



# FUN TO SPARE!

*Whether you bowl in the slow lane or the fast, there's a queer league for you*

by Inga Sorensen • photos by Linda Kliever

**M**ore than a dozen years ago, Mike Buliavac, then 25, was struggling to come out as a gay man. Ironically, Buliavac, a fuzzy guy—who says he'd like to get "even fuzzier"—was jittery about delving into the bar scene.

"It made me kind of nervous. I was just coming out and it seemed too cruisy," says Buliavac, now 38. "I was looking for something that was more suitable to my personality and interests."

About the same time, Roni Lang, then in his early 50s, was embarking upon his own coming out journey. Lang, a heterosexual man who cross-dresses, was searching for a venue that would help him ease into the *public* life of a transgendered person. (From here on in, at Lang's request, we will use only the name "Roni" and the pronoun "she.")

In 1984 both found exactly what they needed: the Portland Community Bowling Association, a gay and lesbian bowling league established in 1979 by Tom Geil, a man who candidly cops to being "not such a good bowler" but nevertheless loves bringing people together.

From the leathers to the transgenders to the dykes to the gay boys, Geil has managed to, during the past two decades, merge all the eclectic elements of the queer community to enjoy one of this nation's most heralded populist pastimes—bowling, a sport that is coincidentally plagued by as many stereotypes as are queers.

The fortysomething Geil, who came out "on June 14, Flag Day, 1973," remembers how tough it was being gay in those days. Like many sexual minority young people in the 1970s and early 1980s,

Geil, a lifelong Oregonian who graduated from Jesuit High School and later earned a college degree from Portland State University, had few options for meeting other lesbian and gay folk.

"It wasn't an easy process," he says. "I fell into a deep depression, and even went to a psychiatrist—an old sage with hands crippled by arthritis—who basically advised me to be a good person, to do my job well, to let people get to know me for who I was as a person, and to do good for others. Those were very wise words."

Though Geil gradually became more comfortable with being gay, there remained that nagging problem of limited opportunities for socializing with other "members of the family."

"Twenty years ago, all there was were the bars

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and the court. I had always liked to do a variety of things, like camping and roller-skating," says Geil, who lives in Southwest Portland.

"For some reason, I stopped doing those things when I came out. I basically hung around at the bars with the guys. I thought to myself: 'Why should I stop doing all those other activities that I enjoy so much now that I'm out?' I also wanted to bring lesbians and gay men together. In those days, there

was a real division in the community along gender lines," he says.

In the summer of 1976—despite his having no historical or emotional kinship to the sport of bowling—Geil decided to organize the "1st Annual Terrific Tournament," which was held in conjunction with the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court's title-holding contest.

"Why bowling? I guess because it's fun and cheap. It's neutral in that it attracts both men and women," explains Geil. "I know that some people have the perception that only beer-guzzling, cigarette-smoking bubbas bowl, but that simply isn't true. It's really family- and community-oriented fun. It's wholesome. It seemed like a natural choice."

An estimated 30 people turned out for the Terrific Tournament, which took place at Portland's Grand Central Bowl. The now-defunct gay and drag hangout Dahl & Penne took first place in the competition. Due to popular demand, the tournament was held the following two years.

According to Geil, by 1979 there was enough interest in queer bowling to form the Portland Community Bowling Association, then a 10-team league with 50 bowlers.

In 1983, PCBA joined the International Gay

Bowling Association, which now encompasses more than 20,000 members throughout the world. IGBO touts itself as the largest gay and lesbian sporting organization in the world.

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Three years earlier, Geil helped launch the Rosebowl Classic Invitational Tournament, always held the weekend after Memorial Day, which also grew in popularity; in 1995 the tournament hosted nearly 300 bowlers from throughout the country, as well as Canada and New Zealand. With a prize fund in excess of \$8,000, Geil says the tournament continues to attract participants from around the world.

"Gay men and lesbians were clearly hungry for social activities," he says.

Forty-two-year-old Renée Cherry, who joined PCBA in 1984, agrees: "I bowled as a kid and enjoyed it. PCBA got me back into the sport as well as involved in the gay community, and it was a wonderful alternative to the bars."

Cherry, who currently bowls for a PCBA team

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