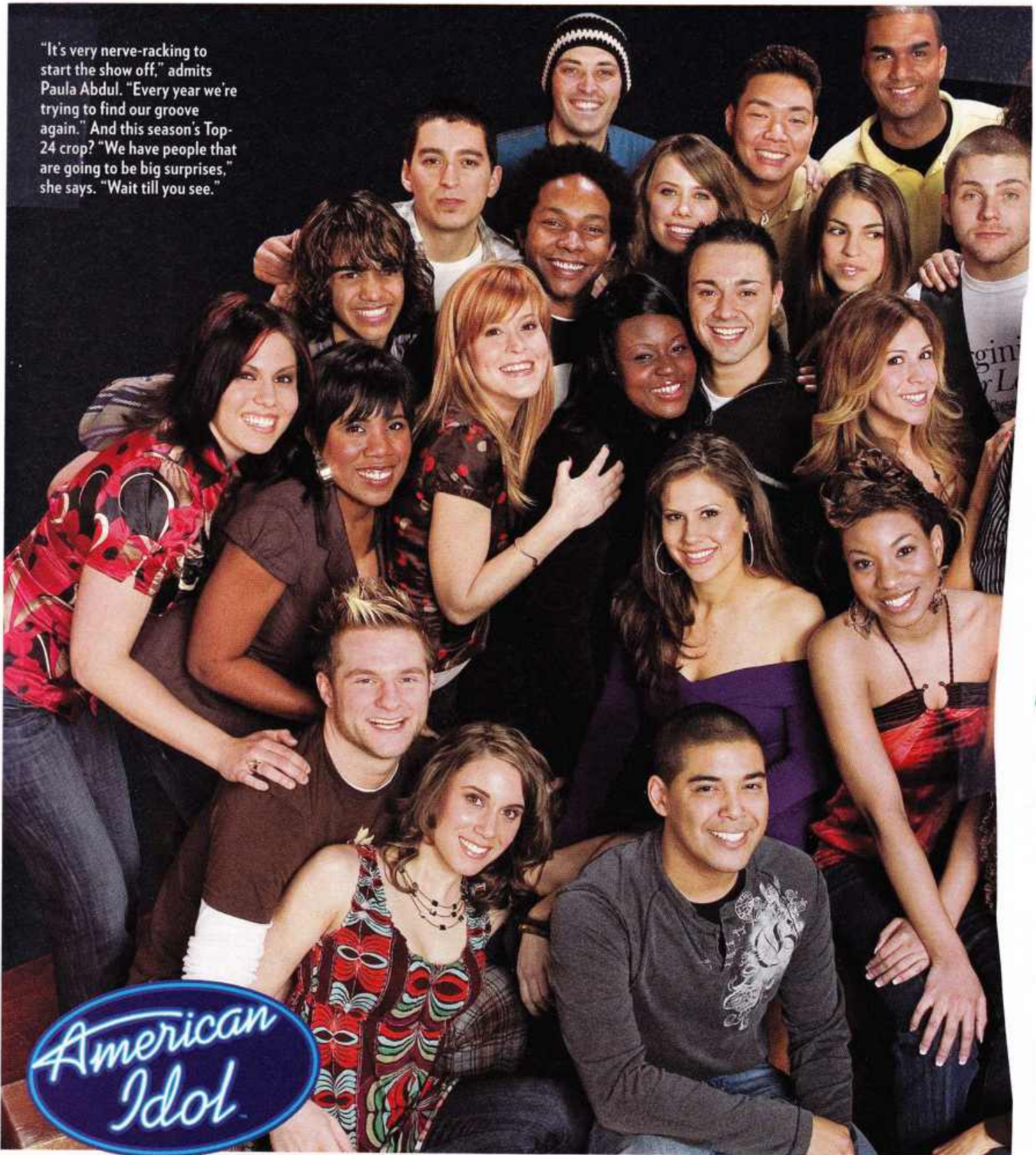


"It's very nerve-racking to start the show off," admits Paula Abdul. "Every year we're trying to find our groove again." And this season's Top 24 crop? "We have people that are going to be big surprises," she says. "Wait till you see."



CLASS OF 2007

One's already homesick, another's a plus-size model, two are worship leaders, five are married, and all are vying to be the next American Idol. Meet this season's Top 24



JORDIN SPARKS, 17

Glendale, Ariz.

Although Simon Cowell called the daughter of former NFL star Phillippi Sparks "a little bit too sugary for my taste," those who know Sparks think Cowell will soon develop a sweet tooth. "Jordin is a blazing whirl of life," says Allison Metcalf Allen, who in 2005 cast Sparks in a Nashville musical she'd written. The homeschooled teen also models for the plus-size clothing line Torrid.

Why she could win: She already beat out 500 singers to win "Arizona Idol," a contest sponsored by a FOX affiliate in Phoenix. Plus, says Allen, "Jordin is always, always singing—she's a thoroughbred who's meant to race."



MELINDA DOOLITTLE, 29

Brentwood, Tenn.

The ex-backup singer for CeCe Winans and Aaron Neville has a growing fan base. "She recently opened up her MySpace page and saw over 700 messages," says Tiffany Wills, a friend since junior high. **Why she could win:** "She's a stand-out," says Winans. "She'd be an excellent role model."



SUNDANCE HEAD, 28

Porter, Texas

Singer Roy Head reports that his son Sundance "has already told me, 'I'm homesick, Dad!' He'd rather be in the woods than anywhere."

Except, of course, onstage, or at home with his wife, Misty, and their 3-month-old son Levi.

Why he could win: "I'm blown away by his musical talents," says Dad. "He plays piano like Elton John, and he has the perfect name for an entertainer."

