

Moscow waiter wins big on Jeopardy!

By Christina Lords Daily News Staff Writer

Posted on: Wednesday, July 20, 2011

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Moscow resident Mark Runsvold started the process to be on America's favorite quiz show in January 2009 - a decision that has paid off big.

The 25-year-old Jeopardy! champion has racked up \$124,201 in three episodes, which locally airs on KHQ at 7 p.m.

He will appear on the show again tonight.

Runsvold, who is originally from Boise, won \$21,201 Tuesday to add to his \$48,000 and \$55,000 totals from his first and second appearances on the show, which aired Friday and Monday, respectively.

He isn't allowed to talk about how many episodes he taped while on the show, or how much his total cash winnings are, until his final episode airs.

After taking the quiz show's online test in January 2009, he was called back to audition in person in Seattle that May. It wasn't until this February that Jeopardy! producers let him know he would be a contestant.

That's when Runsvold said he hit the books by creating flash cards on topics that tend to come up on the show frequently or that he didn't feel he knew well, including contemporary pop culture, the Bible, opera and other classical music.

The shows were taped in March.

He also watched the show regularly, creating spreadsheets and figuring out percentages of questions he got right and which Daily Doubles he missed.

He used that information to know his strengths and create a strategy of betting big if he came across a Daily Double answer, he said.

"I knew that I wanted to be more aggressive with wagering than a lot of people are," he said. "I kept a spreadsheet for a little, while I was preparing and ... I was getting about 80 percent of the (Daily Doubles) right. That was better than I would have thought intuitively, and it made me more confident."

Runsvold said he plans to use the money wisely.

"I'm going to be responsible with it," he said. "I'll put most of it away. I'll pay off most or all of my student loans. I'll travel, and maybe get a new car. New to me, anyway. Not new new."

Taxes will take about 35 percent of his winnings - 7 percent off the top for the state of California and the rest for the federal government.

Runsvold, who possibly won't see the money he won until as late as November, said he doesn't plan to quit his job and hopes to return to school. While he isn't currently enrolled, he hopes finish his international studies degree at the University of Idaho.

Watch parties are held each night an episode airs at Moscow's Nectar, where Runsvold works as a waiter.

The reaction from friends, family and strangers alike have all been nothing but positive, he said.

"It's been pleasant because everybody's just congratulatory," he said. "Nobody's like, 'Give me money' or 'Why did you miss that question, you idiot.' "

People have asked whether the show producers provide a study guide or list of categories (they don't) and whether they really stop recording for commercial breaks (they do.)

The show tapes five episodes a day, and each episode doesn't take much longer to record than the 30 minutes that actually air, Runsvold said.

Runsvold said more than 175 people - most of whom he doesn't know and aren't from the Moscow area - have added him on Facebook beginning at about noon on Friday. He said the followers range from teenage girls to older professionals to fellow Vandals who regularly watch the show.

If his totals qualify, Runsvold said he'd be happy to compete in Jeopardy!'s upcoming Tournament of Champions.

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