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Bowling for Porcupine

It's not easy being furry

BY MIKE SEELY

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Put yourself in the shoes -- make that *paws* -- of Tyger Cowboy, leader of the St. Louis-based UniFursal Zoo, a 60-strong group of anthropomorphic-animal enthusiasts. Known to the public at large as "furries" or "furs," Cowboy (given name: Christopher Roth) and his predominantly gay cohorts have been portrayed by the mainstream media as a subculture of sexually deviant freaks who like to, at best, dress up like Fredbird and do the wild thing in full regalia or, at worst -- how to put this delicately? -- take advantage of plush stuffed animals.

"They took the 1 percent of furry fringe," contends the six-foot-five-inch Cowboy, a travel agent by day who lives with his partner, Jack Below, and four canines in -- where else? -- Dogtown. "They touched very, very lightly on the good."

The "good" to which Cowboy refers is the work he and his fellow fursuiters do for St. Louis-area hospitals, nonprofits and (hold the snickers) animal charities. The furs make appearances in area malls to collect money for the Open Door Animal Sanctuary and recently appeared at the Hairball event, held this year at the Pageant Theatre, which raised funds to benefit shelters for battered women. Still, libidinous public perception can make it difficult for Cowboy and company to get their tails and fangs in the door at, say, Cardinal Glennon.

A March 2001 feature in *Vanity Fair* outed furries as "people whose interest in animal characters goes further than an appreciation for *The Lion King*" and described "a little opening ... a tear in the seam" between the legs of a stuffed animal owned by a randy enthusiast. Occupying another spot near the center of the UniFursal Zoo's dartboard of dismay is Los Angeles-based photographer and filmmaker Rick Castro, a gay bondage enthusiast who produced a documentary on furries for MTV's *Sex2K*. As the series' name suggests, Castro's 30-minute segment homed in on certain attendees

By Ryan Hudson



This bowling lion can do a whole lot more than roar.

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of a Los Angeles convention whose enthusiasm for all things anthropomorphic boiled down to throwing their cuddly stuffed dogs a bone.

Cowboy thinks Castro's coverage of the convention gave short shrift to mainstream furies, an offshoot of science-fiction fandom that gathered steam by way of fan zines and the fledgling Internet before exploding onto the science-fiction-convention scene in the plush in the '90s.

"It's probably the first social group created online that has become real," Castro says of the furies.

Castro, who has another furry documentary set to air in the near future on HBO's *Real Sex*, acknowledges that he focused his lens on the sexual aspect. "Because I've done fetish art my whole life, that's what clicked with me," the filmmaker says. "But soon after, I realized it wasn't just that. It was this whole social identity that crossed all borders. There were reborn-Christian furs, lawyer furs -- all walks of life. The only common bond was an interest in anthropomorphic attitudes."

But, argues Castro, sex is what sells: "Gay life -- is that all sex-based? No, but that's what originally drove the opinion of what gay people are for years."

Still, had Castro's film fleshed out a nuanced understanding of the fur, Tyger Cowboy's life would be a lot easier right now.

In a ritual akin to the pregame meal pro athletes share, Cowboy and six fellow furies are wolfing down chicken livers and medium-rare slabs of steak at Chris' Pancake and Dining near the Hill in anticipation of a few frames of bowling at Sunset Lanes in Crestwood on the Friday before Memorial Day.

Conversation centers on buying "plush" (furry vernacular for stuffed animals) on eBay and a debate about whether Richard Moll's perennially bald Bull on *Night Court* ever had hair. In other words, it's a scene not unlike the ones that take place at the outcasts' table in countless high-school cafeterias every day.

Two members of the group, R.C. and Quasi, have driven all the way from Carbondale, Illinois, for the semiregular roll. Most of the guys are in their thirties and are sporting shirts with caricatures of the animal they'll dress up as at the bowling alley, where management always reserves a private changing room for the group. Contrary to the *Sex2K* portrayal, this group of gay men exudes about as much lascivious energy as a bowl of milk-free Grape-Nuts (save for Quasi, who sports a T-shirt that proclaims, "Weapon of Ass Destruction").

After supper, the Furs make the short automotive migration to the bowling alley. Friday is "Cosmic Bowl" night at Sunset Lanes -- the lights are dim, Jennifer Lopez pulsates and gin-and-tonics run a mere buck-ninety.

With their fursuits stuffed in duffel bags, the furs saunter to the alley's easternmost two lanes. Below -- Cowboy's live-in partner, who goes by the moniker Spiked Punch (a.k.a. Spike) when clad as a rottweiler -- whips out a glowing-skull bowling ball identical to the one Janeane Garofalo used in *Mystery Men*, a camp classic among this group.

"When we're suited up, our games tend to go down the hole," Spike warns, "except for Quasi, who actually does better in his suit."

After four warm-up frames, Quasi emerges from the dressing room dolled up as a disco skunk (complete with car air-fresheners on his tail) and promptly rolls a strike. Tyger Cowboy, who dresses not as a tiger but as a wolf, takes a little longer to find his groove but eventually masters the two-handed granny technique and is creeping toward 100 by the tenth frame.

Although some furs' costumes resemble the chewed-up stuff of rookie-league mascots, hardcore fanatics have been known to spend thousands of dollars on their suits. Cowboy says he's blown a total of about \$7,000 on a half-dozen suits. The wolf, replete with teeth purchased from a local taxidermy-supply store, is among the most elaborate.

By the second game, the two lanes feature a lion, rottweiler, skunk, bunny and wolf. Sunset's other patrons emit expressions ranging from good-hearted amusement to gape-mouthed befuddlement. The 'suiters, meanwhile, are having a veritable ball, dancing nonstop to the music and hamming it up for onlookers.

"Most of the time, you're probably safe in saying that they don't exactly fit in," says Mary Stadter, who, like Cowboy, sits on the board of directors of ShowMeCon, an annual science-fiction convention that will be held this year at the Four Points Sheraton in Earth City in July. "They're not the captain of the football team or the head cheerleader. You might see people who are tremendously shy in the real world, but in their suits, they're extroverts."

The sexually charged media coverage of the furs has hindered the group's acceptance in the sci-fi community as well, Stadter says. But she's quick to point out that Cowboy is chairing this year's ShowMeCon -- the first fur to achieve such a distinction in a St. Louis community that has long been dominated by *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* fanatics.

Castro points to the Trekkers' early struggles as evidence that furs need not adopt a Chicken Little attitude.

"Back in the early '40s, when they had science-fiction conventions the regular community thought it was the anti-Christ," notes the documentarian. "It wasn't understood or accepted -- much like the furies now."

Castro adds that a small subset of Trekkers fetishize Mr. Spock's tantalizing ears and engage in Vulcan-Klingon sex parties. In other words, no matter the group, there's always going to be a radically adventurous faction.

Cowboy agrees, citing Queer Nation's prominence in the gay community. "They were very flamboyant, very everything that most [gay] people aren't," he says. "In the Christian community, you've got the Moral Majority. In the black community, you've got Black Panthers. They almost go over that edge into insanity."

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