



Top Prize  
Jennings  
(with Trebek  
in 2004)  
still holds  
the record  
for longest  
*Jeopardy!*  
winning streak.

\$1,004,960

KEN JENNINGS

# Filling Alex Trebek's Legendary Shoes

HE MAY BE *JEOPARDY!*'S 'GREATEST  
OF ALL TIME,' BUT NOW THE FORMER  
CONTESTANT IS TAKING ON THE BIGGEST  
CHALLENGE OF HIS LIFE: STEPPING IN AS  
GUEST HOST *By* **GILLIAN TELLING**



When Ken Jennings was a contestant on *Jeopardy!* in 2004 at age 30, the then-software engineer never thought he'd wind up one of the highest-earning American game-show contestants of all time, raking in \$2.52 million over a 74-game winning streak. He certainly never imagined that 16 years later he'd be filling in as guest host after the show's beloved host of nearly 40 years, Alex Trebek, died from pancreatic cancer in November at age 80. "It's a real privilege to be trusted to do this," Jennings says of being the first to step in as guest host after Trebek. "I understand better than anybody that these are *very* big shoes to fill. It's extremely nerve-wracking. I grew up watching Alex, and he did that job perfectly. But I also knew that it was a hard job from watching him—he just did it so effortlessly. Hosting the show has been just as dizzying as being a contestant was."

Jennings's turn behind the podium begins airing Jan. 11, after the final pretaped episode with Trebek as host airs Jan. 8. The author and podcast host, who quit his job after his big win in 2004 to be a stay-at-home dad and write books, can rest easy knowing that Trebek approved of him as a potential fill-in. "When Ken finally lost after 74 games, that was a sad moment for me," Trebek told *People* in 2018. "I shed a tear, just because this marvelous streak had suddenly come to an end. And it'll never be matched. Nobody will do it. That was the perfect wave." The two remained friendly until Trebek's death. "Alex was exactly how he appeared on TV, except a little better," says Jennings, who was named a consulting producer for the show in September. "He was a smart guy, but he wasn't as stern or strict as he could appear. He was a real charmer. He was loose and funny and told goofy jokes. He just delighted the audiences. He loved having a full audience; he was miffed about lockdown, when they weren't in the studio anymore." Jennings, who has been hosting without a live studio audience because of COVID, adds, "I think it was kind of a relief for me not having 100 people there watching me flub stuff."

The Seattle-born Jennings, who is Mormon and grew up in Singapore and South Korea before graduating from Brigham Young University in Utah (where he was captain of the quiz-bowl team, naturally), now lives in Seattle again with his wife, Mindy, and their two kids, son Dylan, 18, and daughter Caitlin, 14. While Jennings is so protective of his wife and kids that he generally hasn't posted photos of them online for the past several years, he says one of the greatest things about Trebek was his similar devotion to

## A New Show, a Past Regret

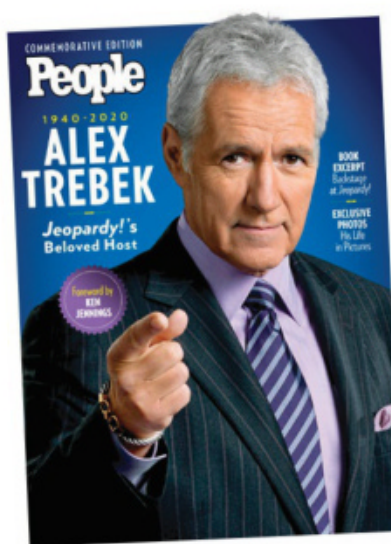
Just before the launch of Jennings's hosting duties—as well as his run on ABC's latest game show, *The Chase* (premiering Jan. 7), along with fellow *Jeopardy!* champs James Holzhauer (left) and Brad Rutter (right)—Jennings found himself in hot water for resurfaced tweets, including one 2014 post that read, "Nothing sadder than a hot person in a wheelchair." He was quick to "own up" to writing "some unartful and insensitive" attempts at jokes. "I'd usually leave bad tweets up just so they could be dunked on," he said. "Deleting them felt like whitewashing a mistake.... I want to apologize to people who were (rightfully!) offended. It wasn't my intention to hurt anyone, but that doesn't matter: I screwed up, and I'm truly sorry."



family. "Putting his family first was very much genuine for him," Jennings says. "Also, people don't realize that he grew up a working-class kid. After the shows I'd often see him in head-to-toe denim, hopping into his pickup truck to go home and clean his gutters or whatever project he was doing. The dapper suit was just a costume to him."

**'Alex never needed a cue card. He could run that game'**

So given the chance, will Jennings step in permanently as host? "That's not up to me!" he says with a laugh. "It's almost been too sudden to even think about. They needed somebody in the chair, and I got drafted. But I'm starting to relax into the role a little bit." Jennings, who is also on ABC's latest game show, *The Chase*, is aware that some viewers may struggle with seeing a new host after so many years with Trebek at the helm—and he's already faced some backlash on social media, especially after some of his less-than-funny tweets from 2014 resurfaced (see sidebar). "I expect people to be a little discontented with me," he admits. "The only thing I can do is to try doing the job the best I can." Still, he says he's beginning to get the hang of the show's fast pace and the camaraderie between producers and longtime staffers: "I'm starting to think maybe there is something really fun about this. Maybe Alex was right to love this job so much." ●



### A Tribute to Trebek

Jennings also wrote about his personal relationship with Trebek in *People's* Alex Trebek special tribute issue, available online and wherever magazines are sold.