



# TRUMPED!

Internet entrepreneur **James Sun**, the odds-on favorite to win “The Apprentice,” was eliminated in a surprising finale by ED KROMER

## James Sun (BA 1999) never saw it coming.

Right up until the final word, he had no reason to doubt that the job was his.

During the interview process—a collision sport in competitive management played out over 14 grueling weeks—Sun had demonstrated unrivaled leadership, creativity and decency. He had outlasted all but one of thousands of candidates. Executive clients, celebrities, even advisors to the boss had lauded his qualities above all others in the running.

But it was not meant to be. “You’re terrific in every respect, and I really think you’re going to be a big success,” said Donald Trump at the end of “The Apprentice” sixth-season finale. “But for now, James, *you’re fired.*”

## EARLY STAGE ENTREPRENEUR

When James Sun was four, his family emigrated from Korea to the United States. They arrived with \$35, knew no one and spoke not a word of English. Being resourceful of necessity, the Suns made do. But James Sun wanted to do better. He began reading *The Wall Street Journal* at age 13 and started his first company that same year, marshalling the neighborhood kids into an irrepensible sales force for a professional home window-cleaning outfit (“Who was going to slam the door on a little kid?” he recalls).

While studying at the UW Business School, Sun managed a small technology fund he had created in 1995. His first stock purchase was eBay. Second was Intel. By the time he graduated with honors four years later, the initial \$5,000 investment had grown to \$2.3 million.

Afterward Sun dabbled in technology start-ups and advised Fortune 500 companies through Deloitte Consulting. He also traveled extensively and became a keen observer of human interaction—and the way this essential ritual is being transformed by the Internet.

“It did not matter whether I went to the most impoverished corner of India or an NYC nightclub full of investment bankers, the commonality is that every human being has a story to tell and would like to share it if someone will listen. We’re built to be connected,” Sun says. “I also realized that information technology was affecting the way humans interact. We want to be part of online communities, but we also want to meet face-to-face.”

This insight sparked development of a new venture in professional networking. Zoodango.com would offer opportunities for accountants and attorneys, editors and entrepreneurs to interact online with the intention of meeting in person. Sun planned to launch this twist on the well-trodden social networking paradigm at the end of 2006. If only he could generate some publicity...

## SERENDIPITY KNOCKS

Strolling through Bellevue Square with his family one Saturday last summer, Sun noticed a massive queue of people curiously dressed in business suits. They were awaiting their shot at an open casting call for *The Apprentice*, Donald Trump’s reality show that pits young executives and entrepreneurs against each other for a spot on his management team. Sun’s wife urged him to give it a go. “I thought, it’s a good dinner story in 20 years,” he recalls.

So he took his turn. Despite his lack of a resume, professional attire or apparent conviction to appear on television or work for The Donald, Sun made the first cut. Over the next few months he maneuvered additional rounds of casting that consisted of group debates, phone interviews, on-camera interrogations, as well as an FBI background check.

“I thought it would be a great adventure,” Sun admits. “But most of all, I wanted to show my girls—Korean American females, a minority of a minority in the business world—that they can achieve anything if they put their minds to it. If dad, this little Asian man from Seattle, can get on national television and look Donald Trump in the eye, then they can do anything in this world.”

The lesson would not come easily. The 50 hopefuls who reached the final round of casting in Los Angeles faced two weeks of sequestering and isolation, probing physical and psychological examinations, an IQ test, a 5,000-point personality profile and multiple debates in front of their potential employer. Trump liked Sun’s creativity and candor. He was in.

After two weeks back at home, he said goodbye to his family for the next two months. If the casting process had been surreal, it was only the prelude to what would come when the cameras started rolling.

## ALWAYS ON

Time on *The Apprentice* is deceiving. What appears, in the broadcast cut, to be a reasonably humane schedule of one project per week over the leisurely course of a television season is, in actuality, a seven-week manic blur of consuming tasks, heady rewards and boardroom dustups, with scant time for recovery, much less repose. Reality sets in quickly.

“When you’re on the show, you don’t have time to over-analyze. You’re too tired,” Sun says. “Plus the cameras are on 24/7. And you start getting used to it. If you act a certain way on the show because the camera is on, that might last an hour. But you can’t keep it up.”

“My approach to the show was that I’m going to wear my opinions and emotions on my sleeve, like I do in real life. I’m going to be myself, take risks and be a leader. And if I get fired in episode one because of it, so be it.”

But he didn’t get fired. Having established himself as one of the most visible and vocal of *Apprentici*, Sun stepped up to the project manager role mid-season after a close call in the boardroom. In his first task as manager, his team performed exceptionally well in creating a soap opera-inspired commercial for a household cleanser. In an unprecedented gesture, Sun promised that he would go to the boardroom alone if they lost. “The producers took me aside and said, ‘James, what are you doing?’” he recalls. “I was standing up for what I believe in. And I earned the respect of my team in a major way.”

