

A 21st-century “Hunger Games”

Alone: The Arctic (Season 6)—Surviving reality television

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Season 6 of the reality television series, *Alone* (on the History channel), concluded last month with Virginia construction worker and highly skilled woodsman, Jordan “Moose-slayer” Jonas, emerging from his snow-covered, make-shift shelter in the sub-Arctic Canadian wilderness.

Jonas thus claimed the winner-take-all, half-million-dollar prize as the last remaining contestant in television’s “most grueling” survival show. It was Day 77 of his fall-winter ordeal on the shores of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories. Jonas, although dangerously shedding body fat, had outlasted nine other contestants.

Unlike the cheesy, heavily scripted reality shows like *Survivor* or *Naked and Afraid*, which have camera crews, unofficial food sources and prodding producers just out of eyesight, *Alone* contestants are truly by themselves. They are provided with body and tripod cameras to record their daily routines and adventures. Once a week, a medical team based many miles away pays a brief and brusque health check visit. Contestants are allowed to take a limited amount of warm clothing and ten items of their choosing from a pre-set list (an axe, a knife, a pot, cordage for snares and fishing line, hooks, a tarp, bow and arrows, etc.).

“I knew for sure if it was a starving contest, I was going to win,” Jonas told Idaho’s *Coeur d’Alene Press* after returning to the US. Jonas now lives with his wife and children in Lynchburg, Virginia, but plans to move back next year to the small, northern Idaho farm where he grew up.

For most, the *Alone* series is indeed a “starving contest.” Season 6 runner-up Woniya Thibeault, a naturalist and off-the-grid farmer from the Sierra Nevadas in northern California “tapped out” with her emergency satellite phone on Day 73 just prior to a medical check that would have resulted in her evacuation. She had been barely surviving for months on occasional squirrels and rabbits caught in her snares, but had not eaten anything for several days. Strikingly emaciated, her body, with no fat reserves remaining, was beginning to consume muscle and internal organs. At one point, Thibeault said, “I couldn’t sit on the ground comfortably because my hips were jutting out.”

Second runner-up Nathan Donnelly, from the state of Washington, a “homesteader without a home,” who had been vomiting blood in the initial weeks of his isolation, shed 26 percent of his body weight over 72 days before tapping out after his shelter burned to the ground one night in sub-zero temperatures. Starvation causes a significant loss of mental acuity. Donnelly had not attended to the increasing risk of fire as his moss and spruce hut interior had dried into tinder. He was forced to keep from freezing to death, stuck outside in the sub-Arctic winter for ten hours before an evacuation helicopter could arrive at first light.

Third runner-up, Barry Karcher, a martial arts instructor in Colorado, was medically evacuated after losing 82 pounds in two months. A gaunt-faced Karcher had already suffered two emotional breakdowns prior to being air-lifted out. Resisting evacuation, he was told by medical attendants that his heart was in danger of serious damage if he did not leave immediately. “I realize now I’m closer to a body bag than to victory,” he says.

Donny Dust, also from Colorado, who had suffered a major heart-attack (the “widow-maker”) less than a year before his appearance on the show, nonetheless insisted on participating, but began vomiting acutely from tainted muskrat meat during his second week in the bush. Experiencing renewed coronary symptoms, he was quickly evacuated.

In all, five of the nine runners-up were medically evacuated. Others voluntarily withdrew due to the effects of starvation, psychological breakdown or the loss of shelter. These results are not unusual. Over five seasons, 15 contestants have been medically evacuated out of 45 runners-up, with most others tapping out due to physical and/or mental breakdown (discounting one season with a team format).

The toll, even on the most capable contestants, is horrendous. Season 1 runner-up Sam Larson (and subsequent 60-day Season 5 Mongolia winner), a young sales assistant at an Outdoors Equipment store, lost 90 pounds in 55 days on northern Vancouver Island. On that same island, electrician Larry Roberts came home suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Zachary Fowler, a boat builder living off-the grid in Maine, lost 35 percent of his body weight in

winning the Patagonia episode before coming home to soon face a divorce from his wife. Another challenger, Dave Nessia, was pulled from Patagonia after 73 days when his blood pressure catastrophically plummeted threatening imminent heart failure. Hallucinating, Nessia had been hoarding food even though he was starving to death.

