

FUN TO SPARE

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called Legs Up High, adds, "It was really my only contact with gay men, which was important to me. There was a huge separatist movement in the 1980s which I didn't want to be a part of. This gave me a chance to get involved with gay women and gay men."

According to Geil, PCBA's membership has averaged about 35 percent women and 65 percent men. This year, he says, women make up 40 percent of the membership.

The league has been a place for mixing genders, and sometimes blending them. At 64, Roni, a former U.S. Air Force service member and retired Tektronix employee, now lives openly and comfortably as a woman "80 to 90 percent of the time," and bowling helped get her there.

"As a transgendered person, I believe I have a lot in common with gay men and lesbians," says Roni, an active member of the Northwest Gender Alliance, the Sexual Minority Roundtable, Veterans for Human Rights, and the newly formed Coalition for Community Communication. "First and foremost, we all have closets to come out of."

Roni admits, however, that it took a little while for lesbians and gay men to warm up to her in those early days.

"The lesbians were wary because they looked at me and saw a man, and the gay men were wary because they didn't understand why I was dressed in a skirt and makeup," she says. "It all worked out in the end, though. They learned about transgendered people, while I got to learn more about gays and lesbians."

Roni has also roller-skated, water-skied and snow-skied as a female. "I've even taken an Amtrak train trip as a female," she laughs. "That's a real gas."

According to Geil, PCBA's golden rule is for members to have fun and experience fellowship. PCBA, whose members bowl on Sundays from morning to early afternoon, is more loosely structured than leagues that are sanctioned. PCBA's league average is 132, which is respectable, but far from impressive.

He says many leagues, including the Friday-night, gay-oriented FITS (Fuck It, Tomorrow's Saturday) are sanctioned, which essentially means they are more costly, more competitive, and have a stricter set of rules and regulations for their members to follow.

Members of sanctioned leagues also pay sanction fees to a governing body called the American Bowling Congress and/or the Women's International Bowling Congress. PCBA has consistently voted against aligning itself with the ABC in order to ensure a freer and more social atmosphere. PCBA league bowlers pay \$7 per session; FITS league bowlers pay \$9.

PCBA's season is 16 weeks, running from January until mid-May, as opposed to the more rigorous 30-week season sponsored by many sanctioned leagues, including FITS.

"That's just too much of a commitment for some people," says Geil. "We understand that there are many people in our community who belong to other organizations that also require their attention."

So PCBA keeps it loose. The league sponsors bowling events and raffles where bowlers may wind up walking away with a cash jackpot.

In the earlier days, when local bar owners were said to be concerned that the then-fledgling PCBA might cut into their business, the league held "Bar Appreciation" gatherings—after bowling, members would head over to a designated bar for drinks and finger foods, darts or Bingo. It was a way of saying, "We're not here to undermine your business. We are here to help it." For many years, in fact, bars have sponsored PCBA teams.

PCBA gives each league member a certificate of participation and a special league pin, and encourages new bowlers to come to the lanes.

"Teams are always looking for substitutes," says Geil. "It's a good way to see if you like it."

PCBA also sponsors special events including a "Weird Bowl," where people do, well, weird things, like bowl with a balloon between their knees or try to get the lowest score—without throwing gutter

balls. Local dignitaries, including former Portland Mayor Bud Clark and retired Portland Police Chief Tom Potter have rolled the season's first ball—a special clear bowling ball with a rose in the center.

"We're here to have fun, and we do," says Cherry, an engineering coordinator for Northwest Natural Gas. She's been with the company 15 years and started there "digging ditches."

"One day when we were bowling, someone said they needed some firewood," she says. "So when we were finished bowling, we got in my truck, found some firewood, packed it up and hauled it over to their house. We just do those kinds of things for each other."

According to Geil, there are PCBA bowlers in the 80 score range as well as those in the 180s and 190s.

"You don't have to be good," states a PCBA promotional flyer, "just interested and supportive of your team!"

