



Emmys 2024

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20 years ago at the Emmys: 'The Sopranos' takes the top prize for the first time





“Seeing those goodbye episodes before gave me these great ideas of how to end the show,” David Chase joked after clips of farewell episodes were presented at the 2004 Emmys. (Mark J. Terrill / Associated Press)

By Randee Dawn

Aug. 14, 2024 4:15 AM PT

By 2004, it didn’t take a TV expert to see that the Emmy Awards were poised for a major evolution: Broadcast TV still ruled the nominations — but original cable programming was coming up fast. And on Sept. 19 at the 56th Primetime Emmys, held at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, the dam finally broke as “The Sopranos” (HBO) became the first cable show to take home the top prize for drama series.

The signs were all there, of course. “The Sopranos” had been nominated in the category every year it was eligible; it lost from 1999 to 2003 to “The Practice” (1999) and “The West Wing” (NBC) (the other years). And it wouldn’t be the only time the New Jersey suburban mobster story would take home the prize — “The Sopranos” would earn it for its final season, in 2007. That would be only the second time, up to that point, that a drama series would win the award after its run ended; the other instance was in 1977, with “Upstairs, Downstairs” (PBS).



AWARDS

20 years ago at the Emmys: That time when series just kept coming back

Aug. 7, 2024

With Glenn Close presenting the Emmy, David Chase and his cast and producers took to the stage to accept the game-changing award — and Chase made a reference to a segment that had just aired about series' farewell episodes with a comment that seems hilariously ironic today.

“This is really great,” Chase said. “And seeing those goodbye episodes before gave me these great ideas of how to end the show.”

The final episode of “Sopranos” notoriously ended with a shot of star James Gandolfini possibly, likely, about to get whacked — and then cut to black.

Chase then referred to Al Pacino’s Oscar-nominated “The Godfather”/“The Godfather Part II” character: “Personally, for me, you have to understand this: To see Tony Soprano shake hands with Michael Corleone fritzed my mind up completely.” (Pacino won his first Emmy for his performance as Roy M. Cohn in “Angels in America” earlier in the evening. Gandolfini presented it.)

Chase also ensured below-the-line folks got a shoutout: “This statue really belongs to our crew, the people in New York, and also our postproduction people — they just don’t seem to get recognized.” He added that his family is his inspiration: “They actually give me ideas.”

This wasn’t “The Sopranos” only Emmy of the evening: Michael Imperioli (supporting actor) and Drea de Matteo (supporting actress) also earned awards, and Terence Winter won for writing in a drama — in a year when the series received four of the five nominations in that category.

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Meanwhile, the big upset among the competitors was the failure of “The West Wing” to secure a five-peat of drama series Emmys; although each of its seven seasons earned it a nomination in the category, it would not win the series prize again. “West Wing” was tied with “Hill Street Blues” and “L.A. Law” for having the most drama series Emmy wins — until “Mad Men” (created by “Sopranos” veteran Matthew Weiner) and “Game of Thrones” joined the club in 2011 and 2019 with four wins each.

As for the rest of the competition, “Joan of Arcadia” (CBS) received its nomination in its rookie season but was not given a series berth again during its run; “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation” (CBS) ended up being nominated three times in the category but never scored a win; and “24” was nominated five times in the category, winning in 2006.

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