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Girls' night in

By ERIN WHITE

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Amy Watts works two jobs, regularly watches the news and spends a chunk of her free time tuned in to the History and Discovery channels. Then, there are the hours she devotes to *The Ultimate Coyote Ugly Search* when it's in season on CMT, a program whose plot revolves around the search for a new *femme fatale* to dance on the bar and pour drinks at one of the chain's locations.

Burleson resident Mallory Neil sometimes gets sucked into *The Girls Next Door*, too -- an E! Network show that follows Hugh Hefner's girlfriends -- in and out of his house.

These shows, and others like them -- with titles such as *Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll* (on CW), *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team* (on CMT) and even *America's Next Top Model* (on CW) -- feature scantily clad females in what many would say are situations that degrade women and turn back the clock on generations of feminist work.

Yet it's women who are setting aside hours at a time to watch.

The CW network says more than 70 percent of viewers of its surprise hit *Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll* are women. That's roughly the same breakdown for the CMT shows, too.

The female-skewed ratings surprised executives at CMT, says Mary Beth Cunin, vice president of programming strategy.

"We thought it would be pretty evenly split," she says.

Perhaps that's because some women wouldn't want to be caught watching them -- at least not by anyone who isn't a fellow fan.

Neil can't help but look slightly ashamed when she admits in front of a sister and a friend that she watches *The Girls Next Door*.

"I feel like I shouldn't be watching it because I feel guilty," she says.

The women on the show aren't stupid, but the program doesn't focus on their intellectual assets.

Cheerleaders

does show the athleticism and dance ability necessary to make the squad, but it still works in the booty shot.

Mindless TV or harmful to women?

So why are ladies hoarding the remote during these shows?

"It's mindless television," Watts, of Fort Worth, says. She likens her *Coyote Ugly* viewing to a summer beach read she can blow through in an afternoon.

The drama created from the tossing together of strong personalities on reality competition shows -- she's a fan of *Project Runway* for the same reason -- draws her in. On *Coyote Ugly*, choreographer Jacqui Squatriglia creates the seductive routines that bartenders perform on the bars at Coyote Ugly saloons, and she has an outsize personality made for enticing television. A producer's dream, she tosses off quips like, "It's about rock and roll and sex," and pushes the contestants until they're exhausted and emotional.

Tempers flare. Women sob. Occasionally someone collapses.

"You get a bunch of young women together," says Watts, "and there's going to be drama."

Watts says the scenarios are so far removed from her own life, she thinks of the participants like characters in a sitcom.

But those conflicts bother Elayne Rapping, a media critic for the University at Buffalo, who studies pop culture and gender issues.

She says such shows reinforce the idea that women can get ahead only by putting other women down.

"What they encourage is the old-fashioned pre-'60s competitiveness among women. In those days it was because women didn't have jobs so there was catfighting over men," she says. "This is a somewhat different version. It's 'Who's going to get the prize?' But I think it brings out the nastiness in women."

The ABC reality show *The Bachelor*, in which 25 women compete for the heart of one single guy, gets the same criticism. The 10th season, which wrapped up two weeks ago, saw women bickering over "alone time" with the bachelor, gossiping about others to him and even snickering about a woman who claimed to be a virgin. Yet watching it is a guilty pleasure for millions of women. Casting has begun for the 11th season.

Erica Espiritu, who periodically watches *Cheerleaders* and *Search for the Next Doll*, says she understands why a mother might not want her 10-year-old addicted to such programs. But she disagrees that they're anti-feminist or exploitative.

"I say, if you've got it, flaunt it," she says. Judging these women for using all their looks, she says, is a form of sexism in its own right.

"Yes, I've got problems with society telling us all we have to have a certain look," she says. "But if you're comfortable with yourself, I say go ahead." The 25-year-old former dance team member says she watched *Search for the Next Doll* to get ideas about style.

"I look it at for the fashion and the trends," the graphic designer says.

'Contradictory nature of women's mentality'

Rapping says envy -- like the kind many women feel when confronted with a cheerleader's perfect cleavage -- keeps women watching, too.