FITS is first and foremost a bowling league, with a few social activities on the side," says FITS founder and former league secretary Rich Knittle, a self-employed contractor who lives in Southeast Portland.

Knittle, who turns 40 in April, says he got the idea

"We're also allowed to bowl in any sanctioned tournament in the country," adds FITS secretary Doug Overfield, 26, who joined the league in 1992 after moving to Portland from Nebraska. "You can't do that unless you're sanctioned."

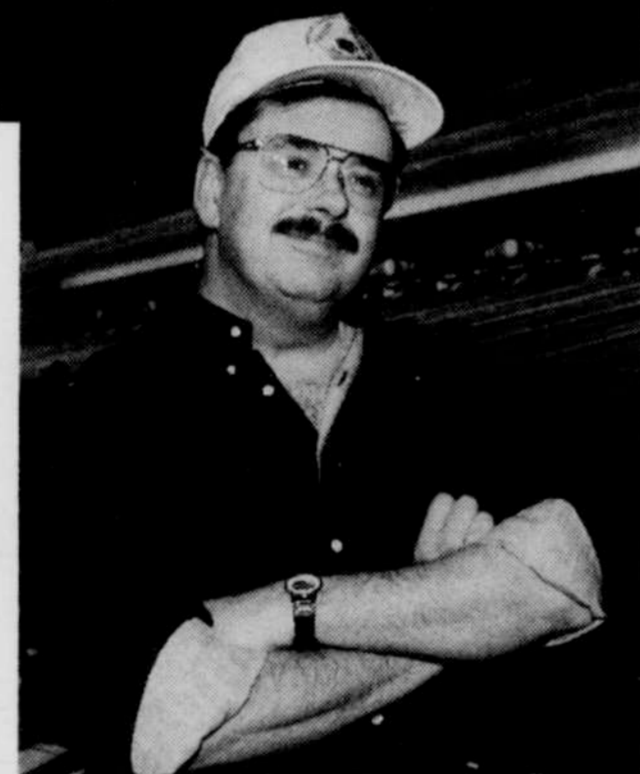
In the spring of 1988 Knittle approached *Just Out*, which ran a piece about the new league's formation. "Ten people showed up at the bowling alley [Pro 300 Lanes on Southeast Powell Boulevard] that first time," says Knittle.

Two weeks later the group started bowling during Wednesday Mixers [which still bowls during the summer]; the Friday night league kicked into gear soon after.

"For the first two years we had about nine teams. Then we went to 12, then to 16," says Knittle. In 1995, FITS grew to 28 teams, and earlier this year, 36 teams "filled the house" on Friday nights, before dropping down to the current 34 teams.

"Before we got so big, we would share the lanes with other straight leagues," recounts Overfield, who works for a Portland temp service and bowls on an all-male team called Pacific Princesses.

"We never had any problems. I never heard of any derogatory remarks or anything like that, though they *definitely* knew we were a gay league," he laughs.



Tom Geil

to form a sanctioned gay and lesbian bowling league several years ago after visiting Atlanta, Ga.

"There were 14 bowling leagues there—fourteen," he says. "I thought that was great and felt that Portland could conceivably support multiple leagues."

Back in the mid-1980s Knittle also managed a local shoe store, "and the retail schedule didn't allow me to bowl on Sundays."

"So I decided to start up a league," he says. "From the beginning I wanted it to be sanctioned, because I like the structure of a sanctioned league.... Let's face it, if you are a competitive bowler, you want to know that if you shoot a 300 you will get national recognition."

Knittle, who has reached that persistently elusive pinnacle—the 300 game—has averaged 205 in a season. His average now hovers in the 190s.

While pleased with FITS' enormous growth, Knittle admits that Friday night bowling "has lost some of its intimacy. In the early days when there were eight teams, I knew everybody," he says. "That isn't the case anymore."

According to Overfield, men comprise an estimated 75 percent of FITS' membership; women make up the remaining 25 percent.

