

Brandon's Top Ten TV Shows of the 2009-10 Season

by Brandon Kruse

Alright, alright, before I bring you my list of the best TV had to offer in the last year, I'm gonna be a stickler for details. Here are the ground rules for this particular event:

These are shows that have been airing new episodes in the last year (September 2009 through August 2010), so no syndicated or old shows. It's open to reality shows, news programs, talk shows... any television show that is currently producing new content. And the rankings are based on how good or bad they were **this** season – career excellence is ignored.

So, for example, *The Office* and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, two shows that were on my list last year, are off it this time around because, to put it eloquently, they stunk up the joint last season. I can only hope they'll turn it around in 2010-11.

And once again, as an added bonus, I am giving you, the beloved reader, my selection for each show's best episode. Do my fellow contributors go to these lengths? No, they do not. Clearly their love of TV and you, the beloved reader, only goes so far. It's a shame, really.

But hey, what the hell do I know? I'm a guy who chose to stop watching critical and Emmy darling *Mad Men* last year, two-thirds of the way through Season 3. I had been enjoying the show for a while – it was even my #4 pick on last year's TV list – but over time, I found myself less and less interested in spending an hour in the company of Don Draper and his co-workers. (And isn't that what TV essentially boils down to? Deciding which characters you want to invite into your home each week, anywhere from 13 to 24 times?)

Maybe that's reason for you to disregard my opinions. Fair enough. You can question my competence and judgment (you wouldn't be the first), but you can't question my love for TV. Between the single-camera sitcom format and the artistic freedom of the cable networks and the blessed, holy DVR, we truly are living in a Golden Age of Television. And I consider myself lucky to be a part of it.

10. *30 for 30*

I'll admit, ESPN's documentary series hasn't quite lived up to the unfair hype in my head (Bill Simmons! Sports! Personal stories told by talented filmmakers!). Still, it has often made for great television, telling many stories (the death of Len Bias, the history of fantasy baseball, Michael Jordan's minor league baseball career) that I have long wanted to hear.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: Then there are those stories I didn't think I wanted to hear, but turns out I was wrong. I watched "The Birth of Big Air," a 60-minute documentary

on *freakin' BMX biking* and found it FASCINATING! I mean, I thought to myself, "Ehh, I'll watch like 10, 15 minutes, then I'll probably just delete it." But I couldn't stop watching. The central focus of the piece is on Mat Hoffman, who is basically the Babe Ruth or Michael Jordan or Wayne Gretzky of BMX. He's a daredevil who sacrificed his body while changing the sport, helping to pave the way for many of the things you now see at the X Games. Even Evel Knievel has to shake his head at the things Mat Hoffman has done. It's horrifying, but utterly watchable.

9. *Late Show with David Letterman*

There's not a lot left to say that I haven't said before: Dave is my TV Friend, the post-monologue desk segments (with Dave often speaking off the cuff) are the best part of the show, and with the right guest, he's still the best in the business at this sort of thing. However, I can now also add this: watching Dave's annual kid's Halloween costumes bit has become a tradition between me and my daughter (she gets even more excited about it than I do), and getting to share little pieces of things that I love with her has become one of the great joys of parenthood.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: It wasn't his finest hour as a person, but Dave's admission of infidelity certainly made for riveting television, and once again showed how adept he has become at mining laughs from difficult situations, and how he's willing to sometimes forgo the comedy to speak honestly and candidly from the heart.

8. *Community*

Full disclosure here: I'm a Chevy Chase fan. Not a brainwashed or unapologetic fan, but a fan nonetheless. Thanks to my grandparents having HBO and their policy (HBO's, not my grandparents') of endless repeat airings, I think I saw *Foul Play* 20+ times when I was like 10 or 11 (this probably explains a lot about me). Chevy's career peak, when *National Lampoon's Vacation*, *Fletch*, and *Three Amigos!* were all released within three years of each other, came when I was ages 12 to 15. In other words, I was impressionable, and he made a big impression. Of course, since that time, he has seemingly done everything in his power to rid me of that positive impression.

So Chevy Chase was the main reason I was drawn to *Community*, but having watched the first season, I can tell you he is only one of many reasons to tune in. Joel McHale, for starters. The terrific comic interplay between Danny Pudi's "Abed" and Donald Glover's "Troy." Ken Jeong, doing his thing (which, sure, is getting a little old, but come on, he's so damn good at it). And some excellent parody of well-worn TV tropes and movie genres, which leads us to...

