Good episode this weekend ... and the final season is shaping up for an awesome finish. Actually, like many of the episodes, this one was another great study in relationships in general, and in the motivations of Tony. His boredom and restlessness regarding

On the positive side, this episode covered a lot of ground and involved more than just two or three people. Hell, we even got a Bennie sighting…although still no sign this year of his nemesis, Artie Bucco (not that I'm missing him at all. Unfortunately, the way Chase is going, I'm sure he'll pop in for 30 minutes or so at some point).

Not much action in this episode, but plenty of pissed off people, so much so that I thought I ran across the taping of a Miami Dolphins Draft Party and their reactions when Roger Goodell said "Ginn", and not "Quinn".

Actually, like many of the episodes, this one was another great study in relationships in general, and in the motivations of Tony. His boredom and restlessness regarding "the rest of his life" are the predominate factors this season, with the current gambling fascination just the most recent attempt to deal with it all.

Recap

A little more back to normal on the storylines, but there was still enough jumping around that I'll have to try to consolidate a few of them.

As hinted upon last week, Tony is developing quite the gambling problem. As he starts out, he's just won a lot of money at a roulette wheel in Atlantic City…and then lets it all ride thinking it would actually hit the number 23 a second consecutive time…Art Schlichter would be proud. It doesn't and that spells more wasted money for Tony. More losses occur later when Tony is watching the Buffalo/Tampa Bay game on the big screen at the Bing. Heh, maybe that's a good idea. Maybe my wife won't mind if I go to a titty bar if I say it's just to watch sports! OK…that was a nice pipe-dream while it lasted.

That was money he could have used, because he's getting pestered by Vito Spatafore's widow, Marie. Seems like little Vito decided to react to news of his father's murder (and his revealed homosexuality), by going Goth and acting like he's vying for a position on the Cincinnati Bengals' roster. Marie wants $100 K to move the family to Maine. Yeah…wise move…take a kid already acting like a vampire, and stick him in an isolated place that has about four hours of sunshine per week.

So that just gives Tony something else to be pissed off about other than his losing streak. Mostly, he's pissed off at Phil, as he thinks Phil should be providing more support since (a) he's related to Marie, and (b) he was the guy who whacked one of Tony's best earners.

The next thing I'm seeing is some old chick singing at a party that must have been organized to celebrate Phil's rise to Boss. I can't really hear much, as there is another loud noise going on; which turns out to be the sound of Frank Sinatra spinning in his grave since the old chick is his daughter Nancy. She looks like hell, and playing up the "alleged" ties Frank had to the mafia by taking this part AND playing herself, which all comes across as a cheap stunt for a few bucks. Guess she needed the money. Luckily, she only has a couple of lines to speak, since her acting abilities make Sofia Coppola's monotone words in "Godfather 3" seem positively Katherine Hepburn-ish in comparison.

Tony stops by to see his buddy Hesh after Phil's party, expressing concern about Phil, and about some of his own crew. When Tony gives Hesh another of his countless "Cleaver" caps, Hesh whines that he was hoping it was some of the $200K that Hesh lent him. Now we add someone else to Tony's "I'm pissed at" list, as he gives Hesh three grand in "points", telling him

"so you don't have to eat cat food." Just hope it's the dry cat food, so he doesn't have to risk kidney failure. Hesh goes to his girlfriend and is even more upset than Tony, letting her (and therefore, the audience) in on the fact that while Tony may appear rich, he's very cash poor, and is sitting on a $3 million plus white elephant in the form of his boat.

At Melfi's office, Tony opens up a bit about the gambling problem, and he doesn't really have a good answer when she asks if it's about the money or about the high he gets from winning. Good point on that regard, as Tony's been quite restless since he recovered from his gunshot wounds, and seems to be in need for distractions at almost every turn. Melfi also questions whether or not they should continue with the sessions, as Tony seems to miss a lot of them. T retorts that he always calls in time to cancel, or else pays anyway if it's too late, but Melfi states that in order to "maintain protocols" (NO!!!! enough damn 'protocols' with "24"!), he needs to be there more consistently. Tony reluctantly agrees, stating that even though he hasn't had a panic attack since being shot, he still looks at the sessions as "my oasis". Right…and to keep up the sexual tension that's gone on between those two from the very first episode. I should add a prediction thing at the end calculating the odds of whether or not Tony and Jennifer ever get it on. Right now I'd put it at about a 50% probability.

