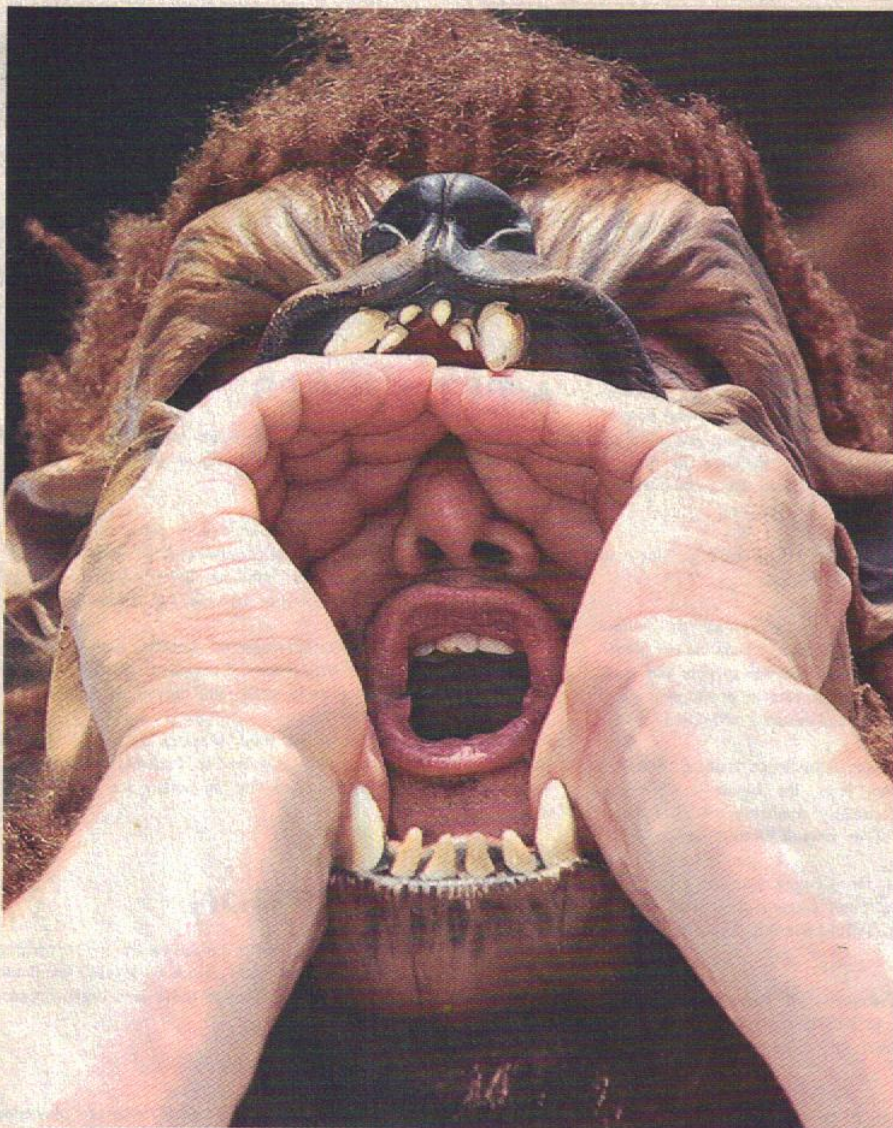




Wolf Pack member Tommy Thompson screams Randy Wolf's name from the 700 level.

**I danced.
I cheered.
I scared
little girls.
A tale of
fandom and
brotherly
love in
troubled
times.**

By Jon Springer

Photos by Tim Hawk

I Was A Philly

WEREWOLF

A Howling Good Time

At right, Rich Wood (left) and Joe Wood celebrate a Randy Wolf strikeout. Below, Out & About contributing writer Jon Springer (left) hangs with the Pack high in the left-field stands at Veterans Stadium.



I'm dressed for a moonlit killing spree at Picadilly Square. I've got pointy pink ears sprouting from a head of brown fur, my crinkled skin the color of spilled coffee. Beneath the flared nostrils of a black, pugged snout, my lips are raised baring a set of jagged, misshapen teeth and a long, rolling tongue. My yellow eyes sport pupils shaped like footballs set on a tee. As I climb ramp after ramp at Veterans Stadium, all the way to the 700 level, my concern isn't how I look but whether I'll fit in. I find Section 739 out in left field and have a seat. I'm early.

