

## Weakest Link

*Weakest Link* (formerly titled *The Weakest Link*) is a television game show which first appeared in the United Kingdom on BBC Two on 14 August 2000. It was devised by doctor and situation comedy writer Fintan Coyle and the comedian Cathy Dunning, and developed for television by the BBC Entertainment department. It has since been replicated around the world. It may also be called a “reality game show” because of competition similar to present-day reality shows and has been the basis of academic studies. The UK version, hosted by Anne Robinson, reached its 1,000th episode on 18 December 2006.

### Format

The original format featured a team of nine contestants who take turns answering general knowledge questions. The object of each round is to answer a chain of consecutive correct answers to earn an increasing amount for a single communal pot. However, just one incorrect answer wipes out any money earned in that chain. But, before their question is asked, a contestant can say “BANK” and the money earned thus far is safely stored and a new chain is initiated from scratch.

Banking money is the safe option, however *not* banking, in anticipation that one will be able to correctly answer the upcoming question, allows the money to grow as each successive correct answer earns proportionally more money.

When the allotted time for each round ends, any money not banked is lost, and if the host is in the middle of asking a question, or has asked a question but the contestant has yet to answer, the question is abandoned. Each player is then required to vote for which contestant they thought was the “weakest link,” for whatever reason. Whoever gets the most votes at the end of the round is eliminated from the game, and leaves with no money. If there is a tie in the voting, the statistically strongest link gets to choose which of the tied players is eliminated. If they voted for one of the tied players, they are given the opportunity to change their mind.

Whenever a contestant is eliminated, 10 seconds are taken away from the clock for the following round. On the eighth round, the clock is reduced to 90 seconds.

## Voting

At the end of each *round*, contestants must vote off one player whom they consider to be “The Weakest Link”: the one they believe wasted the most time, failed to bank judiciously or gave too many wrong answers. Until the beginning of the next round, only the television audience knows (via an announcer’s narration) exactly who the “strongest link” and “weakest link” are statistically. While the contestants work as a team, they are encouraged at this point to be ruthless to each other. Voting presents somewhat of a tactical challenge for canny players seeking to maximise their chances of winning, and maximizing the payoffs if they do. Voting off weaker players is likely to increase the payoff for the winner, but stronger players may be more difficult to beat in a playoff. The host usually questions the players as to who they are voting for. For example, if someone voted for John, the host would ask that person “Why John?” or, in the case that someone voted for Deloris, the host would say, “Why Deloris?” once the host has heard their opinions on who they voted for, she will say to the eliminated player, “You are the **weakest link**. Goodbye.”

## Strategies

Some players may consider incorrectly answering some questions so as not to appear so much of a threat — however, such a strategy is risky. One study suggested that the optimal percentage of questions to answer correctly is 60%. If you do worse, you risk being voted off for being too weak; if you do better, you are perceived as a threat in the final showdown. Mathematical analysis of the expected payoffs provided by various banking strategies suggest that the optimum strategies are to either attempt to go for the highest payoff, or bank after every question. Few teams adopt either — most choose to bank after three or four questions.

## End of the Game

### *Final Round*

When two contestants remain, they work together in one final round, identical to previous rounds in all but two details: First, all money banked at the end of the round is tripled (or doubled in some versions), before added to

the current money pool to make the final total of the game. And second, there is no elimination. Instead, the game moves to the Head to Head Round.

### *Head to Head*

For the Head to Head round, the remaining two players will each be required to answer five questions each. The strongest link from the previous round chooses who goes first. Whoever has the most correct answers out of five at the end of the Head to Head wins the game.

The winner of the game takes home all of the money accumulated in the prize pool for the game, and the loser goes home with nothing like all previous eliminated players.

In the event of a tie, the game goes to Sudden Death. Each player is continued to be asked questions as usual, until one person gets a question right and the other wrong. This can go on for as long as it takes, though in some countries, the Sudden Death is edited to only one round for airtime reasons.

In the event of a tie, the game goes to Sudden Death. Each player is continued to be asked questions as usual, until one person gets a question right and the other wrong. This can go on for as long as it takes, though in some countries, the Sudden Death is edited to only one round for airtime reasons.

In most episodes the maximum possible winnings in the British shows is £10,000; in special celebrity and charity episodes the maximum is £50,000.

### **Success**

Part of the show's success was due to the presenter, Anne Robinson. Already well-known in the UK for her sarcastic tone while presenting the BBC's consumer programme *Watchdog*, she found here a new outlet in her taunts to the contestants. Her sardonic summary to the "team", usually berating them for their lack of intelligence for not achieving the target, became a trademark of the show, and her call of "You are the **weakest link** — Goodbye!" quickly became a catchphrase. (Originally, the devisors suggested the equally acerbic Jeremy Paxman, host of *University Challenge*.) The voice-over in the UK version is by Jon Briggs.

With elements inspired by *Big Brother* and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*, the show differed from virtually all games shows before it by inviting open conflict between players, and using a host who is openly

hostile to the competitors rather than a positive figure (though this feature of the show tends to be played for laughs, especially in the prime time version, where there is a studio audience for Robinson — and the contestants — to play to). Heavily criticised by the television press in some countries for its Hobbesian overtones, the show has nevertheless been a ratings success in most countries.