

Bob Newhart's success didn't come early!

"Newhart," the hit CBS sitcom about the wacky residents of a country inn, is about to begin its eighth and final TV season.

A great deal of the award-winning show's success is due, of course, to Bob Newhart, the veteran comedian who plays Dick Loudon, the innkeeper and the only sane character among a group of crazies.

It is the actor's second hit comedy. From 1972 to 1978, he starred in "The

led to a hit comedy album.

By 1961, Newhart had his own NBC variety show, which lasted only one season. He was also a regular in 1964 on another variety show, "The Entertainers."

A major Las Vegas draw, Newhart manages to make a dozen personal appearances every year during hiatus from his TV show.

Q. What would you like to see happen on your show this season?

A. We started something last year that I'd like to continue this season using guest stars very selectively.

We had Don Rickles, Johnny Carson, Bob Elliott of Bob and Ray, which was a kick for me because Bob is like an idol. I've been trying to get Peter Cook, but our schedules never seem to mesh.

I just don't want Sammy Davis Jr. on the show and the cast saying, "Oh, my God! Sammy Davis! What are you doing here?" And he says something phony like, "My car just happened to break down outside your inn."

Q. Last season your supporting cast, Michael and Stephanie, had the major story. Michael had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized. In the final episode, they got married. Did you feel upstaged?

A. No. What I did feel bad about was the portrayal of the people in the sanitarium. I think it tended to be cruel, and you shouldn't make fun of mental illness. But by the time I got the scripts, we were ready to shoot.

Q. How will your co-star Julia Duffy's real-life pregnancy affect the show this season?

A. Well, we're not going to do

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STAR SPEAK

FRANK SANELLO

'This is what I do, and I do it well.'
 — Bob Newhart

"Three Men and Baby." There's not going to be any diaper-changing, L-maze classes or any of that. I fought for that. On my old show ("The Bob Newhart Show"), they tried to give me kids, and I told them to do it with somebody else. I don't have anything against children — I have four of my own. I just don't want to do "Father Knows Best" or "Make Room for Daddy."

Q. Why don't you want to play a father on TV?

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A. It's not my audience, and it's too formulaic. The kids are always precocious. Daddy's lovable, but stupid. Every week, it's "how are we going to get Daddy out of this predicament?"

Q. Will you retire after this season?

A. It's definitely our last season, but I'll be back in a year or two with something else. This is what I do, and I do it well.

Q. What comedians influenced or inspired you while you were growing up?

A. It was a combination. Jack Benny was the bravest comedian. He took the time it took to tell the story. He never panicked, never got nervous. His timing was impeccable. I was also influenced by Robert Benchley and James Thurber.

Q. Why did you drop out of law school?

A. You're being kind. I didn't drop out of law school. I was asked to leave because of my grades. I don't regret the experience, though. Law school gives you incredible appreciation for (using) the precise word. And that helps in comedy. Sometimes, the right word is the difference between being funny and not quite so funny.

Q. When you majored in business in

college, what were your career plans?

A. I was very practical. You went to college, you got a degree in a very practical area — like medicine, law or accounting — and then, after four or five years, you got married and had kids.

I worked as an accountant for two years, and I was going crazy. I realized I couldn't do that for the rest of my life.

Q. What up-and-coming comedians do you like?


A. I hate to name names, because I hate to exclude. But I like Garry Shandling, Jerry Seinfeld, Emo Phillips — of course he's weird, but he's different. There are a lot of clones out there. I'll see a young comedian on TV and realize he's imitating another young comedian. Garry Shandling practically has a road company of Garry Shandling clones.

Q. Comedy on TV has to be G-rated, but a lot of standup comedians do triple X-rated comedy when they perform in nightclubs. Do you?

A. I don't do blue humor. It's harder to do it clean, and that's where the satisfaction comes in, because it's harder.

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Bob Newhart

Bob Newhart Show" as a psychologist tending to another group of off-the-wall characters, his patients.

But Newhart's status as one of the funniest men on TV could not have been predicted during his earlier careers.

Born in Oak Park, Ill., he majored in business at Chicago's Loyola University, then spent a year in law school before dropping out. He worked as an advertising copywriter and accountant before landing a job on a local morning-TV show, which

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