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: "Modern Warfare," which turned a school-wide paintball battle into a hilarious parody of action movies. It was so clearly the best episode of

Community last season that it almost inspired PoopReading co-contributor Joe Mulder to temporarily hand the title of "Best Show on TV" over to the show. It was so clearly the best episode of *Community* that when you go to Wikipedia's list of Season 1 episodes, the only episode besides the pilot that has its own page is "Modern Warfare." It was quite simply one of the best episodes of television last year had to offer.

7. *Lost*

On the whole, I think this was a good but flawed season, dragged down by three things: too much time spent in the Temple (which felt like a similar low point, the Hydra cages episodes of Season 3), the deeply disappointing/frustrating episode "Across the Sea," and a series finale that seemed to undercut some of what had come before it. Despite the missteps and disappointments, I remained a fan of the show to the very end. It still managed to, at various times throughout the season, offer emotional payoffs that moved the hell out of me. Plus we got more exemplary acting work from Terry O'Quinn, Michael Emerson, and Henry Ian Cusick – now let's get to work on casting them in a remake of the NBC 80s classic *Riptide*. (You do not want to know how much money I would pay to make this happen. It would sadden and deeply trouble you.)

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: "Ab Aeterno" kicked ass, and was an electrifying jolt right when the show needed one, but I think "Happily Ever After," which aired two weeks later, was the real high point. It was the moment where the two worlds of Season 6 started coming together, and also one of the last moments where you truly felt like the Cuse and Lindelof were going to pull off something incredible to close out the show. Plus, it had Desmond and Daniel interacting, and sweet Jesus on a hayride am I a sucker for those two characters.

6. *Louie*

To me, the first season of *Louie* was a lot like watching stand-up at a comedy club: there were moments of absolute brilliance, and there were times when the material was a little uneven, or didn't really land at all. Thankfully, there were more of the former than the latter, and a lot of the unevenness and awkward landings were due to the fact that Louis C.K. was trying something new and experimental, so even when the execution wasn't perfect, you had to credit him for the ambition to try it in the first place. Now that he has a season under his belt, I'm excited to see where he goes from here. Here's my prediction: Season 2 of *Louie* is going to blow us all away.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: The poker game in episode two ("Poker/Divorce") was, in my opinion, the high point of the show, but the best whole episode was the next one, "Dr. Ben/Nick," which contrasted the high-energy hilarity of Louie's visit to a doctor played by Ricky Gervais with a

mostly serious follow-up segment about a fight – and subsequent reconciliation – between Louie and fellow stand-up Nick DiPaolo. It highlighted what the show does best, mixing incisive comedy with more dramatic moments of what I can only describe as a sort of philosophical whimsy. (Or, as Joe so aptly put it in his Top TV column, navel-gazing.)

5. *The Pacific*

Here's how dumb I am. When I first sat down to watch *The Pacific*, the new HBO World War II miniseries from Tom Hanks & Steven Spielberg, I wondered how they would manage to differentiate it from the excellent HBO World War II miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Well, they managed to differentiate just fine, because here's the thing: the Pacific theater was a *completely different war* from the one fought in Europe, with different logistical nightmares and an entirely different enemy. The Pacific theater was a brutal war fought under terrible conditions, and *The Pacific* did a fantastic job of giving you a taste of what it must have been like to live (or, in many cases, not live) through it. So, yeah. Tom Hanks & Steven Spielberg: smart guys. Me: dummy.

Also, like *Band of Brothers*, the series featured breakout performances from young actors who will almost certainly make a name for themselves in the future, starting with James Badge Dale, who is now in *Rubicon*, which may crack my Top 10 next year.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: "Part Seven." The Battle of Peleliu. Percentage-wise, it had the highest casualty rate of any battle in the Pacific War, and "Part Seven" just puts you right in the middle of the nightmare, with scenes and images that will stick in your head for a long time. A character on *MASH* (the TV series) once referred to war as "the greatest enterprise ever created to separate a man from his sanity" – that was Peleliu.

