

Practitioners of the Art of Zen TV Watching

Couch Potatoes Are the 'True Televisionaries'

By BETH ANN KRIER,
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Do you enjoy excessive amounts of TV viewing? Were some of the most enjoyable times of your life experienced in front of your set? Were your formative years nurtured by the "electronic baby sitter?" Are you annoyed by crybaby intellectuals who claim that TV viewing is counterproductive and a waste of time? Like to do most of your living on the couch?

—Advertisement for
Couch Potatoes

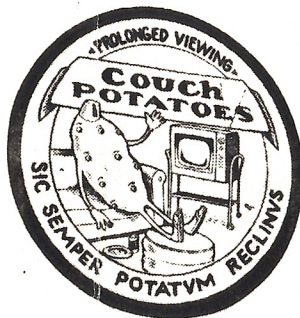
DIXON, Calif.—Here at the "country retreat" of the Couch Potatoes, the society for prolonged television viewing, four of the group's nine "elders" and one of the members have gathered to recline.

They are settled on a couch, circa 1952, in front of five television sets (two color and three black and white) stacked upon each other and tuned to: "Green Acres," an Elvis Presley movie, "CHiPs," "Gomer Pyle" and a vintage Red Skelton film. That's all the stations you can get this afternoon in Dixon, population 8,243, a city that sits between Sacramento and San Francisco and is just west of UC Davis. That's of some significance to the informed Couch Potato—Davis is where the TV dinner was invented.

Sound Turned Down

The sound on each of the five televisions is turned down. "None of us ever watches fewer than three sets at once so we get very good at lip reading," explains elder Jack Mingo, who teaches grades 7 through 12 at a private school in Berkeley and urges his students to watch TV as much as possible because "television is the vocation of the future."

Though the TVs are silent, the stereo is playing an audio cassette of a 1965 TV show featuring the late talk show host Joe Pyne interviewing a member of the Ku Klux Klan. (In the days before video cassette



Emblem symbolizes Couch Potatoes' favorite pastime.

recorders, many Potatoes recorded just the sound tracks of their favorite programs.)

On an end table, there is a toaster oven, since Couch Potatoes like to cook and view simultaneously. An open bottle of beer (not the Potatoes' private-label home brew, Viewmeister) rests on another table, next to a tray bearing the pictures of Lawrence Welk and the Lennon Sisters.

Tomatoes Division

Part put-on artists, part pranksters, part missionaries "attempting to assuage the guilt of fellow addicts," the Potatoes have all dressed in official Couch Potato T-shirts bearing the group's insignia and motto, "Sic Semper Potatum Reclinus." Elder Robert Armstrong, who designed the emblem and permanently resides at the retreat, is also wearing a satin bathrobe and a fez.

There are no women here today and no women members in the Couch Potatoes. Women must join the ladies auxiliary, the Couch Tomatoes. A children's division has been proposed but the elders have not decided if it should be called the Small Fries, the Tater Tots or the Spudniks.

The Potatoes have a request. They ask that any news story about them appear on the page opposite the television listings—otherwise, they fear, their members will miss it. On learning, however, that the



MARY FRAMPTON / Los Angeles Times

Kim Deitch, Robert Armstrong, Jack Mingo, Allan Dodge and Don Ault, from left, keep their eyes on

five television sets at the "country retreat" of the Couch Potatoes, where TV watching is king.

article is scheduled to appear in View, the Potatoes rejoice that the section name, taken as a command, states their philosophy precisely.

"A lot of people think we're a punk group," offers Mingo, the Potatoes' etiquette and advice expert. "We're not. Punk is much too active for Couch Potatoes."

The Potatoes claim they don't remember when they got started but they did make an appearance in the 1979 Doo Dah Parade in Pasadena. They rode in a couch pulled by an automobile. When the parade officials later outlawed motorized vehicles the Potatoes had to drop out; they couldn't recruit any members to pull the couch.

The group may actually go back as far as 1976, at least conceptually.

A Couch Potato insignia appearing in an underground comic book bears a 1976 copyright.

A Logical Choice

Choice of the name Couch Potatoes was actually quite logical, says Armstrong, an illustrator, underground cartoonist and musician with the Cheap Suit Serenaders. "It's perfect. Potatoes are tubers. They have many eyes. It came to us in a cosmic revelation."

Today, all it takes to join is to purchase a \$1.25 Couch Potato button and send the name of your five all-time favorite TV shows to Armstrong at Rural Route 1, Dixon.

Even though, as Armstrong points out, it goes against the grain of a true Couch Potato to pick up a

pen and write, about 180 people around the country have become Potatoes or Tomatoes. For another \$1, initiates receive a copy of the Tuber's Voice, the illustrated Couch Potato newsletter, the first issue of which was published in late March. Armstrong predicts a second issue may appear by July "if we don't have too many summer specials to watch."

Volume 1, No. 1, includes an editorial urging that the membership move to adopt a kiddies affiliate group and cites a poll in which children were asked if they liked television or their fathers better. More than half the kids reportedly answered "television."

And the newsletter prints several
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