

I have been a long time viewer of Survivor since all the way when Pearl Islands was on the air and can attest to taking a small break from the show here and there like some other fans have done and subsequently being hooked to watching and fully investing into S20 due to its hype at the time and the 10th anniversary of the show. Now, I never saw Samoa in its entirety so my first real glimpse of Russell (2.0) was in HvV and still is. I have read about him of course through the Funny 115 and listened to some of his interviews post-game. Anyway, I just listened to part 4 of the HvV Historians series and I agree that Russell did not impact ratings as even I am aware of slow and gradual decline of viewership of the series (and we are almost on S40)!

As for my question (and let me preface this by saying that I do not exactly consider myself exactly a fan or *shudders* a stan of Russell and much of his gameplay), I have a hot take and want to know from you guys this: **Is Russell Hantz the most impactful contestant to ever play the game of Survivor? Let me repeat that: ever?**

Ok, let me backtrack just in case: **Is Russell Hantz the most impactful contestant to ever play the game of Survivor outside Richard Hatch (the pioneer of the old school game)?**

No, I don't mean to ask if Russell's game was effective or anything like that because clearly he lost 3 times and I'm not even going for the angle of how he played to ~~win~~ lose but I'm asking about Russell's impact with respect to how Survivor has changed as a television product.

It can be argued that seasons like All-Stars, Palau, Cook Islands, Micronesia and Tocantins were impactful toward how Survivor has changed (for the worst) in that the casting has gotten more recruit heavy with superfans being mixed in as of recently with more emphasis on casting for strict archetypes rather than complex personalities and more and more twists being part of the core game and eating up airtime (with less emphasis on character storylines).

But I've always thought that the biggest factor for how modern day Survivor has changed forever is all because a guy Russell came in to wreck havoc in the way he did. Was he first person to lie or to create an unpopular alliance or to play an idol or play with no disregard to managing a jury? No. But I've always seen Russell as the first to really play the game aggressively in an entire season – I mean, on a whole other level. Now here's a side note: I consider Tocantins to be in one respect, a historic shift in how Survivor is what it is today since Coach pretty much took up significant airtime more than any other contestant prior to him, leading me to jokingly refer to the practice as single-character editing in contrast to showing your major cast of *characters*, so to speak in a show. Still though, that edit was based more on the idiosyncrasies of a fun character as opposed to a dominance in airtime based on strategic jargon from a power player the producers have to shove down our throats a la a Spencer Bledsoe or Kellyn in S36. In no doubt in my mind, Russell opened Pandora's box on the *idol edit and spike in visibility due to an idol* for many seasons to come...

Oftentimes, when I am watching a new season of Survivor, I pay special attention to the first few episodes to see how the game starts with respect to speed and level of aggression that the players exhibit. Having watched the first few episodes of S39, I as a viewer (and in my mind as I imagine myself being out on the show playing myself) am in disbelief at how fast and aggressive Survivor has become. People are now booted at the first few tribal councils no longer because they are old or they are weak in challenges. No. People can be booted for being threats literally before the game starts through first impressions from what I have heard on RHAP's coverage of the pre-game has revealed in the more recent seasons. When you guys start covering Caramoan and later seasons, this is where the phenomenon becomes apparent. Not always but it lingers here and there.

Now back to Russell: he may have not won the game and he never will. But he should be acknowledged for taking the game, the TV show Survivor and turning it from a show that used to be about strangers coalescing about their lives and still having to eliminate another in a social game of chess for a million dollars to a show that largely is devoid of seeing and enjoying character arcs and more centered on who's in what alliance, who has an idol, who received what votes, etc. in the TV episodes themselves.

Russell's gameplay was hated by juries he faced and overtime has become hated more and more by the fanbase as some have finally acknowledged that he is a one-trick pony who only benefitted from 2 finals appearances because the producers put this unknown player straight to another season without much of a break with no one he played with to judge the gameplay of the *great Russell Hantz*.

