
HOST: 'MILLIONAIRE' GALS ARE NOT 'GOLD DIGGERS':[SPORTS FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (531 words)

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They may have been chasing a fantasy, but the women on Fox's "Joe Millionaire" were not just in it for the money.

"It's very unfair for people to make these women out as gold diggers," show host Alex McLeod told the Daily News yesterday. "That was not the case."

Rather, she said, they were all women who were successful on their own and who, like her, bought into the fairy-tale aspects of going to France to meet a man. It wasn't until the contestants had arrived that they were told their potential prince was a millionaire.

He wasn't.

But that was the concept of the show from the start. Dupe the women into believing he was wealthy, let them fight over the man, in this case Evan Marriott, and then spring the bad news at the end.

However, because viewers were in on the ploy from the start, it's left the impression the women were just after the cash.

"Now America thinks of them as of 20 gold-digging ho's in search of alimony payments," McLeod said.

Since its launch two weeks ago, "Joe Millionaire" has become the latest water-cooler topic - largely because of the scam.

"Even more than 'The Bachelor,' you just know it's a train wreck," said analyst Stacey Lynn Koerner at ad-buyer Initiative Media. "I call it rubbernecking programming."

Aside from "Joe Millionaire," McLeod has developed into a reality show regular. Folks may recall she served as host of the first 40 episodes of TLC's "Trading Spaces." Now she's on "Joe Millionaire." And tomorrow at 10 p.m., she'll appear in "Best of Both Worlds," a two-part A&E special best described as a reality travel program.

In "Best of Both Worlds," McLeod and fellow reality regular Phil Keoghan (CBS' "Amazing Race") each go on a trip - one taking a luxury route, while the other goes on a budget.

The A&E show is a bit more involving than her work on "Joe Millionaire," during which she appears only for the ceremony in which Marriott dumps some of the contestants.

"My nickname became 'The Eliminator,'" McLeod said. "I was the 'Lady of the Manor' and also 'The Manor Madam.'"

McLeod was in on the trick from the beginning, which made her appearances before the 20 single women difficult. She had avoid signaling that something was amiss.

"Nobody can keep a secret in Hollywood," she said. "It was tough for me. If I look a little shell-shocked in the first couple episodes, it's because not only do I send them packing in the middle of the night, but I also have to look them in the eyes."

ALEX McLEOD

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Also in the reality pipeline is "American Idol," which returns next week. ABC's got a handful of shows in the genre on the way and producers in Hollywood are dreaming up more ideas every day - the latest concept has someone training to fight Mike Tyson.

"I think in some way it's supplanted the drama [genre] as the programming story of the year," Koerner said. "Last year, it was all these dramas doing well. Now people are back to watching programming that's lighter."

[Illustration]

Caption: SECRET AGENT: Alex McLeod kept the truth from "Joe" hopefuls.

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