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TV REVIEW | 'AMERICAN DREAM DERBY'

They've Got the Horse Right There and It's Real

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The producers of "American Dream Derby" have gathered together an awfully good-natured bunch of contestants. In the first episode, tonight at 9 (followed by a second episode at 10) on GSN, the only real grumbling to be heard is the comment "Some people just can rub you the wrong way," made by Tara Walden, a 32-year-old Los Angeles massage therapist. She is talking about Sara Slavin, a 24-year-old model from West Milford, N.J. Yes, this reality show actually acknowledges that people have last names, but maybe that's just because there are two Taras in the show. (The other is a ranch owner from Nevada.)

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IQ QUESTION:

Which does not belong in the group?



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The likability of the 12 contestants goes a long way toward making "American Dream Derby" less idiotic than many examples of the reality genre. So does the fact that at least some of the competitions involve brainpower (analyzing a racing form, devotees will tell you, is a science). The relatively harmless, emotionally unthreatening goal for the players is to prove superior equine knowledge in a series of horse-related contests. The winner receives not only \$250,000 but also a stable of eight thoroughbreds.

The competition begins cordially enough, with a bankroll of \$1,000 per participant to bet on a race at the Santa Anita track in California, where the entire series is set. Overall the players don't do well, managing to parlay \$17,000 into \$8,700, as the show's ex-male-model host, Steve Santagati, announces. That round's top money winner, who has previously announced that working with horses is "all that I ever want to do, until the good Lord takes me away," moves into a grand home known as the owner's mansion, along with three other contestants of her choice. They enjoy luxurious bedrooms and baths and an elegant dinner with wine while the other eight contestants sleep on cots in the chilly stables and eat sandwiches.

The next morning, the show suddenly turns into "Fear Factor." As if the eight stablehands haven't suffered enough, now they have to participate in a mucking-out-the-stalls contest and, as Chris Black, 36, a pharmaceutical sales rep from Fort Worth, notices early on, there aren't any pitchforks. The four women and four men - including a corrections officer, a pharmacist and a music producer - are required to dig through the horse feces with their bare hands, looking for keys that will make wheelbarrows available to them.

Tonight it all comes down to the so-called guts match, as it will in each of the show's seven hourlong episodes. (Then the series is to end with a two-hour special, a race broadcast live on Feb. 21, Presidents Day.) Two contestants, usually chosen by teammates, go up against each other, betting on a two-horse race. The winner receives \$5,000; the loser is out of the game. Toward the end of the premiere episode, there is a strong indication that the show's most movie-star-gorgeous contestant - David Malatesta, a 32-year-old graphic artist from Los Angeles - is at particular risk of being eliminated early on, despite having learned about horse racing at Delaware Park at his father's knee.

The producers were obviously going for diversity in terms of equine knowledge. A few of the players wouldn't know a filly from a furlong, at least in the beginning, and cheerfully admit that. But then there are competitors like Deanna Manfredi, 36, a Philadelphia marketing consultant and third-generation thoroughbred fan who grew up on a horse farm in Delaware. On the first night, she takes a look at Crafty Value, a 4-year-old gelding, napping on the floor of his stall and says: "That's a good sign. They say that Scabiscut used to sleep flat."

'American Dream Derby'

GSN, Monday at 9 p.m. Eastern and Pacific times; 8 p.m. Central time.

Scott A. Stone, Sharon Levy, Anthony Ross, Kathy Sutula, executive producers; Tim Warren, director; Steve Santagati, host. A Stone & Company Entertainment production.

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