



TV GUIDE'S OWN JOE RHODES TAKES THE
HOT SEAT ON *THE MOMENT OF TRUTH*

Liar, Liar?

Illustration by John Ueland

I'm not really nervous until the rubber tubes are strapped across my chest, the cuff is fastened to my left arm, and the metal plates are attached to the first and third fingers of my right hand. Until that moment, I assume, as most people do, that getting hooked up to the *Moment of Truth* polygraph machine and answering a few questions will be the easiest thing in the world.

It isn't.

Even with nothing at stake—no chance at the show's \$500,000 prize, no loved ones sitting just feet away wondering what horrible things I'm about to reveal and no jeering studio audience—there is still something unsettling about sitting in a basement room with an ex-cop and a device that supposedly measures my honesty.

Not that I have anything to hide. My life is an open book. Except for that one night in Juarez, which, as far as I'm concerned, absolutely did not happen.

I am not afraid to admit that, yes, Richard Simmons once licked me on the neck for no apparent reason. Yes, I bought Andy Dick a lap dance. Yes, I do own a Hootie and the Blowfish CD. And no, the TV GUIDE horoscopes are not certified by the National Institute of Standards and Technology to be 100-percent accurate. There, I said it.

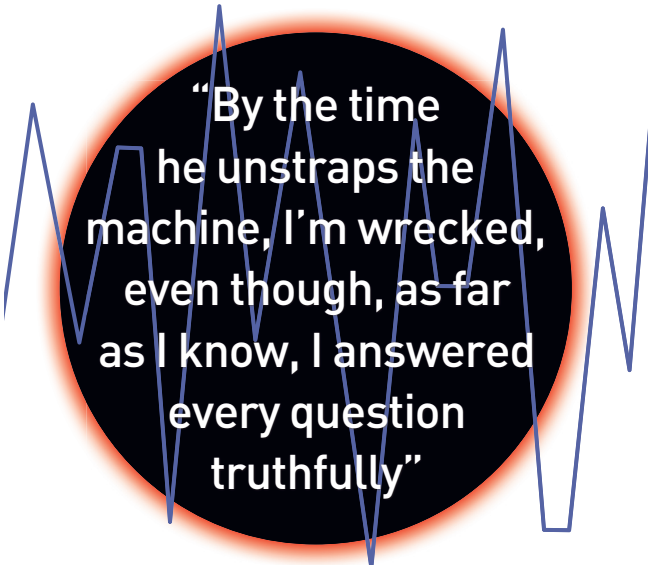
"The questions are easy," says Nick Savastano, the show's official polygraph examiner. "It's the answers that are hard." A former Massachusetts state trooper, Nick was also the lie-detector operator on

The Moment of Truth WEDNESDAYS, 8/7c, FOX
(also online via video.tvguide.com)

Meet My Folks and *Temptation Island*. Just as he does with every *Moment of Truth* contestant, he urges me to "relax." While he hooks me up, he explains that the chest tubes will monitor my breathing patterns, the arm cuff my blood pressure and the finger plates my galvanic skin response—how much I'm sweating. He urges me not to look at the machine, an old-style analog unit with graph paper and swinging pens, which he uses only for TV shows because producers

before the show tapes. Nick and the producers conduct a pretest exam before the machine is hooked up and then ask the exact same question, word for word, with the polygraph turned on. The query is then repeated—verbatim—on the show. Assuming you're willing to answer truthfully every time, *The Moment of Truth* is like an open-book exam.

Except, well, it's not quite that simple. As I'm about to discover.



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like all the knobs and wires. (Newer digital models just look like laptops.)

If I were a real contestant, Nick would be working from a list of 50 questions painstakingly mined from my psychological profile and interviews with my relatives, friends and enemies.

And here's the part I hadn't realized: Whenever anyone is asked a question on the air, no matter how shocking it may seem, they have already answered it. *Twice*. On average, producers do the polygraph exam two to three weeks

Nick works from a list of questions provided by TV GUIDE editors and culled from the show's sample questionnaire. He runs through the list once and then turns on the machine. My heart's pounding. I get a slight trembling in my chin. It's weird. I feel guilty, and we haven't even started yet.

Am I happy to get this assignment? he asks. "Yes," I respond. Do I think my editors really know what they're doing? *No*. Am I getting paid enough to put myself through something like this? *No. Definitely not*. He

asks, by name, whether certain editors are my favorite, if I've ever written anything nasty about TV GUIDE's former sister company Fox, and if I wish I'd done *Deal or No Deal* instead. Then the questions get hard.

By the time Nick unstraps the machine, I'm wrecked, even though, as far as I know, I answered every question truthfully.

We go upstairs to *The Moment of Truth*'s coliseum-like set, where Mark L. Walberg, the show's host and often-anguished Grand Inquisitor, is waiting ("Sometimes the questions make my skin crawl," Mark later admits). We park a few feet from the infamous red leather chair. Mark asks me the questions again. And though we've just met, he knows whether or not I've told the truth. He has my lie-detector results.

We zip through the TV GUIDE questions. I told the truth on every one. Then the sample questions. It turns out that, yes, I do really care about the environment and, in spite of evidence to the contrary, I do think I'm smarter than my parents. "Have you ever stolen from your parents?" Mark asks. "No," I confidently respond.

If we'd been on the show, that's where the lights would have flashed red and the big FALSE would appear on screen. Wait. What? I thought I was telling the truth. Why doesn't the polygraph believe me? "You can't fool your own physiology," Nick says. "You can't lie to yourself."

Oh, really? Are you sure? That's not what I heard in Juarez.