The Phillies and the visiting Minnesota Twins are having batting practice and the stands are filling in nicely. It's a hot but gorgeous Sunday afternoon in late June, and it's not only Jimmy Rollins Bobbing Head Doll Day, but Modell's Sporting Goods Run the Bases Day. It'll be a good afternoon at the gate, but not a great one, and that reflects the Phillies' situation. They're

floundering in last place again, and it appears as if one of their best players will soon be leaving town in a contract dispute/personality clash. That those two issues might be related is the story of the season so far and poison to fans.

"They're expecting 40,000 today. But the way they're playing on the field? Aaaahh," says an usher near me whose nameplate identifies him as SAL. "I don't know if it's the Rolen situation or what, but these guys... they can't even put together a two-game winning streak."

I have been drawn to the Vet today to meet with some fans who show up regardless of the standings, the weather, pessimistic newspaper columns or the free stadium giveaways. Today, I'm joining the Wolf Pack.

Not since The Phanatic popped his first wheelie on the first-base line have the Phillies had a more entertaining sideshow. Whenever pitcher Randy Wolf starts for the Phillies, a group of fans wearing wolf masks out in left field cheer him on by dancing and howling in unison. They've spawned a whole bunch of imitators, become a staple of the nightly highlight shows and one of the unique pleasures in watching a rather unsuccessful team in an otherwise charmless stadium over the last few seasons.

More to the point, there's just something funny, and oddly Philadelphian, about grown men in costume, dancing and cheering, making the same joke over and over again, way up there amid thousands

continued on next page



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of empty seats: A Mummer's Parade for baseball. Ever wondered who these people are? I'm about to find out.

Forty-one-year-old Tommy Thompson is the first to arrive. He's stocky and crewcut, wearing a pinstriped Phillies jersey with Number 43 on the back—WOLF in capital letters on top and PACK below—and a pair of high-top canvas Chuck Taylors with an American flag pattern. He's a union sheet metal worker.

When I introduce myself and tell him I hope to join him today, he compliments me on my mask and informs me of the rules. "There's no drinking, no fighting and no cursing in this section." (I was likely to succumb to only one of the three). As to the dancing, Tommy says, "just watch the moves and try to follow."

For today's game, Tommy has brought along his fiancée and seven kids between them. This is a family group all the way. Soon to arrive are two of his brothers—Mark and John—and seven of his cousins from the Wood family: brothers Charles, Patrick, Kevin, Joe, Albert, Jimmy and John. The Woods and Thompsons, who range in age from 24 to 41, are the core of the Wolf Pack and they rarely miss a game.

Actually, they've never missed a game. Randy Wolf, a 25-year-old lefthander from Woodland Hills, Calif., made his Major League debut on June 11, 1999, getting a win in Toronto. And while Wolf was mowing down the Padres in his next start in San Diego, back in Philly, Kevin and Joe Wood were dreaming up a hero's welcome.

"We were playing pool at my brother Albert's house, and we're listening to the Phillies game like we always do," Kevin says. "Curt Schilling had been whining that the Phillies had no pitching, but here they bring this Wolf guy up and he's great. We just wanted to support him and show Curt Schilling that we did have pitching. So we took an old sheet from my mom's closet and wrote WOLF PACK on it, got some masks, and went to his next game."

Wolf won once again, and nothing has stopped the pack since. Not even the wedding of one of its members, Patrick, who showed up for a Wolf start with his wife (still in their wedding clothes) between their ceremony and reception in September of 2000. ("Francona switched the rotation!" Patrick says, explaining his

seemingly poor planning. "We like to think that's why he got fired.") Today's game marks the 44th official gathering of the Pack, and one day past its third anniversary.

The Wolf Pack arranges itself so as to surround the concourse entryway to section 739, from which their banner hangs. They stand in their places for the entire game, masks on, and the arrangement seems peculiarly important. Charles Wood, for example, always stands on the lowest of the three rows they occupy and on the right side of the entryway (left to most of the stadium). Charles is the group's unofficial choreographer and usually has the last word on which dances they'll perform.

