

The Amazing Manley Challenge

THE AMAZING MANLEY CHALLENGE

"Hello everyone, I'm Norah Thompson, and you're watching the Amazing Manley Challenge. We're here at half-time at Tampa Bay Jesuit High School stadium to prove once and for all if psychic powers exist. We've got a young woman all the way from Beauval Saskatchewan Canada who claims she can read minds. If she can, she'll get one million dollars in cash, right here!"

"You're probably wondering how we're going to do that. Well, we've got our own hometown skeptic The Amazing Manley himself right here to run the most exciting edition of his world-famous Challenge."

The svelte redhead with too many perfect teeth flipped her tresses back to expose her graceful neck to the camera. "And here's Manley himself. Hi, Manley!" she shouted as an thickset balding man jogged his way over to her. He wore a Tampa Bay Jesuit Tigers jacket over his overstuffed body.

"Hi, Norah," he puffed. "Gee, Norah just how are we going to do that? Is this going to be some kind of dumb science exhibition? I can't believe anyone would do that at half-time." He smiled widely into the camera, revealing a gap between his two front teeth.

"Don't you worry, Manley, and don't touch that remote, you viewers at home. Something's going to happen right here in our Tampa Bay that's going to make history. Today!" Norah chirped, "I think it's time to meet our Challenger, don't you, Manley?"

"Right you are, Norah." Manley responded. "Here's Professor Douglas Curtsinger from St. Anthony's College in Schola Saskatchewan, Canada, and one of his students, Rain

Tellier, the young woman who just might make history happen right here on our own football field!”

“Saskatchewan, which if I remember, is a suburb of Toronto”, Manley offered.

A fortyish man, tall and gangly, wearing a white shirt with a prominent baby-blue tie, pushed under his adam's-apple, stepped forward to the camera. Just behind him was a athletic teenager of aboriginal abstraction, who bounced up and down on her tiptoes, trying to get a better view of the action on the field.

The man smiled and said: “Well, I'm Professor Curtsinger, and I guess I started all this. Actually, I'd rather have Rain explain it you...”

“Until we get to the techie junk,” the teenager piped up, “and then you can explain stuff.”

Nora moved over to Rain and put the microphone in her face. “So, Rain, I hear that you were actually one of the first subjects in the experiment.”

“Yeah, it was one of those in-class-get-extra-marks-deals,” she said, directing her soft brown eyes to the camera. “We were supposed to see if we could sense these Magic Helmets that Professor Curtsinger built.”

“And what happened?” Norah asked.

“Oh nothing special, at first” Rain replied. “But then I told Professor Curtsinger about how I was getting weird images when he turned the Magic Helmets off.”

“And then what?” Manley interjected.

“Everything.” Professor Curtsinger said. “With a slight re-calibration, we went from the usual non-significant results to something that's going to change the world, I believe.”

"We'll see about that," Manley said bluntly. "I believe that you didn't use careful measurement, and that you had information leaks all over the place."

Professor Curtsinger stuck out his face to within an inch of Manley's sweaty smile.

"Whiner," he said. "You already ran the pre-Challenge at my place, and couldn't find any of your precious leaks."

Rain turned to look at them. "Okay, you two can have your geek-war later, but not now," she said.

Norah shook the microphone like a wand, cutting off the nascent argument. "Professor Curtsinger, could you explain to our viewers just how these Magic Helmets work?"

Professor Curtsinger smiled. "I created football helmets that give out electromagnetic fields, not much stronger than a toy car or stereo would. It's just that the shape of the field is special. The average person wouldn't notice anything, but I was convinced that someone might, if we went looking. I built a few and tried them on my students, by putting students wearing these Magic Helmets in empty rooms and having my other students run by those rooms, without going in."

"And I found 'em all!" Rain chirped. "And nobody else can!"

Professor Curtsinger grinned widely into the camera. "But wait, there's more."

Nora winked into the camera. "I'm intrigued. Tell us all."

"Rain can also read images from the mind of the someone wearing the Magic Helmet. We've been using Xener cards. They have simple pictures of squares, circles, wavy lines, stars and crosses. And again, that's with them hidden in a room behind a locked door."