But, I would be remiss if I didn't say that after Russell's 3 seasons, his aggressive impact would be felt. Not immediately but gradually. I personally believe that the Big Moves Era of Survivor (like the rock draw in Blood vs. Water) and Tony and his win in Cagayan wouldn't have happened without a player / character like Russell existing. Producers must have wanted another Russell-like character and proceeded to cast many people in the vein of playing the game fast and playing the game aggressively. And LOUD. Some seasons we got these imitators in aggression (i.e. Joe Mena, Domenick, Wardog). Many of them, with the exception of Tony lost. Soon enough, we started to get seasons where players that may have not played aggressively and fast, played aggressively and fast (i.e. Ciera, Kelley Wentworth, David Wright, Zeke, the Lairo tribe in S39), many to their own detriment.

More so, I believe that Russell influenced how we watch and consume Survivor in the modern era because the show is so much about game these days than it ever was before. I think about the podcasts like RHAP (that I personally listen to) that essentially is an outlet for fan discussions on gameplay much how like ESPN or NFL commentators are for analyzing sports. And while it's true that Russell wasn't what started these podcasts and I would argue that Micronesia is probably the first season where there is so much happening game-wise that it eclipses the feeling of what old-school Survivor is, Survivor truly felt like a different product in the late 20s and specially in the 30s of seasons produced. I truly believe that Russell forever changed the way Survivor was

going to be produced and played like subsequent to his time on the show, which led for all these commentaries on Survivor the game and not Survivor the TV show most of the time.

No, this wasn't immediate – it was gradual. Probst, the producers, casting – whatever you want to collectively call them, have spearheaded the direction of this new Survivor by pushing this “big moves” mentality on the narrative of much of the recent era of the show. They get to control the edits, as they always have been, but now they have this new template: give a bigger edit to contestants that hunt and look for idols. Throw in all of these advantages to make tribal councils more chaotic ala a Russell Hantz idoling out someone in a majority alliance. Eventually, the template got modified: to emulate the person emulating aspects of Russell's game. Producers show tapes of the seasons that fit this mold to recruits in order to have a fast and aggressive season made. We later got Game Changers where speaking and standing up at tribal council became a thing (thanks JT). I could go on...these are all building blocks that – parts of the path of evolution that Survivor was heading into long after Russell's 2 (and a 1/10th?) seasons made their mark.

I think that the game Russell played in Samoa and HvV was at a level that was far faster and aggressive than anyone else's on either cast; it's like if the final 5 episode of Micro with Erik's blindside – the mean spiritedness and deceit that was pulled off to get Erik out that the players had an appetite for – if that was every episode or most of Micronesia, we would have ourselves a modern season in the 30s then like we have now: quick, unpredictable, big move-itis, the usual jargon. It took until the likes of Caramoan for the game of Survivor and the TV show of Survivor to start catching up with Russell's tone (not style exactly) of gameplay (and not saying all of his behaviors and moves).

Ultimately, does my question have merit? **Is Russell the most impactful contest that Survivor has ever had?** Was he the culmination of one era that began in Micronesia and the beginning of another era that began in Heroes vs. Villains? Is it fair to say that Russell's story and his losses impacted this notion of playing hard in Survivor but righting the wrong that Russell did in his own attempts? Or did Russell just influence future contestants to play more aggressively for the cameras and not play to win to score a chance at coming back and being infamous?

I want to close out by saying that Survivor has long lost its (in-game) innocence in various aspects – whether it's the Gabe vote in Marquesas or the fact that Johnny Fairplay told his big lie in 2003. I as a viewer think that a core value of Survivor that has been lost on me as of late is the purity and charm of the show that isn't really felt in a post-Russell show. There really haven't been contestants that have played to the same intensity as Russell except maybe Tony (but he's a much more palatable character anyway) but I strongly feel that because Russell played the way he did and acted the way he did in S19, S20 and S22, Survivor lost its innocence concerning its production – its product as exhilarating TV. Aside from Sash's mortgagegate in the first post-HvV season and Colton's antics in One World, Survivor became just a game show without

much of a soul. It's part of the reality TV pastiche that includes the Bachelor, Big Brother, the Real World – pretty much the same thing what Jay was saying in the podcast.

No more rites of passage (which I loved), no more intros (which I appreciated), no more “LAST TIME ON SURVIVOR” as of S39 (which Probst was editorializing anyway), no more juror moments, no more actual reunions... it's all game apparently with some character moments sprinkled in within a 42-minute show that should be a 60 minute show that may be compromised by EOE or IOI or whatever gimmick that needs to suck airtime from allowing us to watch strangers interact through cohesion and conflict like in the days of Borneo.

– George Yazbeck