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Christmas takes a back seat at ITV

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ITV IS ducking out of the traditional Christmas ratings battle because advertisers want its best shows held back for the start of the January sales.

A low-key season, announced today, will be dominated by archive compilations and special editions of long-running series.

Network chiefs see little point in broadcasting their best programmes at a time when most viewers take a few days off from shopping.

Christmas Day highlights include a service from Bradford Cathedral; a contest between the Gladiators and sporting celebrities Vinny Jones, boxer Gary Mason and 400m runner Derek Redmond, and a meeting between presenter Phillip Schofield and the Walton sextuplets.

A tribute to Les Dawson is the most promising of the archive shows. Others include Michael Aspel's selection of 25 years of ITV talk shows, and a best of Blind Date - with Alex and Sue Tatham, the first couple to marry after picking each other on the show.

The line-up of films is headed by Kevin Costner's Field of Dreams and there will also be screenings of Arachnophobia; Police Academy 6; The Man With The Golden Gun; Joe Versus the Volcano - with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan; Suspect, starring Cher, and Danielle Steel's Heartbeat.

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