The Sopranos is back for nine more hour long trips into the lives of the most dysfunctional mob family ever to grace the small or big screen. What will be coming in this last season? No one really knows for sure. The betting is probably about even money right now that Tony either ends up dead (the more likely choice) or in prison. That will just depend on whether or not creator David Chase wants to make a movie. Mitch's show recaps are back as well. And per usual ... loaded with biting humor, analysis, and predictions as to what's coming next.

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But for certain there will be unexpected turns, hilarious foul ups by some of the most inept mobsters in Mafia history, scenes of unbelievably shocking violence, more profanity than could be uttered by an entire aircraft carrier full of sailors, and deep probes into the inner psyche of a television character unlike any other.

Before getting to the recap, it will be easier to catch up on a couple of the characters here, as the references to them were rather brief, and sometimes made in conversations between Tony and Carmela.

Meadow is back home, planning to go to medical school to be a pediatrician. According to other reports, she has broken up with Finn, quite possibly the most boring character in the entire series history. But hey, any time they show Ms. Sigler, who gets hotter and hotter each year, it's a great scene.

AJ is still a total loser, and I love him for that, because no matter what stupid things my twentysomething son can pull off, I always know that at least he's not 1/10 as bad as this spoiled brat. AJ is still with Blanca, has dropped out of school, and supposedly works at a pizzeria, although when Tony and Carm left for the weekend, he immediately started having sex in his parents' bed (a 9.9 on the "ick" scale) and having all his friends over to party.

Christopher is out finishing his slasher/mobster flick, "Cleaver". I don't think Ward or the Beav has anything to do with it. I also doubt that Scorsese is shaking in his boots.

Paulie was only in one brief scene, which is a good thing…and there was no sign this week from Sil, Melfi, or Uncle Junior. Hopefully we'll see more of them soon, but I'll give Chase credit for realizing that he has nine hours to complete the story, and he doesn't have to stuff every character into every show. Quality, not quantity.

Recap

As we start the last nine episodes, we first flash back to 2004 and that fateful morning at Johnny Sacks' when the Feds charged in…totally ignoring the fat man running like hell in the snow away from them. Your tax dollars at work. What we didn't see in the earlier version (because it hadn't been filmed yet) is that Tony dropped his gun in the snow, and some pre-pubescent hoodlum-to-be picks it up, fires off one round, and runs back to his house to demand one major increase in his allowance.

So now, three years later (or two, depending upon who you listened to in the show…just a little editing problem), there is pounding on the door of Casa de Mafioso at 6:00 AM. Carmela sits up quickly and asks, "is THIS it?" Of course not, you silly woman, there are still eight episodes to go, and at least six weird dream scenes. But at the door are the local cops to bust Tony on a

weapons charge, as the punk got caught with the gun and some coke residue, and tried to give up Tony in a plea bargain. The strange thing is that the arrest was mainly due to there being hollow point bullets in the gun. Three years with the gun, and we're supposed to believe it still has ammo from the original clip? Yeah…and AJ is going to be awarded a Rhodes Scholarship.

In one of the few scenes not involving Tony this week, Phil Leotardo is back in New York after recuperating from his heart attack. And in his words, he is one "cranky f***". And in other breaking news; the sun rises in the East. His crew welcomes him back with the news about Tony (and Phil almost goes postal on one guy insulting T)…and a brief complaint about Doc, the guy who had been running things since Phil was gone. I get the feeling Doc will be the warm up whack for Mr. Cranky.

At the Essex County District Attorney's office, a Federal Attorney saunters in and it takes all of his self-control not to grab the media whore DA's laptop and smash it over his head. "We've been building a RICO case against Tony Soprano for five f***ing years. Then you blow this popcorn fart." Guess who is not getting a seat at Alberto Gonzalez's table next week?

Tony gets the call from his lawyer while he and Carmela are on their way up to the Adirondacks to visit Bobby and Janice at their lake house, to relax, celebrate Tony's 47th birthday, and conduct some business with "some Canadians". First birthday gift; an AR-10 machine gun from Bobby. Then a blowjob and some golf clubs from Carmela…damn, that is one lucky guy.

I wonder how this weekend will turn out? We have Tony…lots of water…ducks…and Janice doing more passive aggressive head jobs on him.

Best thing to add to the mix; lots of booze. It doesn't start out too bad as T and Bobby take a boat trip and have a pretty decent conversation. Tony has developed a great amount of respect for Bobby, both as an earner, and as his brother-in-law. Tony is quite reflective, thinking that there is "an 80% chance of ending up like Johnny Sack or on an embalmer's table." They talk about how Bobby's never whacked anyone, with Bobby saying how rough it would be with "all

that DNA stuff". That Foreshadowing Fairy is one busy little Sprite, as she's quickly made the trip to New York after spending much of the last three months in L.A. following Jack Bauer around, but she settles quickly into the boat and also pops open a Heineken.

