Arts & Humanities

The Absurdly Delightful Career of *American Ninja Warrior* Cohost Matt Iseman

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For TV personality Matt Iseman ’98VPS, a chipper outlook and flexible attitude are more than winning character traits — they’re key ingredients to success. Over the years, the entertainer has appeared on numerous shows from *Today* to *The New Celebrity Apprentice* to *RuPaul’s Secret Celebrity Drag Race*, where he once lip-synched to Céline Dion in a sparkly evening gown. “I’ve said yes to just about every

opportunity that’s come my way,” he says.

Iseman is perhaps best known as the cohost of *American Ninja Warrior*, a popular reality series where amateur athletes tackle extreme obstacle courses with the hope of winning a cash prize. On the show, Iseman blends the macho energy of a sports announcer with nice-guy charisma and goofy enthusiasm for the competitors. “I love celebrating people who do exceptional things,” says Iseman, who has served as a commentator since 2010. He takes pride in knowing that, thanks to the series, “ninja” training is now a popular activity. “Some kids play baseball or basketball; others are ninja warriors,” he says. “They go to gyms, they compete in local competitions. It’s been cool to be a voice of the sport.”



Iseman on the set of "American Ninja Warrior." (Courtesy of Matt Iseman)

Iseman has overcome many of his own obstacles on his path to primetime TV. Originally from Denver, he attended Princeton as an undergrad, then enrolled in Columbia for medical school to follow in his father’s footsteps as a doctor. But while completing his medical residency, he experienced a sort of existential crisis. “I realized I would soon have to start making life-or-death decisions,” he says. “It hit me that my heart was not in it enough. Medicine isn’t a job, it’s a calling.”

In an effort to reset, Iseman says, he moved to Los Angeles to try his hand at comedy. “I’d always enjoyed entertaining people, and I wanted to do something

completely removed from medicine. I figured I would clear my head and come back with a renewed sense of purpose. Instead, I ended up falling in love with performing." He says his medical training gave him valuable perspective and softened the harsh realities of Hollywood. "Not getting a role or completely bombing in front of a hundred strangers while doing standup was nothing compared to the pressure of being in the ICU or ER."

Since landing a breakthrough TV role in 2006 as a regular cast member on the home-makeover series *Clean House*, which won him a Daytime Emmy, Iseman has acted in episodes of *The League* and *Hot in Cleveland*, served as a medical expert on the talk show *Home & Family*, and hosted the documentary series *Live Rescue*, which follows first responders on rescue missions. Last summer he covered the Tokyo Olympics for NBC's streaming service Peacock, and on Thanksgiving he cohosted the National Dog Show junior program for kids.



Iseman as drag alter ego Bette Bordeaux in a 2020 episode of "RuPaul's Secret Celebrity Drag Race." (VH1)

A particularly exciting break came when Iseman went on *The New Celebrity Apprentice,* hosted by Arnold Schwarzenegger. He ended up winning the 2017 season against runner-up Boy George. (Other contestants included *Jersey Shore*'s Snooki and Mötley Crüe lead singer Vince Neil.) As a double Ivy League graduate, Iseman was well-equipped for the show's business challenges. "You couldn't see this

on TV, but with every team task, we'd get a dossier full of instructions and resources," he explains. "I would study the rules and keep everyone organized. It was like doing the grunt work in medical school."

Iseman, who is still a licensed physician, often makes health and medicine the center of his work and philanthropy. When he won *The New Celebrity Apprentice*, he donated almost a million dollars to the Arthritis Foundation, a charity that hits close to home: Iseman suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, a painful inflammation of the joints. He has also battled renal cell carcinoma, and in 2007 he had a cancerous tumor removed from his left kidney. "Ending up on the other side of the stethoscope has given me even more appreciation for doctors," he says.

Through all his health struggles, Iseman, who still lives in Hollywood, has found room for humor. "I truly agree that laughter is the best medicine," he says. Plus, no matter what hurdles stand in his way, Iseman can usually count on his busy schedule to lift his spirits. "My job is absurd," he says. "I'm telling jokes and traveling the world trying to entertain people. I have such an appreciation for the amount of joy I get to have. It's incredible."

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