Carmela is about to close on her spec house, which is to be bought by her cousin Barry and his pregnant wife. All this leads to more people being pissed, as Carmela's dad isn't happy when she nags him about the sub-code construction materials. Damn, I thought this series was set in New Jersey, not Cleveland.

The concept of a woman Blanca's age getting that huge of a house pisses off AJ's girlfriend, and she lets him know all about it. So AJ does what any man does when his long time girlfriend keeps nagging and nagging and nagging. He dumps her and starts dating a supermodel? Nope, sorry, AJ is not related to Matt Leinart or Tom Brady. Instead, he takes her to a fancy restaurant, and surprises her with a decent sized engagement ring. Kid…the fact that you had to coax her into agreeing by talking about your recent promotion to the "night manager of the pizzeria" should have shown you that there are more red flags with her than you'd see with Britney Spears unaccompanied in a Jack Daniels warehouse.

Hesh shows up at the back room of the Bing while Tony and the boys are playing poker, with

Tony once again showing his cruel side with several “Shylock” jokes, and deliberately embarrassing Hesh by giving him his next $3,000 payment in front of everyone else. Hesh later confesses to his son-in-law Eli that he’s very concerned about getting whacked; thinking that eventually Tony will consider it an easier way to eliminate his debt problem. Good point. Who needs those debt counseling services when you can on the law firm of Smith & Wesson?

Meanwhile, Tony’s money problems continue. After blowing $18K in card winnings and then some at the track, he sees opportunity when Carmela states that she expects to clear “about six” from the spec house (I’m assuming that means $600,000). Tony recommends an excellent investment strategy; putting at least half of it on the Jets/Chargers game, as Tony has “inside information”. Sure beats the hell out of the stock market, doesn’t it? She refuses, which infuriates Tony even more, but he backs off after whining “I thought it was OUR money”. But his ill mood returns after the Jets win big time. Carmela responds that she doesn’t want to end up like Ginny Sack (no problem unless she starts eating a truck load of Twinkies every day), which leads to a physical confrontation with Tony as he grabs her and she throws a vase.

AJ takes Blanca’s little rug rat down to the Puerto Rican festival, looking totally stupid with all the Puerto Rican flags on his SUV, being that if AJ were any more Caucasian, he’d officially be Irish. Blanca meets him, and doesn’t look too happy, with AJ being the only person on planet Earth not knowing what’s going to happen next. Reeeeject-shun! Blanca “just doesn’t feel it”. And we say “adios” to the most boring female character Chase has came up with not named “Charmaine Bucco. Now we’ll get to see the AJ we all know and loathe; the whining slacker with a extremely overdeveloped sense of entitlement going back to being a huge burden to his parents.

Alright…I’ve avoided it as long as I can, but I’ve got to get to it sometime. Vito, Jr. What a friggin’ loser. Phil tries talking to him first, with the gist of the conversation being “your family has enough shame without you being like this.” Thank you, Dr. Phil. I can’t wait to see you on Oprah next week. Tony gets the next crack at Edward Blubberhands, and for a moment, you think he might have gotten through to the kid, but then Vito Jr. gives another “I don’t care” look, at which point Tony tells him to snap out of it, grow up, and accept his position as “man of the house”. Only if the house is the one used in “Rocky Horror Picture Show”.