He also won. Then he won again. By the time he lost as project manager, Sun had earned Trump’s respect. Over time, he solidified his place atop the hierarchy of candidates while others faltered or self-destructed. In the penultimate project, Sun and long-time collaborator Stefani Schaeffer created a marketing plan for a gold-plated pair of Trump towers in Las Vegas that left the competition in the dust and set up a clear top two. His mastery of the final team task, again taking the lead with Schaeffer in support, seemed to strengthen his position.

Or so he thought. The TV edit left viewers in limbo, with Trump praising each of the final four candidates, and inviting them back to the final boardroom where three would be fired and one would be... the *Apprentice*.

## FITFUL FINALE

Sun entered the final boardroom, filmed live at the Hollywood Bowl, leading the NBC.com fan poll. He held a majority of candidate votes and the confidence of Trump’s confidants. “I thought I had it in the bag,” Sun says.



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He also had a sense of perspective, developed over the eight months between the end of taping and the live finale, and decided that he would not utter a negative word about any of his three rivals. “You have time to reflect on your experience on *The Apprentice*. And you ask yourself, ‘What’s more important in life?’ For me, it was going out with class rather than winning without it.”

Trump quickly dispatched two candidates for failing to impress in the final project. The rest of the show was little more than an escalation to a final “twist,” so beloved by the television industry. It was Sun, not Schaeffer, at the receiving end of Trump’s famously brusque final dismissal.

“I’ve never been fired in my life,” Sun admits. “It’s a show, but still. To hear those words does something to you. Your stomach just drops.”

Especially considering the cryptic rationale given. In firing Sun, Trump cited unspecified actions and comments that had bothered him. This was as big a mystery to Sun as it was to the thousands of fans who e-mailed him after the finale. “To this day, I don’t know what he was talking about,” Sun says. “I went back and read through 150 pages of the journal I kept while on the show. I was baffled. Completely dumbfounded.”

Still, the shock hardly tarnishes an otherwise sterling experience. “Would I have made any different decisions?” Sun says. “No. I would have done everything exactly the same. I don’t regret the way I played the game called *The Apprentice*. I put myself way out there. If I got fired anyway, so be it.”

## SUN ALSO RISES

As imagined, *The Apprentice* will provide a lifetime of great dinner conversation. It has given Sun the opportunity to trade immigrant stories with Arnold Schwarzenegger and rap with Snoop Dogg. He has merited a page on Wikipedia, received unsolicited executive job offers and met with

governors, business magnates and pro sports icons. “Life is definitely different,” he admits.

But he never courted celebrity, and he feels a responsibility to make the most of the visibility the program has brought him. “When you have kids, you realize that life is going to continue after you are gone. How am I going to make this world a better place?” Sun says. “*The Apprentice* is not something I earned. It came my way, so I can’t be selfish with it. I’m trying to leverage it to do some good.”

Top of his agenda is to inspire young people to get serious about education, to “think bigger.”

He’s also thinking bigger about Zoodango. Since launching in concert with *The Apprentice* January premiere, his start-up networking company has taken off. It now serves most major cities and partners with professional associations, universities and non-profits, as well as big media players like Yahoo!. This fall, Sun plans to add a feature that allows users to monetize their professional expertise.

Why did he get fired? Doesn’t much matter now, though he has speculated that it may have something to do with his entrepreneurial—rather than party-line employee—background. Or it may have been the time he slipped the name of his company in the boardroom, an event that spiked traffic to Zoodango.com by 900 percent, crashing the company’s servers.

“I got fired by Donald Trump,” Sun says, “but my company is going to be much better off for the exposure. I wake up in the morning and wonder, who is going to call me today? And what is going to happen? It’s been a great opportunity.”

And no regrets.

“If you see me, don’t say, ‘I’m sorry you got fired,’” he says. “Because I’m not sorry.” ■

## JAMES SUN ON...

**REALITY TV:** “The show is not scripted. It’s the real deal, no pre-planning whatsoever. When you see an episode, you’re seeing an edited version. But those things really happened.”

**TENT CITY:** “You know what? It wasn’t bad. Really. We were on top of Hollywood. We had lobster the first night. TV made it look worse than it was.”

**THE BOARDROOM:** “You’re seeing ten heated minutes. In reality, the boardroom is four hours long.”

**THE DONALD:** “What you see about Donald Trump—he’s not like that in real life. I found him to be gentle, gentlemanly and fatherly. He’s a big thinker who expects a lot out of people. And he has this tough love thing going. But he’s actually a lot warmer than he appears.”

**INSTANT CELEBRITY:** “When you’re walking through a mall or a neighborhood with a film crew of seven, the world thinks you are a major celebrity. People would stare at me everywhere I’d go. It’s very eye-opening.”

**ALMOST FAME:** “We had a new baby sitter who said, ‘You look and talk just like that guy on *The Apprentice*.’ I get that a lot.”

**KEEPING SECRETS:** “I didn’t tell a soul, other than my wife. I was under contract. And even if I wasn’t, I’d be taking the suspense and joy of the experience away.”

**LESSONS LEARNED:** “You can accomplish a lot with fewer resources because you don’t have to manage as many channels of communication. You should not overspend. Don’t hire ten people if three can do the job.”

