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What's up? Chuck hip now

On screen and in real life, nickname enjoys a renaissance

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What's up with Chuck?

In case you haven't seen the trailers or television promos, at least six TV shows and movies premiering within the next few months feature characters named "Chuck." Today, the movie "I Now Pronounce You Chuck & Larry" opens, starring Adam Sandler as Chuck.

Speaking for my namesakes everywhere, Chuck is hot.

Finally.

This name blitz might not be so unusual if it were all about guys named Gary, Scott, Bob or even Floyd. But Chuck - a nickname for Charles that comes from the Middle English "chukken," meaning to "chuck" - is dated. According to U.S. Census data, Americans began using the nickname before 1930 and it peaked after 1960. While Charles is still a relatively popular baby name, Chuck is not.

If you meet a Chuck, he more than likely remembers watching "Bonanza" in black-and-white.

"I think it's about time Chuck becomes trendy," says WLW-AM (700) traffic reporter Chuck Ingram, 47 of Anderson Township, who has endured "chuckles," "chuck roast" and "upchuck" jabs much of his life.

Ingram believes the tide began to turn in 2005 when the Charles Schwab "Talk to Chuck" ad campaign debuted.

"That was the first positive thing to happen to us in a long time," he says.

Still, Ingram's 15-year-old son is Charlie - not Chuck Jr.

"It is better than being called Junior," says Chuck Tackett, 50, of Butler, Ky., whose father is named Charles.

The worst part about being Chuck, says Cincinnati Bengals defensive coordinator, Chuck Bresnahan, are the "What's up Chuck?" salutations.

Bresnahan, 46, has been Chuck since high school, but his brothers still occasionally call him Charlie. He has also been called Chuckles, Chaz and Chick.

If there is a Chuck renaissance, Butler County Commissioner Chuck Furmon, 66, of Hamilton is ready. Until he was 16, he was Charlie. But baseball teammates began calling him Chuck, and the name stuck.

He loved it, but his mother always insisted on calling him Charles.

THE CHUCK WHO STARTED IT ALL

For many, the epitome of Chuck might be the affable Chuck Woolery, the original host of "Wheel of Fortune" and an Ashland, Ky., native.

Woolery, 66, is anything but the lead character in the new NBC series, "Chuck," a 30-something computer geek. Nor is he the prep school bad boy Chuck in the CW's new "Gossip Girl."

So why all the young Chucks? Is it a so-retro-it's-cool thing, like Chuck Taylor Converse All-Star sneakers?

Josh Schwartz, producer of "Chuck" and "Gossip Girls," told "Entertainment Weekly" he was inspired by writer and pop culturist Chuck Klosterman.

"I feel like it must be a friendly name or something," says Klosterman, author of "Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs" (Scribner; \$20), who at 35 is one of the youngest real-life Chucks around.

"Maybe Chuck is the new 'Jack,'" Klosterman speculates.

He may be on to something. Like Jack, research shows the hard consonants in Chuck make it sound masculine, says James Bruning, a psychology professor at Ohio University who studies baby names.

To most people, Chuck sounds more masculine than Charles or Charlie, he says.

Chucks must love that - but really, if they'd named the lead character in Fox's "24" Chuck instead of Jack, would anyone believe he could save the world from terrorists? More likely, viewers might believe in Chuck Bauer taking the bad guys out for a beer.

While she admits she's stumped, pop culture expert Elayne Rapping thinks Chuck might be popular because it's such a "guy name."

"Maybe it's a backlash against feminism," says the professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo.

University of Cincinnati associate professor of English Rebecca Borah is kinder, observing it can be a manly name (martial arts actor Chuck Norris) or sweet (Chucky from TV show "Rugrats").

NOT EVERY CHARLES IS A CHUCK

Not every Charles wants to be Chuck. Charlie Brown of the "Peanuts" comic strip hates it when Peppermint Patty calls him Chuck. Even though he was born when the name was popular, former congressman and Cincinnati mayor Charlie Luken resisted the nickname.

"People who wanted to aggravate me called me Chuck," says Luken, 55, now chair of the Ohio Racing Commission.

Could he have won an election named Chuck?

"I like to think I have undying faith in my ability," Luken says, "but I always thought Charlie looked better than Chuck on the ballot."

True, it isn't the most commanding of names. Even when he was elected mayor of Hamilton and then county commissioner, Furmon ran as "Charles (Chuck)." So if Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel runs for president, will he become "Charles?"

The name doesn't endear itself to respect. The British tabloids call him Chuck, for instance, but no one dares to call the future king of England Prince Chuck.

At least most Chucks are nice. Other than the sneering dolls in the "Chucky" movies, there haven't been many

evil ones. After he served time for his part in the 1970s Watergate scandal, Chuck Colson devoted himself to prison ministries. And, of course, no mass murderer could be named Chuck. Hence: Charles Manson.

There are plenty of accomplished Chucks, including test pilot Chuck Yeager, the aforementioned basketball player/shoe salesman Chuck Taylor and Chuck Harmon, the first African-American to play for the Cincinnati Reds in 1954.

"As long as I didn't miss a call for dinner, I didn't care what they called me," says Harmon, 83, of Golf Manor.

Although he did prefer being called Chuck than Chicks, his first nickname.

If a Chuck revival does sweep the land, at least one guy with the name really doesn't care.

"People ask me if it's my first name all the time," sighs Jeff Chuck, 36, of Hebron.

And in case you're wondering, no one in his Chuck family is named Charles.

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