"Ooh, spooky," Manley said. "Just stick to the facts, Professor Curtsinger. We'll see what Rain can really do today, here on my home turf."

"Exactly." Rain piped in.

"I don't want to upset you," Manley interposed, "but if you're doing something with technology, doesn't that make it not psychic? After all, I stand to lose a million dollars today. "

"Good point," Professor Curtsinger agreed. "But science isn't always about black-and-white answers. Remember nobody has tried this before, and even then the theory says that only certain people will be able to use it. I'm just creating a situation where a psychic explanation is as good as any other, and challenging Manley here to prove me wrong."

"Wow! What nerve!" Nora blurted.

"Especially for a guy who wears a pocket protector and flood pants," Manley added.

"So Prof, what's this test like? Just cut to the chase for us non-techies," Norah asked.

"Well, for the first run, we use twelve players from the team as our senders. Only one of them has a Magic Helmet that is live, the other eleven are duds. The players don't know which is which. Rain runs through the line, and at the end puts a tag on a board that represents that player. That's a probability of less than one chance in seventy-five that it's luck; and that's enough for the Challenge. We do this three times, choosing a player at random. Then the probability of this happening by sheer chance drops to five in ten thousand. And that's when we win."

"Wow, that's heavy, " Norah replied. "And you say she's done this before?"

"Yes".

“And nobody else ever got this far?”

“Absolutely nobody. That's why there's so many parties interested. Just let me say that those folks in charge of your national security are very interested in how all this turns out. Psychic or not.”

“I get it!” Nora beamed for the cameras. “Who cares if it's psychic or not, if you've got the tools and the talent on your team.”

Norah motioned the cameras to pan across Rain. "Rain, before the Challenge starts, why don't you show all our viewers that wonderful Aboriginal outfit you're wearing."Norah said.

"Sure," Rain answered. "The silver-and-blue cloak is Dene design; but I'm not going to run in it."

"Well, show us your running outfit, then."

Rain slowly lifted her arms over her head, and wiggled out of the cloak. She carefully folded it, and placed it on the grass. She was wearing a white buckskin halter top embroidered with silver and turquoise bells. She wore a tight-fitting short skirt of the same material, which had the same silver bells all along its hem. Rain slipped off her white buckskin moccasins and stood barefoot before the camera. There was an appreciative wolf-whistle from the high-school audience.

Rain smiled up at the crowd in the direction of the whistle, and waved, getting more whistles as a response. She then reached into her travel bag on the grass beside her, picking up and carefully placing a headdress on her brow. It looked very much like a papal mitre, except that the centre piece was composed of stripes of color: indigo, sea green, and white.

"That's beautiful," Norah said.

"It's Seminole. I'm honoring them today," Rain said to the camera. The mega-screens caught the image, and Rain's voice floated out over the audience. Clapping broke out.

"Okay, my turn," Manley interrupted. "She's very pretty, but that's just a diversion. Remember, we're talking a million dollars here. My money." Manley smacked his hand in his fist for emphasis. "The fact that I have allowed the challengers to come this far says a lot about how open-minded I am. And, yes I know all about 'grey areas' in science," he said, sneering at Professor Curtsinger. Manley dug his fists into his ample waistline, looking quite pleased with himself.

"Like I said, I'm a man of my word." Manley continued. "But we're going to have to make some last minute changes, ones I consider quite exciting.

"What would those changes be?" said Professor Curtsinger, his Adam's apple noticeably extended.

"I'd like you all to meet Sean Landsten," Manley said, spreading his arms, and waving a man over from the sidelines.

A tall, large-framed young man with a spike of red hair, both on the top of his head, and on his chin, ambled over to the camera. "Hi, I'm Sean Landsten, from Glasgow, Scotland."

"And you're here because?" Norah asked.

"Well, Norah," Sean said in a fraternal tone, "Professor Curtsinger neglected some of the finer points of interface engineering. Manley asked me to improve on the original design."

"This is blatantly unfair!" Professor Curtsinger shouted.

