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Slinky dancers strip down—almost

By Trevor McArthur
 Staff Reporter

The band winds down its regular set with a good slow metal ballad, then thanks the audience for all its kindness and enthusiasm, making a bunch of pandering jokes about how well they've heard Lincoln residents can party.

But now it's time for the main event of the evening, for which many have assembled — the Wednesday night Royal Grove dance contest.

According to Royal Grove owner Tommy Jelsma, the Grove has been hosting some sort of dance contest for about 30 years, with occasional short periods of interruption.

Although the present incarnation of the dance contest largely revolves around dancers removing most of their clothing, Jelsma said, he does not enjoy the title "amateur strip night" because the contest is not limited to amateurs. Professional dancers also participate, he said. And the emphasis is on dancing, not stripping. Real strip dancing, done by professionals, can be found at the Grove every morning and late afternoon.

But the contest does give participants a chance to bare it all (almost) in front of his or her peers.

Now back to the event, live and in progress.

The men's category is first. It takes a few minutes of chiding from the band before grey-haired Bill, a regular customer wearing Fruit of the Looms with a blue stripe, gets up, serenaded with a cover of Guns and Roses' hit "Sweet Child O' Mine."

Contestants are easier to come by after this. Mark strips to his jeans. Then Royal Grove and dance contest regular "Big Al" comes forward. The band's singer makes cracks

about what his nickname really refers to. But his glasses and beer belly give him an almost modest appearance, until the pants come off and the blue bikini briefs with a red mouth and tongue appear.

The next dancer — who just moved here from California — is "Hollywood," the first person with much real dancing ability. After him comes Pete, who seems to be a professional, complete with tear-away pants.

At one point during Pete's routine, while fraternizing with the front row of the audience, Jelsma is forced to intrude. An audience member had been reaching out for closer contact, against state law which says audiences cannot have physical contact with dancers. "Tipping is allowed, as long as the money is handed and not placed in the dancer's costume."

Three more dancers perform. "Sweet Child O' Mine" is played again for one, and another grooves to a heavy metal version of Wild Cherry's disco classic "Play That Funky Music." Then it's time for judging.

Local boy Bill wins first place and the top cash prize with cheers that nearly bring the house down. Pete is next with a fair amount of noise made for him, but not like the racket in Bill's honor.

In a post-game interview, "Big Al," a Lincoln resident, said he has been coming out to dance in the contest for about five years and began decorating his underwear about three years ago when some friends gave him what he described as an elephant G-string.

"Big Al" says he likes the dance contest as a friendly event, agreeing with others that the sexual element is not the most important.

"Sometimes you do get sex afterwards, but it just depends upon the

crowd that night," Al said.

James Willits, a Grove regular who said so far he has resisted temptations to get up and dance, described the participants as a mix between regular patrons and newcomers. Even daytime dancers are coming out to mix with the evening crowd, Willits said.

"It's a real good time," Willits said. "A lot of people come out."

As soon as the men are clothed and clear the floor it's time for the women. Again it takes a while to find contestants. The lead singer of the band goes up to the rail around the dance floor to talk some courage into likely candidates.

Finally Dawn comes forward. Previously she had led the cheering section for Bill. When she reaches the stage she almost backs out. But once the music begins, the modesty comes off with her overshirt. Dawn also helps to demonstrate the second important law of nude dancing in Nebraska.

According to Jelsma, present law requires any dancer to have on at least enough garments to cover the pubic region and buttocks, a requirement which Dawn's undergarments do not appear to meet. Any time she starts to pull down her black trousers, Jelsma cautions her to keep them on.

Dancers who flagrantly violate state statutes can be disqualified or expelled from the establishment.

But Dawn complies with the law, just going to the fringe of the allowable.

Then Angela is coaxed and pulled up front. Initially she seems even more modest and embarrassed, but when the band starts beating out those jungle rhythms, she starts her routine.

It continues. Kelly is another good dancer. Another apparent professional, Ambrosia, goes out to

the tune of, once more, "Sweet Child of Mine."

Six gals do routines. For one last look in determining the best before judging, they all hit the dance floor at once.

Tonight Angela walks away with top honors.

A little while after the excitement, the evening's first female dancer, Dawn Wesley, agreed to talk.

Wesley, a Lincoln resident and Grove regular, said she does not dance very often, but this was not her first time. She said exposing herself to a crowd of strangers does not worry her.

"The only concern is what I have to take at work the next day," Wesley said. "Sometimes I've gotten a little ribbing and that kind of thing. But otherwise I figure it's my decision — it's what I want to do. I'm my own person . . ."

Wesley said the dance contest was not really a competition.

"It's fun," she said. ". . . A lot of the girls dance down at clubs and that kind of thing, professionally. And since this is labeled 'amateur night,' I feel like I'm more of an amateur than the other girls that get out there."

"So I'm more or less out there just having a good time, showing my friends that, 'hey, I'm free-spined' and stuff. And a lot of people take that kind of like, 'Oh God. This girl is really easy.' But my really good friends know that I'm not like that."

Jelsma said the contest is open to any patron of the bar who does not want it to be labeled an amateur event.

"It has never been. I wouldn't want to be in the position of saying 'You're an amateur, you're not,' Jelsma said.



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