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This sports bar gives gay fans reason to cheer

Outa Bounds met with skepticism, found success in untapped market.

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John Beagh could be himself on Friday night.

He wore a bright green Kansas cap, the one his straight buddy told him he couldn't wear last weekend, and he cheered nearly every play of KU's victory over Niagara in the NCAA Tournament.

When the game ended, Beagh did what any good Jayhawk would do. He sang the "Rock Chalk Jayhawk" chant. Only, nobody joined in.

"Bunch of queens," Beagh said, laughing. "They don't know what to do."

This was certainly different from watching from his seat in Allen Fieldhouse. But, that's life at Outa Bounds Sports Bar & Grill, Kansas City's only gay sports bar.

It's a place where crazed KU fan Steven Piatt can belt out, "I LOVE THE JAYHAWKS!" and, moments later, jump out of his seat and kiss the bartender on the lips.

It's a place where, one night last week, half the patrons wanted to watch the KU game and the other half wanted to watch "American Idol." Unfortunately for those hoping to listen to Simon Cowell, the game won out and was played over the bar speakers.

"Some people were pissed," Outa Bounds co-owner Doug Knetzer says. "But that's what we are. We're a sports bar. Sports always take precedence."

Midtown Kansas City isn't alone in welcoming a gay sports bar. Cities like Boston, San Francisco and Phoenix have had one for more than a decade, and in the past five years, they've started to pop up in cities all over the country. Many see it as another barrier falling in a cultural conflict that has often left gay men feeling shut out.

But, even among gay men and lesbians, Outa Bounds' opening in October 2005 was met with plenty of skepticism. A gay sports bar?

"I thought it was an oxymoron to be honest," says Shon Hall, an Outa Bounds patron and diehard Chiefs fan. "I've always watched sports with straight friends."

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Kansas City has many gay bars to choose from, but until partners Doug Knetzer and Alan

Rogers started paying the rent at 3601 Broadway, there was nowhere to sit down, relax and watch a game.

The same problem prompted other cities to open gay sports bars as early as 1983. That's when Fritz's Lounge opened in Boston's South End. Uncle Bert's Place in San Francisco followed in the late '80s, then Roscoe's in Phoenix opened in '96.

But it wasn't until 2002 that gay sports bars really started to take off. There was Woofs on Piedmont in Atlanta, then Sidekicks in Austin, Texas, then Crew in Chicago and Gym Sports Bar in New York. Kansas City, Fort Lauderdale and Washington, D.C., have recently joined the party.

Gym, which opened in March '05, has thrived in New York's gay-friendly Chelsea district. But even in cosmopolitan New York, co-owner Rick Schmutzler was met with resistance from bankers and investors.

"I was literally laughed out of several meetings," Schmutzler says. "I said, 'All right, fine.' I had a lot of knowledge, research and personal experience, and they had cultural biases about why it wouldn't work. Cultural biases are strong."

Here in the heartland, Knetzer started to realize how much his community needed a sports bar. Knetzer and Rogers had many friends who loved sports. Usually, they would host watch parties at each other's houses on Chiefs Sundays. Planning those outings every weekend eventually got tiring.

"If I had a dime," Knetzer says, "for every time someone said, 'I wish we had a sports bar.' ..."

But they didn't have one. While some gay men feel comfortable in traditional sports bars, many at Outa Bounds said they don't. Garen Shorten says that he hasn't been to a "straight sports bar" in years.

"I think we have to mask who we are when we go to those places, for fear," Knetzer says. "Unless you're there with girlfriends."

Says Greg Razer, "It would be hard for a big group of gay and lesbian people to go to a straight sports bar. I think it's the same thing that made me uncomfortable playing sports as a kid. There's still this very masculine, chest-pounding feeling to it. It just makes you feel like you can't be yourself."

In reality, Razer knows that most patrons at traditional sports bars wouldn't care at all.

"But you get that one drunk idiot who could make a scene," Razer says.

So, after hearing enough complaints, Knetzer convinced Rogers that a gay sports bar would work. The couple bought the place in July '05, and their friends rejoiced.

"I think people that are gay have a passion for life that will roll over into sports," says Piatt, who works construction and kisses bartenders. "If it's important to straight people, then it's important to me. I love my teams."