"Calm down, Professor Curtsinger," Manley chided. "You'll create a negative influence, which will harm Rain's psychic powers."

Professor Curtsinger took a step back, his gaze across the stadium. At last he straightened his tie and said: "All right, I accept. I should have known that you would try something like this."

"Not to worry, Professor Curtsinger, actually," Sean said. I've added a Sony SuperThin monitor screen on the inside of the Magic Helmet. That means that the player can't see much except what's on the screen. And that's where the Xener images will be flashed.

"There'll still be some peripheral vision, of course." Professor Curtsinger noted.

"Really?" Manley interjected. "We'll see just how psychic Rain is, if the players can't see her."

"And, I've added a sound-proofing gel inside the Magic Helmets. A dog wouldn't be able to hear the solenoids clicking on and off, or the hum of the coils."

Professor Curtsinger began to hop from one foot to another. "Well, I was going to get around to that..." he stammered.

"So?" Manley asked. "Care to call it quits right now? There's only thousands of people watching," he smirked.

Professor Curtsinger grabbed his tie and pulled it straight out, as if it were a hari-kiri knife he was about to plunge into his throat. "Oh, God, I uh..." he blurted.

"Whoa!" Nora gasped. "Does this mean the whole thing is off?"

Rain stepped up to Professor Curtsinger, and gently pried his hand off his tie, which promptly fell flat against his chest. "Abso-frickin'-lutely not." she hissed.

"Of course not, Nora," Manley reassured her. "If Dr. Curtsinger was gracious enough to allow to the test to proceed, we'll simply have a much tighter experiment than anyone has ever tried. I have only one more slight stipulation."

Rain held Professor Curtsinger's hand, keeping him from using it to shield his eyes.

"And that is?" Norah, Rain and Professor Curtsinger said in unison.

"Every player who successfully sends Rain an image be removed from the trials. That means twelve, then eleven, then ten. Even though that drops the level of the statistics, the odds of young Rain successfully achieving that are seven in ten thousand. If she does, nobody—including me—is going to say that something important isn't happening. I'll cheer her on myself. How much more reasonable can a man be about losing a million dollars I ask you?" Manley stepped back, crossed his arms and beamed at the camera. Norah sidled up to Rain, who moved like a willow in the wind when she came near. "Do you think these changes are fair?"

"Well, I'm a little scared, but I know I can do it." Rain said in a quiet, musical voice.

"You must appreciate how unbelievable it sounds to ordinary people," Norah said in a confidential tone. "I mean, it really is spooky."

Rain smiled, showing her perfect teeth. "I'm just used to it by now, I guess. But do you want to know something really spooky? I can do this without the Magic Helmets, but I'd rather leave that for another time."

Nora stepped back, speechless, but only for a moment. "We'll have to get into that another time. But right now, I just have to tell you how great you look in that outfit. I'm told that you designed it yourself. Is that true?"

"Yes." Rain's smile grew wider. She did a small twirl, and small bells chimed; jewelery attached to her wrists and ankles.

Manley wandered into the camera shot. He began pacing about, annoyed at being ignored. He put his face into the camera. "Okay, then. Let's do it. Do psychic powers exist? Viewers in the Tampa area will find out first," right after this word from our sponsors."

"That was my line, jerk," Norah said off-camera.

"Tough," Manley replied. "Don't be getting too friendly with Little Miss Saskatchewan here. She could be up on fraud charges by the end of the afternoon, if things go as I expect."

"Manley, you can't do this! We've already signed an agreement about the experiment design!" Professor Curtsinger said, alternating between clenching his fists and wringing his hands.

"Read the fine print," Manley retorted. "The design can and must be changed if scientific or technical circumstances at the time of the experiment come to light which would merit such a decision." He paused for effect, while Professor Curtsinger put his finger in the collar of his shirt and pulled. "Overlooking a source of information contamination such as solenoid noise would definitely qualify." Manley paused for emphasis. "Also, danger to the subject would qualify, but we haven't seen anything like that, so you're clear. For now."

Before Professor Curtsinger could answer, Sean Landsten came up and said. "Guys, one minute. The linemen are ready to go."

