

The stage lights dim as the crowds' cheers echo throughout CBS Studios. The judges sit center stage patiently waiting to critique his performance. The cheers quiet down, the music begins, and a spotlight shines on Jonathan Burkin, America's new favorite twirler. In a nation where baton twirling has battled stereotypes and clichés, Burkin has emerged as baton twirling's spokesperson showing America how edgy, fierce and difficult twirling can be. Burkin is an 18-year-old college freshman from Clyde, Ohio. Although he planned to attend Ohio State University in the fall, his plans changed when he got the call that he would be a contestant on NBC's hit summer show, America's Got Talent. After many auditions and interviews, the show felt Burkin was just the right guy for their show and believed he had the opportunity to go all the way. He enrolled at Tiffin Community College and went on to pursue a dream.

Burkin never thought he would one day have the opportunity to be on AGT and, at times, almost quit twirling completely. Living in a small town where baton twirling isn't popular made it difficult for Burkin to practice the sport he loves. After years of getting teased and mistreated as a boy, Burkin decided to ignore the doubters and pursue his dream. He refused to settle for mediocrity and now has become one of the best baton twirlers in the nation. He has been a National Champion in Twirling Unlimited, Drum Majorettes of America, and National Baton Twirling Association. He feels he is finally ready to try USTA and hopes one day to take home the coveted Senior Men's Solo Championship. We got the chance to speak with Jonathan Burkin as he prepares for his upcoming show at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Read on and find out what made him want to audition for the show, what twirling on live TV was really like and more!

Jen: Congratulations on all of your success. What made you want to audition for AGT?

Jonathan: I wanted to bring baton twirling to the national spotlight and to show America that twirlers aren't just majorettes with high white boots leading a band down a parade. I wanted to show America that there is so much more to twirling than what is believed.

Jen: Once you got to the live shows, millions of people were watching all around the world. Since this was your first time on television. What was the most unusual part of the competition for you?

Jonathan: Knowing that so many people were watching me was intimidating. Every single move I made was being watched and as far as interviewing, I had to make sure I was perfect.

Jen: Tell me about your feelings before you would perform on live television.

Jonathan: As I would wait behind the LED screen doors, I was so nervous and anxious. But right when the doors opened and the music came on, I was relaxed and just had fun.

Jen: How did you feel about the comments from the judges (Sharon Osbourne, Piers Morgan and David Hasselhoff).

Jonathan: When David called me the “best baton twirler in the world,” I felt awkward because I know otherwise. On the second live show Piers said he thought he saw the best of me. I felt defensive because he had not seen most of what I could do yet because I was working under a low ceiling and I was limited. I still wanted to show more contact, rolls and tricks. As for Sharon, I don’t think she understood what I was doing. She was really nice but she never gave me comments on how I could improve. It was hard to work off what she said.

Jen: How much control did you have over your choice of music, your performance, or what you wore?

Jonathan: I had minimal control. The directors chose my music and designed my program. As I progressed in the competition, I wanted to incorporate regular batons in with the fire so I could show more contact, rolls and more difficult tricks, but I was told that the audience wouldn’t like the rolls or contact and that I should stick to the bigger tricks with fire batons. I did like how I got to work with the fire features on the stage.

Jen: Your perfect performances showed your bravery and focus and took you all the way to the top 20. Just falling short of the top 10 and out of contention to win, whom were you rooting for to take home the AGT crown?

Jonathan: Queen Emily because she has had a really tough life. She persevered and has overcome adversity to become an extremely talented singer. Her story was really good and she was nice and genuine.

Jen: Speaking of nice contestants, who were the nicest and who showed their true colors when the cameras were off?

Jonathan: The nicest contestants were the ZOOperstars. I was not too fond of Brian Chetham (top 40) and Matthew Piazzzi(top 20).

Jen: How did you feel about those acts chosen to be in the top 10?

Jonathan: I was frustrated with some of the acts chosen. I was definitely happy for the contestants but there were nine singers and one musical act in the top 10. It went from being a variety show to American Idol.

Jen: Who do you think should have been in the top 10 that wasn’t chosen?

Jonathan: I would have liked to be in the top 10, of course. I thought Sarah Lenore (blond country singer) and definitely Extreme Dance FX.

Jen: Hearty opera singer Neil E. Boyd took home the \$1 million prize. What would you have done with the money?

Jonathan: I would have used it to pay for college and pay for my trip to the NBTA World Championships in Belgium in April. I also would have made sure my family was financially stable.

Jen: The top five and four other acts were chosen to perform at a live show at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas on October 17. You are preparing for that now. Can we have a sneak peak?

Jonathan: I am performing to Pinball Wizard but this time I get to perform for 3:05. I will be twirling fire batons and regular batons. The arena seats 17,000 people!

Jen: What opportunities have you gotten since the show aired?

Jonathan: I was invited to perform on NBC's The Today Show in New York City. I also got to be a guest on NBC's The Bonnie Hunt Show, which was an awesome experience. I have gotten several teaching opportunities as well. Lastly, I was invited to perform at a basketball halftime show at the University of Buffalo in February.

Jen: Sounds like this was quite the opportunity. What are you most proud about after being on AGT?

Jonathan: I am proud that baton twirling is finally getting the respect it rightfully deserves.

Jen: Any last words to your fans?

Jonathan: I am so thankful to get this far. The support from everyone has been unbelievable. It has been so surreal. Thank you to all of you who voted for me and sent me luck.

Jonathan's favorites:

Movie: National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation

Food: Spaghetti without meatballs

Baton routine: Freestyle

College team: Ohio State

Music: Anything that gets my blood pumping or to twirl to. In my Ipod there is nothing enjoyable to sit and listen to. It is all songs I like to twirl with