable language might contain the secrets of the universe, it's clear why Spike TV's hottest new media personality says, "I haven't started a new life -- just a new job." It's one he's particularly well suited for -- and not just because he's the archetypal Gen-X pop-culture kid. "I'm what I like to call a TV baby," he says, "*with good parents.*"