Professor Curtsinger and Rain began to walk down to the opposing team goalpost, where they were to meet Sean Landsten. "No, Professor Curtsinger," Manley said. "You stay here with Norah and I. Only Sean works with Rain."

Using a small nondescript device the size of a cellular phone to scan for hidden electronics, Sean ran it across Rain's head, then her slender body.

"Okay, everyone," he said. "Rain is clear of any electronics. There's some silver in her head, and the bells on her outfit are tin, but that's it. Nothing that would constitute a violation of the Challenge."

Next Manley's voice boomed out over the stadium public address system. "Ladies, and gentlemen, boys and girls, Rain Tellier from Beauval Saskatchewan Canada is about to begin the first of the three trials necessary to win the Amazing Manley Challenge of one million dollars. A moment of silence so that Rain can collect her psychic powers, please." Rain stood with her head down, very much the picture of a sprinter about to run the hundred-yard dash. A blast of a referee's whistle, and she was off, showing fine form as a runner. She began to windmill her arms and whoop. A few in the audience--mostly teenage males--began to whoop with her.

She flashed past the gauntlet of the lineman, six to a side, all dressed in Tampa Bay Jesuit indigo and white, hands clasped behind their backs. To their credit the linemen did not budge, nor did any move their hands so as to signal the ground-mounted cameras. Every camera--home and opposition goalpost, ground mounted had a separate window on the screen above the home goal.

Rain made it to the home goalpost, then ran up to the touch screen which held the image of the lineman gauntlet. She pressed her palm to player five, the third on her left. The image turned green, a positive hit. The audience grew quieter.

Beside the image of the green lineman, a series of five shapes appeared: square, circle, wavy line, star and cross. Rain slammed her palm down on the cross, and it lit up green. There was a loud bell-clanging sound, much like the one found in older carnivals.

Norah spoke first. " Yes, folks, you've just seen a demonstration of psychic ability. Rain Tellier has successfully passed the first trial by identifying both the player and image in his mind. Amazing!"

"Ho hum," Manley drawled. "Typical beginner's luck. That's the problem with psychics. They do this once and everyone else is mesmerized. Now let me show you what really happens. Everyone get ready for round two. Now!"

Manley spoke to Sean Landsten on his private mike. "Sean, have Rain remove her headdress. Tell her it's messing up the camera shot."

"But, Manley," Sean said. "I just scanned it for everyone to see. There's nothing there."

"I'm sorry, but did I hear the word 'no'?" Manley snapped. "As long as you work for me, you follow orders. Get to it, laddy."

Sean motioned to Rain as she finished trotting back to the opposition goalpost.

"Manley says the headdress has to go." Sean explained.

"What's he got against Seminoles?" Rain asked.

"He probably thinks you've found some way to cheat the Challenge that I can't find. He's kind of paranoid."

Rain smiled at the rangy Scotsman. "So, he doesn't trust you, either. Want to make him really mad? You can blame it on me, if you like."

"I..I don't want to blame anything on you. I'm just doing my job."

"I know that. Here, help me take this skirt off. It's too tight for this kind of running, in this kind of heat."

Sean knelt down and gingerly began to untie the buckskin belt that held the belled skirt on Rain's hips. It came away, leaving Sean breathless. Rain wore only a slim leather thong underneath, the kind that made Brazilian beaches famous.

Every window on both screens purveyed it to the waiting audience. There were some more catcalls, followed by gurgling noises.

Manley saw the problem before Norah. "What the hell are you doing, Sean? Enough fraternization already."

"That's no way to speak," Norah scolded. "I for one am ready to cheer her on." She directed a question to Rain. "Rain, sweetie, how is it going down there? Feeling okay?"

"Hi, Norah. Well, I'm beginning to get butterflies in my stomach. These Magic Helmets always make me a little woozy."

"Or more accurately, you get butterflies when someone is about to expose your scam," Manley said.

"There's no scam involved," Professor Curtsinger pleaded.

"We'll see about that, now, won't we?" Manley answered. "Time!" he shouted.