Tony also does a good dance around the subject of Christopher, talking about how he'd been grooming someone, but that he seems to have different agendas. He offers Bobby the spot of running another lucrative construction scam, and hints of more things to come.

Nothing like watching middle-aged people getting totally shitfaced all night. Janice and Carmela singing karaoke sent my dog scurrying to the doggie door to get the hell out of Dodge and save his ears. Then we get Drunken Mafioso Monopoly, where cheating is expected, and the barbs keep getting nastier and nastier. Janice continues to tweak Tony, knowing exactly what buttons to push. Freud would have a field day with these two, watching Tony get more an more pissed, especially after Janice tells a particularly embarrassing story about their dad firing off a gun in the car right through their mother's beehive hairdo.

So the agitated Tony gets back at her by making several vicious comments about Janice's looks and her former promiscuity. Bobby freaks out and cold-cocks Tony right in the face. And it's ON!!! Drunken fat men fighting, and drunken women screaming hysterically. In other words, just another Sunday in the Dawg Pound.

Think that next morning wasn't just a bit awkward? Tony and Bobby take off for a trip to "play golf", and I was wondering when they turned down the side road if it may have been Adriana Time for Bobby. But no, they were just going for their meeting with the Canadians, making a deal to smuggle in expired prescription drugs.

Back at the lake house, Carmela and Janice do some more foreshadowing, with Janice talking about someone who had beat her, and that she had "done something" about it. Yeah, it was

Richie Aprile, and she gave him a little case of lead poisoning. Carmela is also rubbing the shoulder she hurt when she tried to break up the fight the night before. On the other hand, Carmela was complaining about it earlier, so I'm wondering if it may be the sign of something else, and she could end up very sick, which would definitely change things around for Tony.

In the end, the Foreshadowing Fairy was about as predictable as a third down fullback sweep from Maurice Carthon. To get a break on the price of the prescription drugs, Tony agrees to take care of a little problem of one of the Canadians…seems the guy has a niece in a custody battle over a small child, and he'd like the father to "go away". Of course the job goes to Bobby, and of course he makes such a mess of it that it will be able to be solved by Barney from "CSI: Mayberry".

Once Tony and Carmela get back home, another bit of bad news hits. Tony's lawyer Neil Mink calls Tony to tell him that the gun charge has not gone away, but that it's been taken over by the Feds. "They don't have anything. If they did, I'd be talking to you through glass." Heh. What a sense of humor this guy has.

Fade out to Tony watching a restored home video of a young Janice tormenting and bullying her younger brother about a garden hose. She may have said that she's "more like her father", but she is Livia's clone, at least personality-wise.

Best Line: Carmela: "That verbal diarrhea you have when you get something in that head of yours, Janice, you give yourself away."…when she defended Tony, stating he'd never hit either her or the kids.

Best Scene: I used to think my sister and her husband could come up with some doozies after a long day of drinking while watching the Browns game with us…that kind of barbed kidding we do to each other was nothing compared to the entire evening at the lake house. Fascinating to watch…just like a train wreck.

Latest Whacking Odds. Looks like we have our first whacking next week (I'm not counting the Bobby soxing of the Canadian guy. Like last year, I'll be tracking this throughout the season.

1) Doc (odds – 1:2) – Never met him before, but it's pretty obvious that no one else likes him, and we've got to have something to put Phil in a better mood.

2) Murmur (odds – even) – Time to start weeding out the minor characters early, and Christafuh's AA sponsor/gangster is a logical choice.

3) Uncle JuniorMummyHead (odds – 2:1) – Don't know if AJ will finally get to him, or the old fart will just keel over due to being 110 years old.

4) Benny Fazio: (odds – 4:1) – Another minor player who has outlived his usefulness. Although I'm breathless in anticipation of that rematch between him and Artie.

5) Bobby: (odds – 8:1) – Tony's plans to have Bobby succeed him instead of Chris just took a hit ("a hit"…I crack me up).

6) Paulie (odds – 10:1) – I think there will be more than one regular buying it this season. And I really, really hope it's Paulie.

7) Phil (odds – 10:1) – This one won't happen until Episode 8 or Episode 9, as the upcoming battle between Jersey and Brooklyn is inevitable.

8) Artie (odds – 20:1) – Another on my "please kill this jerk" list.