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Trump trumps as 'Apprentice' jumps

Returning NBC reality show pulls a 4.5 in 18-49s

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The strike certainly isn't hurting NBC as it starts the new year. The network posted its third straight strong night thanks mostly to the premiere of Donald Trump's new 'Celebrity Apprentice' yesterday.

'Apprentice' averaged a 4.5 rating among adults 18-49, according to Nielsen overnights, easily the night's highest-rated show and up 9 percent over the program's sixth-season debut last January.

Last year 'Apprentice' aired on Sunday nights; last night's debut was about even to its most recent Thursday premiere, a 4.6 in September of 2005.

'Apprentice' even finished ahead of Fox's Orange Bowl coverage in the 9 p.m. timeslot and lifted NBC into a tie for the nightly lead in the demographic, according to early numbers. It had a good lead-in from a special 'Deal or No Deal,' which averaged a 3.7, but the seventh-year reality show still grew from its first to its second half hour.

'Apprentice' tweaked its formula this year, inviting celebrity participants, including villainous season one contestant Omarosa, to compete for charity while trying to impress Trump.

The bump could be attributable to a number of reasons. NBC had a good platform to advertise 'Apprentice' the previous two nights, with 'The Biggest Loser' and 'Law & Order' both turning in solid premieres. The celebrity angle could have drawn in viewers as well, as could the lack of competition. Both CBS's 'CSI' and ABC's 'Grey's Anatomy' were repeats.

'Apprentice' will have a tougher time next week, when 'Grey's' airs its final original episode filmed before the strike shut down production.

As mentioned, Fox and NBC shared the lead for the night among viewers 18-49, each finishing with a 4.0 average overnight rating and a 10 share. That's according to fast nationals, which measure timeslot data and not actual program data. As the Orange Bowl lasted past 11 p.m., Fox's true performance will not be known till nationals are issued.

CBS was third for the night at 2.6/7, ABC fourth at 1.8/5, Univision fifth at 1.6/4 and CW sixth at 0.9/2.

At 8 p.m. Fox led with a 3.9 for its first hour of Orange Bowl coverage, followed by NBC with a 3.7 for 'Deal.' CBS was third with a 1.8 for a repeat of 'Without a Trace,' Univision fourth with a 1.7 for 'Amar sin Limites,' ABC fifth with a 1.5 for an 'Ugly Betty' rerun and CW sixth with a 0.9 for a repeat of 'Smallville.'

NBC took the lead at 9 p.m. with a 4.5 for 'Apprentice,' while Fox slipped to second with a 4.1 for the Orange Bowl. CBS was third with a 3.3 for a repeat of 'CSI,' ABC fourth with a 2.0 for a 'Grey's' rerun, Univision fifth with a 1.6 for 'Basion' and CW sixth with a 0.8 for a repeat of 'Supernatural.'

Fox regained the lead at 10 p.m. with a 4.1 for the Orange Bowl, with NBC moving back to second with a 3.6 for 'ER.' CBS was third with a 2.6 for another 'Trace' rerun, ABC fourth with a 1.8 for a repeat of 'Desperate Housewives' and Univision fifth with a 1.4 for 'Mer para Creer.'

Among households, NBC and CBS tied for first for the night, each with a 7.2 average overnight rating and an 11 share. Fox was a close third at 7.0/11, with ABC fourth at 3.9/6, Univision fifth at 1.8/3 and CW sixth at 1.5/2.