The referee's whistle blew, and off Rain went. Something was wrong with her gait; her knees and ankles went out to the sides spastically. This time all that one could hear was her laboured breathing. Still, young men in the stands were biting their knuckles as she passed, while their girlfriends punched them on their shoulders.

Rain ran past the place where the fifth lineman had been, and her pace picked up, although her rhythm remained uneven. She cleared the gauntlet, and ran up to the touch-screen. Her hand wavered for a minute, then she pressed the icon of player ten. The icon turned cherry red, a miss. The five Xener symbols displayed, and she pressed the wavy line. Again a cherry. There were a few boos at first, which quickly built up as one young man stood up in his seat, made his hands into a megaphone and chanted: "Fake! Fake! Fake!"

Sean Landsten's voice came over the public address system. "There's been a problem on run two..."

"No shit!" a young man yelled back. "She's a fake!" More boos ensued.

"There's been a problem on run two," Sean Landsten repeated. "A power cell went intermittent a moment before Rain ran past it. Player Ten was the correct choice." Manley motioned to Norah to allow him to override the public address system. She shook her head at first, but then he pointed his finger straight at her forehead, and pulled his thumb back. Norah yielded.

"Pay no attention to the Scot behind the screen," Manley said. "If it's wrong, it's wrong. Just to prove the point, which helmet had the wavy line image?"

"Number twelve, the next one she passed." Sean Landsten answered haltingly.

"Told you so," Manley sneered at Norah and Professor Curtsinger. "The first trial was sheer luck. Now we're back to the usual non-significant results."

"So, what are you going to do?" Professor Curtsinger asked.

"On the terms of the Challenge, I can throw you two impostors off the field right now," Manley beamed.

"Wait a minute, Manley," Norah said. "You had an equipment failure. You can't disqualify Rain for your mistake."

"Sure I can. She also got the image wrong. Or was all that too long ago for your attention span?"

"Just like she said she could," Norah shot back. "Rain said she doesn't need the Magic Helmets, and I'm beginning to believe her."

"All right, all right," Manley held his hands palm up. "We'll give her her chance. And just to show what a nice guy I am, we'll cull player Ten, as though she was correct." He smiled, showing his canines. "All right, everybody. Run Three in one minute." He switched to his private mike, berating Sean Landsten. "What are you trying to do, ruin me?"

"That's the difference between showmanship and science," Sean Landsten answered.

"No, that's more like the difference between employment and unemployment," Manley fumed. "Just make sure everything works this time, or I'll have more lawyers look over your contract a little more thoroughly, understood?"

Sean Landsten switched off his end of the private mike and muttered to himself.

"Blathering sod." He looked over at Rain, who stood with her head between her knees. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"No. I have the splittingest headache in the universe right now, and I'm seeing double."

"It's probably just nerves. Get ready to run in ten seconds."

Rain snapped her head up, and began to swoon. Sean Landsten rushed over from his station and caught her before he fell. "Girl, you've got to run now, or things will get a lot worse for everyone," he insisted.

Rain gently disengaged herself, and took her place beneath the goal post. She gave Sean Landsten a thumbs-up as he returned to his station.

The whistle blew and Rain bolted. Steady at first, she began to zig-zag through the remaining ten players. But before she made it to the touch screen, she doubled over. Rain attempted to pick herself up, but she began to vomit as she got to her elbows.

Manley restrained Professor Curtsinger with a palm placed lightly against his chest. "You stay right here," he ordered. "Let Sean Landsten handle this."

"Manley, you're getting out of hand," Norah warned.

"Not at all," Manley laughed. "I'm just giving the audience what it wants. Reality television."

Rain made it to the touch screen on her hands and knees. The young man who had led the last barrage began again. This time the audience's tone was deeper and darker. "Fake! Fake! Fake! " rang like "Blood! Blood! Blood!".

Rain touched the third icon. It sparked green. There were a few appreciative claps from the audience. She then selected a circle from the five Xener images. The circle began to glow brightly green. There was a gasp, and then the applause grew like a summer cloud, promising rain, then drifting away.