Great talk, Tony, as the next time we see the little shite, he’s taking a little shite in a shower

stall at school just to freak out the classmates that were teasing him. Yeah…that'll make them stop. At that sound you heard was the sound of David Chase jumping waaayyyy over the line. I know it's HBO, and you can see things there you can't see anywhere else, but I'd much rather prefer that he stick with the old chestnuts of graphic violence, Cleveland bar level language, and plastic chested strippers at the Bing. I've never seen this on TV (or movies) before…and I don't care to again. What's next? Showing the placenta after Barry's baby is born? Pass the Tums, please.

The last part of the show brought up some things that will have ramifications throughout the last episodes. Tony might have actually contemplated whacking Hesh, but after Carlo brought up the subject of either Tony having him killed or just refusing to pay, Tony lashed out at Carlo for not being anywhere near the earner on construction jobs that Vito was, in addition to telling the older captain and Christopher that as boss, he could not ignore his debts.

Tony also decides to pay Marie the $100 K to get Vito Deuce out of state, but after he cashes in enough assets to cover it, he blows it on another "sure thing" football bet. Consequently, he can only come up with the money needed to have one of those intervention groups from "Idaho or Utah" come in, and haul the obnoxious little turd-dropper off for some well deserved smack-downs. Hopefully, that's the last we'll see of any member of the Spatafore family.

Back at the rather chilly Casa de Mafioso, Tony tries making back up to Carmela, and admits to having a problem with "chasing the money" on his losing streak, and seemingly telling her that he'll stop, and her money is safe. And my dog doesn't bite (it's not my dog, but I think it belongs to Pete Rose). But perhaps it is true, because you've got to think that Tony remembers all the problems gambling brought to his old friend David Scatino a few seasons back.

As Tony is driving through one neighborhood, he sees the two Arab guys that used to always hang around Chris at the Bing…and they are amongst a group of predominately Muslim men in religious garb. And once again, the specter of Tony copping a deal with the Feds regarding busting a terrorist cell raises his hand, shouts "look at me!", and then retreats back into the background.

Hesh's problems are far greater than Tony, as he comes back to the bedroom one morning to wake his girlfriend Renata, but finds that she has died from a stroke. Later at the devastated man's house, Tony stops by to give his condolences…and pay off the $200K.

Next Week…looks like the long simmering resentment between Paulie and Chris boils over. Five more episodes is all we get.

Best Line: Tony to Marie, "there is no geographical solution to an emotional problem". That's really a pretty good line. On the other hand, having my ex-wife move over 100 miles away wasn't a bad thing at all.

Best Scene: Tony's last talk with Carmela. Great stuff, seeing them talk at a more adult level while sadly reflecting on a very uncertain future.

Latest Whacking Odds. I'm glad Hesh didn't get whacked, as I never had him on the list.

1) Paulie (odds – 1:2) – Next week could be the time.

2) Phil (odds – 2:1) – Phil's party with the 125 year old Nancy Sinatra scaring the crap out of me (bad choice of words after this episode, wasn't it?) set the table for the continued friction with Tony.

3) Carlo (odds – 4:1) – Could substitute Benny here, but I think it would be more in the storyline of "time ends for all" if another one of the older crew from the Jackie Aprile days buys the farm. Tony's chastising of Carlo this week also bodes ill for him.

4) Uncle JuniorMummyHead (odds – 5:1) – I still think he'll pull a Johnny Sack and die of natural causes while incarcerated…which would hit home with Tony, who may prefer helping the Feds with terrorists (and not betraying his own people) rather than face life in prison.

5) Bobby: (odds – 6:1) – These odds will go up if Tony or Chris whacks Paulie. Phil WILL kill someone on Tony's crew, and Bobby is the more natural choice.

6) Chris: (odds – 8:1) – Same as before: If Tony dies, I think Chris probably lives.

7) AJ (odds – 8:1) – We haven't had an episode focus on the Soprano kids this year. I think we'll have one, and it may end with a tragic ending I long ago predicted for this lost soul.

8) Silvio (odds – 10:1) – Still feel the need to keep the entire main crew on the list.

9) Tony (odds – 15:1) – I'm really thinking that Tony is out of the mob in one way or another at the end.