

Catching up with Howie Schwab, the man ESPN turned into a trivia star



By [Joe McDonald](#) 6h ago 6

In the days before smartphones, every sports department of every newspaper in the country would receive calls on a nightly basis from patrons at neighborhood bars, asking to answer a sports trivia question.

It would go something like this:

Editorial assistant: "Sports."

A well-lubricated bar patron: "Yeah, what number did Pele wear?"

Editorial assistant: "No. 10."

Then you would hear the excited callers arguing.

“He said No. 10. I told you. ‘Tell my buddy,’” patron No. 1 would say and he handed the payphone to his friend.

Patron No. 2: “Yeah, what number did Pele wear?”

Editorial assistant: “No. 10.”

Patron No. 2: “That’s baloney!”

In a newsroom full of sports nerds, someone would always have the correct answer. It was rare when it would have to be researched as the drunken callers were put on hold. And, they would wait for the answer.

Those types of phone calls dramatically decreased with the invention of the smartphone when sports fans could look up an answer in seconds.

But before the smartphone came along, ESPN made this back-and-forth into a game show called “Stump the Schwab,” built around the network’s Sultan of Sports Trivia, Howie Schwab. It aired for four seasons (80 episodes) from 2004 to 2006 and was hosted by Stuart Scott. Each episode had three contestants competing against Schwab.

Incredibly, Schwab posted a 64-16 record during the show’s run. It turned him into a niche superstar in the insular world of sports trivia. Even now, fans will recognize him on the street and attempt to stump him.

“I had one guy walk up to me in Atlanta and ask: ‘Who’s the only player to win the Heisman Trophy and play in a Final Four?’ He freaked out when I answered it,” Schwab said. “It was Terry Baker from Oregon State.”

OK, Schwab, who was the only player to win a World Series and NBA championship?

“Gene Conley, the pitcher,” he quickly answered.

Schwab, 59, lives in Fort Lauderdale with his wife. The sports trivia guru has a few things in the works but he's still proud of his record from the show.

"I'm proud of that. Eighty percent is pretty darn good," he said of the winning percentage he had on the show. "There were a couple of times when people were better. I'll admit it. I had no problem with it. I remember one time I was disappointed because this guy was a cocky SOB who beat me and it bothered me a little. Bottom line is I've lived through so many things in sports and I've always been into sports, so (getting stumped) was fine."

There were times when the network would tape four shows per day, so it didn't take long for Schwab to suffer a bit of mental fatigue.

"But that's no excuse," he said. "Hey, I got beat sometimes and it's OK. I'm a human being. It's funny because everyone would say, 'Oh, you think everybody is dumb.' I'm a human being and it's OK."

At one point, Schwab and Dick Vitale were in Las Vegas when another man approached them on the street.

The man came up and told Schwab, "I can beat you."

"Do you know how many times I've heard that?" Schwab said. "Oh, my God."

ESPN hired Schwab in 1987 and during his 26-year career at the network he served in numerous roles, including coordinating producer for the website, along with studio shows "SportsCenter" and "Outside the Lines." He was part of a massive layoff by ESPN in 2013.

His time on "Stump the Schwab" was the highlight. Every episode he would wear a different team's jersey.

"I had a great time with it," Schwab said. "It was good. I enjoyed it because people were competing and they enjoyed it."

Scott, asking the questions from a podium, would dare contestants to "challenge the Socrates of the stat sheet" in a way only he could deliver that type of catchphrase.

Schwab enjoyed working with Scott.

“Stuart was great,” he said, “and we had such fun. It was great that I got to see his daughters grow up. They’re great people, great girls, and I’m happy I still periodically get to communicate with them.”

Schwab remembers one particularly funny story about Scott performing a gymnastics routine on the show.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” Schwab said. “They were going to have a stunt double but Stuart actually did it. It was hysterical. We had such great times and I miss him terribly. He was just a great person, a caring person. Ah, memories.”

Scott passed away from cancer in 2015. He was 49.

Since the two had solid chemistry on set and played off one another well, some accused them of getting the answers ahead of time. Schwab’s success probably fueled those conspiracy theories too.

“No, they never gave us the answers,” Schwab said. “I’ve heard that one, too. ‘Oh, they must’ve given you the answers.’ No. Never. Believe me when you’re doing a game show, they had security around and they made sure no one came into our dressing rooms. They were very, very tight-lipped.”

Recently, a former high school classmate contacted Schwab and asked if he would be interested in working on the new sports trivia app.

He couldn’t wait to get started.

Now Clickstream Corp., has signed Schwab to host a digital trivia program. They are developing an app where users will be able to compete against Schwab in real time for a chance to win cash and prizes.

“It’ll be fun,” Schwab said. “I’m excited because it’ll be challenging. This thing is going to be great. I’m having fun setting this up and looking forward to hosting some shows. I just hope people want to compete and see how they do.”

Along with the app, Schwab still works with Vitale and the two are thinking about writing a possible book.

If you happen to challenge Schwab on his new app, or see him in public, just don't choose his strongest sport – college basketball.

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(Photo of Schwab: Nick Hunt / Patrick McMullan via Getty Images)