"Well, Manley," Norah said. "Still sure it's just luck? Pretty good odds that twice in a row isn't a fluke."

Professor Curtsinger walked up close to Norah and spoke directly into her throat mike. " What do you think, people? Does Rain deserve another chance or what?" He smiled at Norah, who blushed.

Manley pushed Norah and Professor Curtsinger apart. "Remember that 'danger to the subject' clause? Rain is vomiting violently. For her own sake, I'm invoking it now."

"You can't do that!" Norah and Professor Curtsinger shouted together, then looked at each other in amazement."

"Can and will." Manley retorted. "What's more, both of you will be job-hunting later this afternoon if I get any more lip like that."

There was a sound of a young woman clearing her throat. " Perhaps I can solve this. How about giving me a run, with just images, and no live Magic Helmets?" Rain asked. "You mean make a million dollars by guessing which of nine players might have one of five images?" Manley answered. "Forget it, girly."

"No, lard ass," Rain replied. " I mean nine images from nine players. Are you up for it, or are you all talk?".

The audience's heads had been shifting from side to side as the argument ensued. Finally one teenage girl, all tattoos and piercings, stood up and began to chant: "Rain! Rain! Rain!" The entire stadium echoed her name. Someone began stomping their feet in rhythm, adding to the power.

Manley raised his hands for the crowd to be silent, and amazingly they did. "I want you all to remember that I did this for the sake of national security. I didn't come here to humiliate this girl, but to make sure no one sells the United States of America a bill of goods. Especially so-called allies who wouldn't fight when we asked them to. So just to show what a great country this is, I'm giving her this one last chance to back out before she ruins her young life. Rain, consider what you're doing. Your scam is just about up. Don't throw your life away like this."

"Does that mean yes?" Rain answered.

"It's your funeral," Manley answered.

"Sean, are we good to go? All the Magic Helmets turned off?" Rain asked. "No more technical difficulties?"

"All good. You run it, lassy. Make me proud." Sean Landsten answered.

Rain got to her position under the opposition goalpost. Sean Landsten waved at her, and she gave him a thumbs-up.

"Just one more thing, Rain," Sean said. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No. The last one thought I was too weird."

"Want a Scottish one?"

"Let's talk after I run," Rain answered.

The whistle blew. This time Rain sprang from her position. She windmilled her arms, pointing at each player left to right as she passed. "Circle! Cross! Wavy line! Star! Square! Wavy line! Cross! Circle! Star!

Rain then ran to the touch screen and repeated the sequence. As each player's icon turned green, the applause and cheering mounted until one could hear it through one's bones. All nine were green, there were none red. The tattooed and pierced teenager shrieked with delight.

"Jumpin' shit!" Sean shouted, throwing down his comset. He vaulted over his station, and tore down the field. When he arrived, he embraced Rain, picking her up off the ground. " You're amazing!" he shouted.

Rain squirmed in his grasp. " Okay, okay, but don't try kissing me. I just puked, remember?" she laughed.

"Sean Landsten, you're fired. Please remove yourself from the field," Manley said.

"I don't think he cares that much, Manley," Norah said, placing a conciliatory hand on his shoulder. Manley shrugged it off.

"This can't be happening," Professor Curtsinger said. " It flies in the face of all my theories. There aren't any psychic powers, really."

"I think you two have just been smashed flat by girl power," Norah answered. " Go, Rain, go!"

Sean put Rain down just as all twelve linemen sprinted to the home goalpost. One of them squatted under her, and placed her on his shoulders, and they began the victory run around the field. "Good luck getting her back!" the lineman taunted Sean as the twelve sped away.

Norah put her finger on Manley's chest and pushed him away from the cameras. He kept his head down, and did not fight back. "And that's it, folks. We promised you something you've never seen before, and now you've just something the whole world has never seen before. She spread her arms out the stadium. "Let's give 'em one more Tampa Bay Jesuit cheer, and we're outta' here!"

The audience responded with thunder.

Professor Curtsinger put a consoling arm around Manley's shoulder, who still not looking up, failed to flick it off.

"So, Manley, what do you think? Don't you just love those grey areas?"