

UNEASY ISSUES

A Change for
'Happy Days'

BY PETER BROWN

August 31, 1979, undoubtedly will go down in TV history as the night "Happy Days" went sad.

A celebrity-packed audience with tears in their eyes watched the filming as the marshmallow show about the '50s cruised off its soda-fountain course and began tackling the heavy, uneasy issues of the '60s.

The word had already gotten out on the Paramount Picture's lot, but the full impact didn't sink in until three minutes into the show.

It caught the Fonz (Henry Winkler) and the audience in mid-sentence as the cameras were running on episode six of the new season (to be shown in mid-October).

Fonzie was hunched over a slightly battered '55 station wagon when the guest star for the night came onto the set. The newcomer was young, good-looking and glib-talking with the open face of the show's regulars Ron Howard and Anson Williams. And he was in a wheelchair—paralyzed from the waist down.

"I'm here for the job," said the actor, in real life a former Olympic class pole vaulter named Jim Knaub (pronounced Kah-nobb).

'Comedy' Phenomenon

Fonzie's back was still turned and the audience had gone silent—a phenomenon on this comedy set.

"Be right with you," said Winkler. "Hand me that oil filter on the top shelf, will you?"

"No," snarled the new character, reaching vainly for a shelf that was two feet above his chair. Fonzie whirled around and froze: "Oh."

"Don't worry. It's not contagious," said Knaub, playing a bitter paraplegic martyr named Don.

From that line on—until only seconds before the end of the show—"Happy Days" plunged darkly out of the sock-hop genre into a heavy script by Fred Fox Jr. that tackled head on the issue of being wheelchair-trapped in a walking world.

Like "All in the Family," "Maude" and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" before it, the 7-year-old sitcom now used its comedy to enliven a sombre message.

But unlike those other three shows, the regulars on "Happy Days" (Richie, Fonzie, Potside and the Cunningham family) had been locked into soda-fountain issues for most of its history. The price of a hamburger, the outcome of Richie's basketball game, Fonzie's hottest date, Joanie's new figure—these have been the staples of the most highly rated show (on a regular basis) since 1972.

"It's a new territory, and it's heavy territory," said producer Garry Marshall, who also created "Laverne & Shirley," "Mork & Mindy" and "Angie," "but we are commit-



NEW STAR—Paramount's "Happy Days" has new face, Jim Knaub, center, with Henry Winkler, producer Garry Marshall, Ron Howard.

Photo by Ann Summa

ted to it. This is a semipermanent change, not an isolated show."

Marshall, by rating points the most successful TV producer in the '70s, had been stuck on the "Happy Days" set since Monday morning when the green copies of Fox's script were wheeled onto the sound stage. He was still there at midnight Friday.

"We could be taking a chance, but I don't think so," said Marshall. "It is time for this show to stretch its wings and move into the uneasy years of the '60s. We're going to take on the little things like longer hair and espresso coffee along with the appearance of the first hippies and the disappearance of the happy innocence of the '50s."

The music will change from Big Bopper to Beatles.

"Ron Howard as 20-year-old Richie is going to fall for an older woman. Fonzie will become heavily involved with a deaf girl. Marion and Howard will need to reaffirm their marriage. None of this is as easy to do as it sounds.

"We just can't sit still and not use the enormous power that this show has achieved, and we can't get frozen in the '50s."

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The Acting Debut of a Paraplegic

It had been 18 hours since Jim Knaub pushed his wheelchair up the long ramp to the "Happy Days" set and the show was in the can.

He used his powerful pole-vaulter's arms to tip the chair up and out into the midnight fog that was moving in over Hollywood.

Back on stage, the applause still was bounding off the walls of "Al's Place" and "Fonzie's Garage." And this was not the roar of the live studio audience—who had gone home hours before.

This applause was coming from the cast; from some of TV's big guys—Ron Howard, Henry Winkler, Marion Ross and Tom Bosley.

Winkler, still suited in the classic jeans and jacket of "The Fonz," raised his fist a little toward Knaub: "That guy may have come in here in his wheelchair, but he's walking off."

Knaub, 23, was through with the last retakes on his first acting job anywhere, playing a bitter handicapped man who wheels into the lives of Fonzie and the Cunninghams and confronts them with the heartaches of being imprisoned in a wheelchair for life.

It's a role that's already etched into Knaub's own life. "It only took a couple of seconds. I was stopped on my cycle behind an accident. The driver behind me hit the gas pedal instead of the brake, and I was crushed into the car just ahead."

The accident (Aug. 18, 1978 in Long Beach) stopped Knaub's auspicious pole-vaulting career in mid-air—just

as he was about to clear the final hurdles in preliminary Olympic trials. (He'd already set a state college record by clearing 17 feet 2 inches at Long Beach State eight weeks earlier.)

"I can't really say I was bitter or acted like a martyr. I wasn't at all like the character I play in 'Happy Days.' But when I came off the pain medicine and faced being alone in my chair, I thought about suicide. A lot.

"My whole life had been aimed at the Olympics for 10 years. Then it was over."

Two years earlier, one of Knaub's coaches had said, "Jim is one of that rare handful of world athletes with the guts to look the pole and the speed in the face without a second of doubt or fear. I'd give him a hundred points in courage alone."

When the taping was finished at midnight last Friday, Jim Knaub had heard the applause again from a crowd that gave him a standing ovation—a rarity in the calloused world of TV taping—and he was ready for more.

"I don't want it to end here," said Knaub. "Paramount and Marshall are talking to me about my own series, a sitcom about handicapped life. Think of the possibilities like dating in a wheelchair.

"I can see myself doing a Vegas nightclub from a wheelchair," Knaub added, "I can see no reason why people can't learn to laugh with a paraplegic. It's time."

—PETER BROWN