History's *Alone* series is a popular and lucrative show for the cable network. It has a devoted fan base who admire the contestants amazing bushcraft skills, ingenuity, fortitude, bravery and deep connection to the natural world. Much of the show's audience—and many of its contestants—come from small-town and rural America. The affinity of this audience with the generally low-wage, working class contestants speaks to the overall social and economic malaise that has become the experience of millions. There is something attractive, as one participant put it, about “breaking out of our modern-day punch clock cages.” The accomplishments and reflections of all the contestants are remarkable.

There are no corporate CEOs, union presidents, real estate developers or Wall Street traders on the show's contestant rosters. Starving yourself to death for money is not a rich man's game. Golf is much preferred. But if we examine the backgrounds and yearnings of *Alone*'s contestants, particularly those who compete to the bitter end, we may perhaps get a view into the current state of affairs in much of America and Canada today.

Said Karcher, “The only reason I'm out here is for my family. I wanna pay off our debts, get a house instead of renting, take stress off my wife. You put a price on my life. Right now, it's a half a million dollars ... As a kid my family was homeless, we lived in a van in parking lots. My father once stole a potato just so we could eat. For the right amount of money, I would die for my family.”

Donnelly owed his exemplary outdoor skills to his grandfather's teachings. “If I win, I want to visit my grandfather. For the past twenty years I've been too poor to afford even a bus ticket for a visit.” Fan favorite Thibeault said, “Most of my life I have not had enough money to keep myself well-fed...Growing up we were always, really poor. Do I stay for the money and if I get to the point where I think I'm doing long-term damage, that's when I'm out. We live in this culture that puts winning and money on top of everything. Leaving here will put the importance of your own well-being above that.”

Albeit with much different formats, there have been telling “sign of the (hard) times” popular entertainment shows before. Of course, there has always been boxing or today's pay-per-view extreme fighting extravaganzas. Here too, audiences can appreciate the finely honed skills and bravery of the fighters and still be appalled by the utter desperation imbued in the blood-sport competitions.

There have been more or perhaps less subtle televised entertainments. There was, for instance, beginning at the end of

World War II, the long-running—and ghastly—US radio and then television show, *Queen For A Day* (1945-64), where hard-pressed working class housewives would tearfully appear before studio audiences and tell them about a war bereavement, an imminent eviction, an illness in the family, a laid-off husband or hungry children. Then the host of the show would place his hand over the head of each contestant and, based on an “applause-o-meter,” determine the winner of a washing machine, a month's supply of groceries or an unforgettable night-on-the-town with her husband. Such was the popularity of the show that it was knocked off by other networks with the equally upsetting *It Could Be You* and *Strike It Rich*.

Perhaps most memorable for several generations of North Americans were the grueling, weeks- and even months-long Dance Marathons staged during the Great Depression of the 1930s (as depicted in the 1969 Oscar-winning film, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, directed by Sydney Pollack). Also drawing their audiences and contestants from small-town and rural America, these cash prize competitions had the added attraction of supplying free meals and cots for the often-impooverished dancers. Typically, dance-marathon competitors were given 15-minute breaks every hour but while on the floor had to remain in constant motion and on their feet. Dancers would doze whilst being held up by their partners. Occasional longer-term rest breaks were sometimes scheduled as rewards for fast dancing or other crowd-pleasing activities. Medical staff were on hand to deal with the inevitable physical collapses. Such were the health risks that the shows were made illegal in 24 states by 1935.

The hardships and challenges, and perhaps illusions that propel people into programs such as *Alone* are real. When ruminating about his family in the bleak, sub-Arctic cold, Season 6 winner Jordan Jonas remembered watching his father slowly waste away as one limb after another was amputated as a result of terminal diabetes. He remembered his Assyrian grandmother who watched seven of her eight children slaughtered during early 20th-century Ottoman Empire massacres. Life is hard, he reflected. The most important thing was to be able to leave a positive imprint on the world.

Yes, life is hard for the overwhelming majority. The way out for a handful consists in succeeding in professional sports or winning the lottery or isolating oneself in the deep wilderness. But the great bulk of the population, when “their burdens are intolerable,” a great Marxist once observed, seek “a way out through revolution.”



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