

TEAM AMERICA - BEST BUDS

Under the neon lights in mid-December at The Mirage Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, Rockfield freshman Ross Graves correctly answered the \$100,000 question for him and his three best friends of more than two decades.

High industry cameras flashed as contest officials raced on stage with cardinal blazers and beads in hand to dress the four men. Referred to as "the talent," the group had proved they were the best buds in America and were escorted out the door for a nine-and-a-half hour photoshoot with Rolling Stone.

Two months later, magazine vendor Joshua Davis rustled through his tote bags to find a Feb. 29 issue of Rolling Stone. He flipped the front cover and stared at a photo of him and Graves, and his two other best friends, Ryan Cummings and his brother Brandon, smiling with beer bottles in their palms.

The Rolling Stone spread of the Rockfield natives read "Budweiser's Band of Buds: Team America Takes Home the Title."

"They didn't tell us where it was gonna be. I opened just the cover. And were the back of the [front] cover. And I was like 'oh my,'" Davis said.

Before answering the final question in a "Newlywed Game" style challenge that won them the \$100,000, a spread in Rolling Stone and unlimited Budweiser for a year, Graves was quick to blame one of the three celebrity judges for almost costing them their victory.

"[American model] Amber Rose gave the other team five points. She's about to marry Wiz Khalifa. And I'm not going to that wedding," said Graves, a Marine Corporal who served as team leader in Afghanistan for two tours from 2002-2006.

He referred to their team's 15-point deficit during the last five questions of the game.

"She almost cost me a hundred grand," he said.

However, Graves gave thanks to teen heartthrob Justin Bieber. The three men were asked a question about Cummings. The friends immediately knew it was Justin Bieber's "Baby" when asked "What is the most embarrassing song in your friend's iPod?"

It is a common teasing point among the group. However, they knew all the lyrics and chanted the song to each other mimicking the singer's voice.

As Graves answered the question, Cummings dropped his head. The crowd shouted "ohh" sounding disappointed.

"I played a trick on them," Cummings said. "I felt pretty good when they asked the question because it's my girlfriend's ringtone and they always give me shit for that. I try to answer [the phone] fast before it finishes. Yeah, and my dad came over and watched football for one of the playoffs and brought me a big Justin Bieber poster for my man-cave."

The group said they wanted their name to represent their personalities but also their country. The Cummings brothers entered the contest its first year with two other friends and failed to advance to Las Vegas. In 2011, they recruited Davis and Graves, or "thunder" and "lightning" as they called themselves.

"Whenever I found out that it involved more creativity than just sheer drinking, I put our dream team together. Yeah, we [also] would've won the drinking contest," Cummings said.

Cummings also learned the contest had an emphasis on marketability. They entered the contest on Independence Day and then grasped a pencil and a notebook to decide what to name their crew. Team America proved to be the obvious answer.

They went to their closets and pulled out old red, white and blue

shirts, shorts, shoes and Uncle Sam costumes.

"We already had a team flag made up too," Graves said before he breathed in the silence, "Thanks to Betsy Ross."

He smiled afterward and ran his thumb and index finger through the mustache he grew a week before the competition.

"I YouTubed 'how to curl your mustache,' and after that it was just magic. I have to cut my sandwich in half or it gets into it. It soaks up condiments like a paintbrush. It's a lot more work than people realize. I'm scared to shave it 'cause I don't wanna lose my spotlight."

From July to October, they performed in as many online challenges as possible to gain points to be qualified for the Memphis regionals.

In his mobile album, Cummings saved pictures of one of their favorite team challenges. He showed it again to his friends and they laughed as they said it reminded them of the Will Ferrell film "Step Brothers."

It was a Walmart portrait of them all wearing white turtlenecks and with their hair gelled down. Making karate and sports videos were among approximately 20 challenges they completed.

All the men feared that Budweiser contest officials would strive to find a group from a more marketable city such as New York. The competition started with more than 2,000 groups. Team America won the regional in Memphis and flew an all-expense trip to Las Vegas for four days to compete with 24 other teams.

In Las Vegas, they performed challenges such as a NASCAR race as passengers, a scavenger hunt around the city, a casino-style game and a challenge of who could get the most text votes.

"It didn't matter how you fared, it was as long as you looked good doing it," Davis said.

Team America was one of six finalists on the last day.

Graves said a tight group with sportsmanship and a connection with the other groups was the key to the competition.

They won the scavenger hunt and received the most texts, and were neck-and-neck with their opponents in the last challenge that Saturday night called the "Bud-Wise Game", the "Newlywed Game" spinoff.

Since the four men, all in their late 20s, won they have received several requests from friends, acquaintances and strangers to do favors, such as make appearances to parties.

"I think it's kinda like what [P.]Diddy says, ya know. 'mo' money, mo' problems'," Davis said. "People want a piece of me now. It's like 'hey, you weren't here in the beginning. Why are you here now?'"

Davis and the men termed this as big-leaguering or acting "big time." However, some weren't fazed by their "celebrity" status. Graves said he tried to big-league in class, "My professors really don't care, but my English teacher was impressed."

Graves, an exercise science major who had looked to switch to photojournalism, spent some of his share of the money on a new camera and a cruise before saving the winnings in a bank account like his buddies.

"I got several new Facebook friends," Graves said. "We still talk to a few people from the competition from up north and everywhere. Three of them actually came down for our New Year's party from Cleveland."

The \$100,000 was a high contributing factor for entering the competition, but the friends agreed the contest would have been fun without the cash win.

"The free trip to Vegas and all the stuff we got to do was probably equivalent to several, several thousand dollars, too," Cummings said. "Even if we had lost, it would be worth everything we did because we got to all hang out in Vegas and all ran around together."



After a series of competitions, Team America comprised of Joshua Davis, Ross Graves, Ryan Cummings and Brandon Cummings (not pictured) won the 2011 Budweiser's Band of Buds title.

ERIC SHEA

NATASHA A. SIMMONS