4. *Party Down*

Can I have just one Best of TV List that doesn't contain the bitter lamenting of a show that was unfairly cancelled after only a few seasons? Apparently not. Season 2 of *Party Down* was even better than Season 1 – I think the loss of Jane Lynch's Constance may have actually helped, because she had a way of dominating every scene she was in (through no fault of Lynch's – she's just good, and I'm sure it was a fun character to write), so her absence gave the other characters a little more room to maneuver. And Megan Mullally's Lydia added a nicely distinct flavor to the mix. But alas, it's all over now. Do yourself a favor and rent the DVDs. If you're a Thursday night NBC fan, you can watch an episode of *Party Down* each week in place of that pile of puke *Outsourced*. This will undoubtedly add years to your life.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: At first, I thought it might be the surreal, Gutt-fueled lunacy of "Steve Guttenberg's Birthday."

Then I thought it would certainly be the pitch-perfect, farcical craziness of "Not on Your Wife Opening Night." But no, it was "Cole Landry's Draft Day Party" that finally took the prize. I don't want to spoil anything, but the way it took Lydia's man-hunger, Ron's concern over his semen output, and another character's secret and fused them all into a hilarious climax was a thing of beauty.

3. *Modern Family*

I didn't start watching until Christmas, when my sister-in-law insisted that we had to watch the pilot (after similar recommendations from fellow PoopReading contributors Tenessa Gemelke and Jameson Simmons), and thanks to the miracle of Hulu and repeats, my wife and I were able to quickly get caught up to speed. I am so thankful that we did, because *Modern Family* is the best sitcom literally about family (because even sitcoms that don't feature a literal family are about family) since *Everybody Loves Raymond*. I can't even begrudge the show its Best Comedy Emmy, even though it beat out my choice for best show. It was simply a banner freshman season.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: Not only was "Fizbo" the episode that cemented my love for this show, it was the episode that made me realize *Modern Family* intended to push its way into my Top 5 and take on all comers. It put together all of the elements necessary to create a disastrous birthday party and then paid them off perfectly. And it gave us comb sheaths. Never forget the comb sheaths.

2. *30 Rock*

There was a point in January, after *30 Rock* aired, back-to-back, "Black Light Attack!" and "Winter Fever," two of the weakest episodes they have ever done, that I began to think that this could be the year that the show fell from the top spot. But just two weeks later, starting with the episode "Anna Howard Shaw Day," which introduced Elizabeth Banks's Avery Jessup and gave us Jon Hamm, Jason Sudeikis, and Dean Winters pretending to be Jamaican dental assistants in a drug-induced hallucination of Liz's, the show bounced back in a big way. And the rest of the season, with Wesley Snipes and Jack's romantic triangle, was really, really funny, but *30 Rock* was still just a little off its game. Not enough to slide down very far in the rankings, because *30 Rock's* B-game is still light years ahead of nearly every other show on TV, but enough to lose its grip on #1.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: "Emanuelle Goes to Dinosaur Land" gave us Tracy Jordan in a stairwell, crying over the freshly-remembered horrors of his youth, and that would have been plenty, but it also gave us Liz visiting her exes (Drew and his new hook hands, and Dennis trying to "Balloon Boy" a kid in the park), Wesley's great line about London not being ready to host the 2012 Summer Olympics, and Liz reading inappropriate Bible verses while stalling at her ex-boyfriend Floyd's wedding. More like this in Season

5, please.

1. *Parks and Recreation*

If you watched the six-episode first season and were unimpressed, you're not alone – I was too. But I implore you to give the show another chance. It found its voice in a thrilling way last year, and it didn't take long before realized there was a chance I was going to write this column with a #1 next to the show's title. The entire ensemble is fantastic (and I'm thrilled about the additions of Adam Scott and Rob Lowe), but one man needs to be singled out: Nick Offerman's Ron Swanson is the best marriage of actor and role since Alec Baldwin's Jack Donaghy. Lord help us if anyone ever finds a way to put those two characters in a show together. You'll just turn on your TV and Liz. (*30 Rock* reference, bitches!)

Parks and Recreation joined *30 Rock* this year as the only two shows where I happily, eagerly, watched every episode at least twice. The laughs hold up, and both shows are so dense with comedy you can often find little things you missed the first time around. I had that experience with *The Simpsons* in its heyday, and to me, rewatchability is a big factor in a show's greatness.

BEST 2009-10 EPISODE: "Ron and Tammy." It was, in my opinion, the best episode any show did last season. Casting Offerman's real-life wife Mullally as his ex was a stroke of genius, and the interplay between their two characters was breathtaking to watch. "What's it like to stare into the eye of Satan's asshole?" (And a huge tip of the cap to former *Simpsons* writer and friend of Joe Mulder, Mike Scully, who wrote this episode.)