III

While Outa Bounds may not be your average sports bar, it is also not your average gay bar.

Every once in a while, a guy wearing leather pants will stop in. Or a drag queen. But those moments are very rare. Outa Bounds is not a meat market.

"A lot of people go to these gay bars that are looking for a (hook-up)," says Shorten, who visits Outa Bounds often. "I'm coming down here to hang out with friends, have a good time and watch whatever is on the air."

The thing that makes Outa Bounds stand out the most among gay bars? It has windows. Take a drive past Missie B's or Buddies Lounge and the other gay spots in midtown, and there are either no windows or, if they do have them, the blinds are drawn. Most gay bars have chosen over the years to shield themselves from the community at large.

Not Outa Bounds. Large-pane windows greet visitors from either side of the corner location.

"Go to gay bars during the day, and you're in a cave," Knetzer says. "You can't see out. Unless the sun is going down, we keep the blinds open all the time. We don't have anything to hide."

In a year-and-a-half, Outa Bounds has become a neighborhood bar and grill. On Friday, a group of lesbian KU fans cheered quietly at a table near the front. Straight women and straight couples who live in midtown stop in as well. Many say they like the clean atmosphere and the food. Straight men bring their wives or girlfriends because they know their significant others won't get hit on.

In fact, if you walked in off the street during the day, here's what you would see: Pennants and photos of athletes and coaches line the walls, and 13 HD-ready flat-panel TVs are available to show the game of your choice.

Still, even with pool, darts and Texas Hold 'Em tournaments on select nights, Outa Bounds is a gay bar. On Thursday night, as Duke struggled with Virginia Commonwealth in the NCAA Tournament, a straight man sat down at the bar. Within 10 minutes, patrons were taking a poll of his sexual orientation. When told he was straight, the group was noticeably disappointed.

And while most local sports fans give up on the Royals by May, gay sports fans have

other reasons to stay interested. Last summer, it seemed like every time Royals center fielder and universal heartthrob David DeJesus came to the plate, somebody at Outa Bounds yelled, "DAVID'S BATTING!"

"It would be 12-2, Royals losing, and the bar would get very quiet when he'd come to the plate," says Razer, who used to tend bar at Outa Bounds. "It's not a stretch to say that David DeJesus has a lot of fans here."

There are more subtle hints, like the sandwich section of the menu that's labeled "Between the Buns."

But, in the end, it is a sports bar, which means the place erupted when VCU's Eric Maynor hit the jumper that ended Duke's season. It appears that, if there is one common denominator for sports fans these days, it's a shared joy in watching the Blue Devils lose.

III

Most of the gay sports fans interviewed for this story have a similar tale. They grew up liking sports, but stopped playing youth sports because they knew they were different. Even early on, the sporting world wasn't for them.

"I remember being 6 or 7 years old, playing t-ball," Razer says, "and I can remember having a crush on a boy on my team. You know how Charlie Brown had a crush and didn't understand what that meant? I realized I shouldn't tell anybody this. At 6 or 7, I closeted myself."

Many years later, as a sophomore at Missouri, Razer came out. He was an avid Tigers fan, and, the next year, he was chosen to be the school's mascot, Truman the Tiger.

Yes, the walls separating sport and gay men are crumbling. In recent years, former NBA player John Amaechi and former NFL player Esera Tuaolo have come out. In fact, Tuaolo was in town last month and stopped by Outa Bounds. It was karaoke night and he joined in.

"There's a sea change that is happening in the gay community," says Schmutzler, a former college football player who owns Gym in New York. "We're growing up and maturing, the same thing that happens with any community that has to fight for their place. I'm waiting for the gay community in general to open its eyes and see how far we've grown and be more comfortable in the spaces that we've carved out."

The gay sports bar is becoming one of those spaces, and it's not going away. Not with fans like Kenny Blyer, who circled his KU national championship pick on his bracket with a heart. Not with fans like Beough, who has spent so much money this year going to KU basketball games that he forced himself to sit out this weekend's games in Chicago. Not with fans like Shorten, who doesn't miss a Chiefs game or NASCAR race.

"My friends know not to call me on a Chiefs Sunday," Shorten says. "I think the straight world would find it ... strange ... how much more common we are than apart."