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Due in part to FITS' evolution, Knittle has pulled back from the league a bit, and no longer handles administrative duties.

"I just bowl," he says, adding, "I think the growth proves that there is a great deal of interest in our community for this, and I believe it proves that we can have even more leagues in the future. Personally, however, it's time for me to step back. I'm a happily married man, and my work schedule makes it tough to put as much time into [FITS] as I did in the past."

Over the years PCBA has experienced ebbs and flows in its membership.

Geil says currently there are 80 regulars [20

teams], which is down dramatically from the mid-1980s. He cites the establishment of other gay and lesbian organizations, as well as the founding of FITS as factors contributing to the dip in membership.

Additionally, an estimated 60 PCBA members have died of AIDS complications over the years.

"I've had four teammates die of AIDS," says Cherry. "It's been painful to watch, but I try to be there for them. I tell them they have to come back again next year."

"I never knew anyone with AIDS before getting involved in the [queer] bowling leagues," says 31-year-old Lauren Pike, coordinator of the 1996 Rosebowl Classic. "I now have good friends who are HIV positive, and it's been very, very hard, because I know I will eventually lose them. I fear the moment when that happens."

As a younger person, Pike, a pharmaceutical technician who lives in Aloha, was being primed for the professional bowlers' circuit. She burned out, however, and took several years off.

Later she learned of PCBA by reading an alternative publication and decided to check it out.

"At that point in my life, I was also trying to find the gay community, which I had not been involved with. So it was perfect. It's really renewed my interest in bowling, and I got to meet other gay people. I now have a community," says Legs Up High's Pike, whose average ranges from the 180s to the 190s (translation: she's darn good).

Pike currently bowls for both PCBA and FITS, as does Buliavac, whose average is consistent with Pike's.

"Sunday is looser and more social. It's a little more serious on Fridays. I think the leagues really do complement each other," says Buliavac, whose FITS and PCBA teams are composed of Bears—that is, furry gay men and their admirers. His FITS team is aptly named "Bear It," while his PCBA team is dubbed "Bears R Us."

Buliavac, a lifelong Oregonian, grew up bowling with his dad, who lives in the area.

"He keeps saying he'll come watch. He hasn't made it yet," he says. "He might be confused if he did show up, after all, I'm still trying to explain to him what a Bear is."

For me, this was never about bowling," says Geil, "it has *always* been about community. I'm proud of what we've been able to do."

Over the years, PCBA has raised money for several gay and AIDS organizations, including Cascade AIDS Project, Esther's Pantry, the No on 9 Campaign, the Pride of the Rose Scholarship Fund, and Equity Foundation.

"You know, I've learned a lot about myself [from queer bowling]," adds Cherry. "Many years ago when we were at an out-of-town tournament, Tom asked me to talk in front of this crowd of 350 to 400 people. We were at a reception, and he had to leave."

"Well, I had never done that before," she recounts. "And here are all these people in front of me. I got up there and just started cracking joke after joke. I never knew I had it in me until then. I brought down the house. I've been emceeding our tournament events nearly every year since then."

For Overfield, FITS has led to a sense of community. "I didn't know anyone when I first moved to Portland," he says. "[FITS] really opened the door for me in terms of meeting other people in the gay community."

FITS bowling, meanwhile, is getting Pike back into her competitive mode. "Before I'm 35 I'd like to go semi-pro for a couple of years," she says. "I'm trying to hone my skills."

Roni, meanwhile, has tested herself via PCBA. "I remember in those early days when I asked Tom if I could sell ads for the [Rosebowl Classic] program," says Roni. "I'm sure he was wondering what people would think when this cross-dressing guy came walking into their business in his skirt and high heels. Being Tom, however, he said, 'Go for it.' I put on my five-inch heels and went for it—and did great. I've been selling those ads ever since."

For more information about PCBA, call 293-0438. To contact FITS, call 771-2345.