"On the one hand, we love to look at these women and vicariously imagine that we're them. But deep down inside there's something depressing about it because we aren't them. That's really the contradictory nature of women's mentality right now."

Neill says part of the reason she's conflicted about her enjoyment of *The Girls Next Door* is the message it sends that looks are a woman's most valuable asset.

Though one of the women on the show occasionally studies for the college courses she's taking, the girls devote most of their time to trying on skimpy outfits, posing for risque photos and discussing which thong/miniskirt/thigh-high boots Hef will find most attractive. One episode focuses almost entirely on one woman's choreographing a burlesque routine she plans to perform after popping out of a birthday cake.

Neill favors a tamer lifestyle and modest clothing, but she can't help making a comparison.

"I find myself saying, 'Oh, she's so pretty,'" she says. "And I'm like, not me. I look nothing like that."

That attitude, says Nancy O'Reilly, a clinical psychologist and founder of the WomenSpeak Project, an online resource for older women, helps explain why Neill stays glued to the girls even if it makes her feel insecure.

"Women love to compare themselves to other women," O'Reilly says, explaining the success of programs like *Top Model*. "And women are extremely competitive. It's just more covert than overt."

So does that mean women should stop watching these shows?

Cunin doesn't think so. She points out that both *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team* and *The*

Ultimate Coyote Ugly Search

have strong female leaders who place a high priority on work ethic: Liliana Lovell turned a bar idea into a Coyote Ugly empire singlehandedly through smart business decisions. And Kelli Finglass worked her way up from a member of the cheerleading squad to her current position as director of the organization. Both women are whip-smart, well-spoken and exacting in their expectations, and they sharply chide contestants for whining, gossiping and crying. The programs make no bones about the importance of appearance, but they also make it clear that winning a top spot takes more than an hourglass figure and flowing extensions. The contenders must demonstrate athleticism, toughness, the ability to speak in front of a crowd and charisma.

Indeed, the winner of *Search for the Next Doll*, while still beautiful by any conventional standard, wasn't the best-looking woman of the bunch.

"You certainly see in the *Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders* and *Coyote Ugly* that some of the prettier girls don't make it," Cunin says. "It is empowering. If anyone is out there working hard to get to a goal, I don't think you can completely devalue that."

Watts agrees.

"These are not women who are working in this bar out of desperation," she says. "It's what they really want to be doing. Do I agree with it? Not necessarily. But I don't think it's exploitative. In this case, these women have the power. I think there are bigger problems than girls dancing on bars. I'm more bothered by glass ceilings in the workplace and unequal pay."

Guilty-pleasure viewing

The Girls Next Door

Show info:

The program follows Hugh Hefner's three vastly younger girlfriends as they shop, groom, plan parties, occasionally flash the camera and vie for Hef's affections.

Episodes from season 3 air several days a week at various times, including weekend afternoons. Check local listings. Seasons 1 and 2 are out on DVD.

E!

The Ultimate Coyote Ugly Search

Show info:

Young women compete for a spot as a bartender at a Coyote Ugly Saloon. Requirements included bareable abs, a tough-girl attitude and the ability to "shake it" on the bar.

Watch deleted scenes from season 2 at www.cmt.com. A third season is in the works, but a premiere isn't scheduled.

CMT

Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team

Show info: A behind-the-scenes look at the tryout process for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders.

The new season premieres Sept. 19.

CMT

Pussycat Dolls Present: The Search for the Next Doll

Show info: The first season found a new member for the burlesque-act-turned-singing group. Season 2 will search for a girl group in the vein of the Dolls and Danity Kane.

For information on how to apply for the show, go to www.cwtv.com/shows/pussycat-dolls. The show's new season is scheduled to air after January.

CW

America's Next Top Model

Show info: Beautiful women compete for a modeling contract. Hosted by Tyra Banks.

Cycle 1 is available on DVD. Cycle 9 is planned but not scheduled.

CW