

# ‘Deadliest Warrior’ stays nimble to win viewers

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LOS ANGELES | Dave Baker reaches into an overnight envelope and pulls out a square of what looks like shoe leather.

“Elk backstrap,” Baker says. “It’s nature’s fiberglass.”

Slathering hot glue on the strips of dried meat, he puts the final touches on his first traditional Plains Indian bow — one of several historically accurate implements of death he’ll be building this week as weapons designer for “Deadliest Warrior.”

That’s the show that dared to ask what would happen if a Samurai and a Viking got into a fight. Or an Apache and a gladiator tangled. Or Jesse James’ gang took on Al Capone’s boys.

“We always say it’s the show that settles a thousand bar bets,” says Sharon Levy, the executive in charge of Spike, the cable channel that created “Deadliest Warrior.”

But here’s the problem: The show that settles a thousand bar bets has a lot of viewers who are too young to drink.

Video gamers immediately embraced the role-playing and over-the-top violence on “Deadliest Warrior.”

The first part of each show was spent testing each combatant’s arsenal of weapons on ballistic dummies and slabs of meat. The episode ended with an epic confrontation, filmed near LA with re-enactors, CGI and buckets of blood.

After two seasons, “Deadliest Warrior” was pulling in 1.7 million viewers an episode, a 70 percent improvement over Spike’s regular prime-time rating. But the median age of its audience is 25. Lots of boys watching, not many dads.

“We would love this show to be embraced by older guys as well,” says Levy.

And so would advertisers.

“Getting programs so that the median age of the show is in the low 40s makes a huge difference in the sale-ability of the program,” says veteran cable executive John Ford.

Research has found that male viewers in their 40s prefer reality shows with science and history content. So “Deadliest Warrior” will dial down the blood and guts and focus on the biographies and methods of

each combatant.

The original host, a computer programmer named Max Geiger, is gone, replaced by ex-Navy SEAL Richard “Mack” Machowicz. One of his first tasks was calculating how many arrows would be required to bleed out one of the elephants used by Hannibal, the legendary general from ancient Carthage.

“Deadliest Warrior” will also start explaining the data that go into its computer-based battle simulator that determines the winner of each mythical showdown.

“We’ve just broken down the wall between us and our fans,” says Levy.

This kind of versatility is what separates reality TV from scripted TV. Even a minor character leaving a police drama can damage the show’s ratings. But most reality shows are able to tweak their formats on the fly.

Which brings us back to Dave Baker and his weapons workshop. For two seasons, he’s been toiling off-camera in a nondescript brick building in LA, downstairs from the studio where the “Deadliest Warrior” indoor scenes are filmed.

Baker’s days of anonymity are numbered, though. Levy wants him on camera, vouching for the authenticity of his handiwork.

Perhaps he will revisit some of his earlier tools of destruction, like the historically accurate Spartan shield he built in Season 1. Is it true, as an expert said on the show, that the shield is so tough it makes the Spartan virtually unbeatable?

Baker, a jolly fellow in his late 40s, snorts and picks the Spartan shield off the wall. He hands it over. It’s about as light as a manhole cover.

“How do you beat a Spartan?” Baker says, grinning. “Wait until his arm gets tired. Then shoot him in the eye with an arrow.”

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