"I just try and make the dances easy enough so that the others can pick them up right away," he says. He's not a professional choreographer (he's a Pennsylvania State Trooper), and his decisions are ultimately made for him by the Vet DJ. So when, between innings, the PA sys-



The view from the "cheap seats" is pretty good, says the Wolf Pack.

tem blares Metallica's "Fuel," Charles leads the air-guitar dance—lean left, strum four times, stand straight, strum four times and back again. During the salsa music that accompanies Bobby Abreu's trips to the plate, the Pack collectively shakes its fists and twists at the waist like a team of phantom maraca players.

With one exception (me) they're in perfect unison. I've set up on the far right side, second row, beside Patrick. My

turns and walks back in three steps. The first-row and third-row guys begin by going to their left; while we in the second row are expected to go right first, then left. It's a simple high-school marching-band maneuver but I can't get it right. I lose my cue when Charles steps away from me and Patrick crashes into me from behind. Catching up now, I can see the entire left-field side of Veterans Stadium but none of my fellow Werewolves; I can only

mask, while magnificent, is extremely difficult to see out of, particularly because the snout blocks a clear view down to Charles. The game isn't much easier to see, especially at the great distance, but I manage by tilting my head back and peering through the nostrils or focusing beyond my scary yellow eyeballs.

My lack of vision is particularly harmful when the Pack breaks into "The Walk." In this move, the Pack takes three exaggerated, Madness-style steps to one side, then



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guess (and guess wrong) when to turn back.

The signature move of the Wolf Pack, and the one that gets on the nightly highlight shows, is the strikeout routine: An exaggerated umpire's punch-out, repeated 10 times and punctuated with a "Whoool!" The Pack gets into action right away as the Twins' Christian Guzman strikes out on three pitches to lead off the game. "Attaboy, Wolfie!" comes a mask-muffled shout from behind me.

In the days leading up to my visit, I'd been waking up early, transfixed by soccer's World Cup from Asia, and a passage I'd read about fans in a book by Dean Chadwin. Both soccer and baseball, Chadwin noted, are intellectual games featuring long stretches of seeming inactivity punctuated by moments of high drama. But while baseball fans tend to fill those stretches between by devouring concessions and conversing with neighboring fans, soccer fans pass the time cheering, singing and celebrating.

It's as if I'm in Korea when Wolf hits Guzman with a 2-2 pitch in the third. This is a classic Wolf Pack moment. As Guzman takes a few menacing steps toward Wolf and is held back, the Pack is howling and baying at the top of its lungs. Later, when the sputtering Phillies' offense threatens with back-to-back walks, Tommy's cries—"HE'S WIIIII-ELLD!"—could set off car alarms in the Vet parking lot.

We're an attraction. Today, dozens of fans will stop by to pay their respects and take photos, and Patrick spends an inning entertaining questions from a newspaper reporter. A man approaches me with his toddler daughter in his arms. I give a wolf roar and, unintentionally, frighten her. "She said she wanted to come up here and look. She loves you guys," says Dad, speaking for his suddenly silent child.

Wolf strikes out five more batters and keeps the Phillies in the game despite allowing solo home runs in the fourth and sixth innings. But his teammates can't get him a lead. Wolf leaves for a pinch-hitter in the seventh inning trailing 2-1. The pinch-hitter, Ricky Ledee, flies out to center.

One might expect the stereotypical Philadelphia fan to boo at this point. This is a town, Bo Belinsky once overstated, that would "boo a parade of one-armed veterans." Kobe Bryant, Mike Schmidt and Santa Claus have all heard the call of the boo-bird here, but Patrick is philosophical about Philadelphia's infamous

zeal. "Santa Claus got booed not because he was Santa Claus, but because he was a *skinny* Santa Claus," he contends. "No real Philadelphia fan would boo a guy who's busting his butt out there."

The Woods don't boo. They grew up in Overbrook, West Philadelphia, in a family of 12—eight sons and two daughters of James and Sally Wood. James was a Philadelphia police officer who never tired of telling his boys the story of working the Franklin Field sidelines during the 1960 NFL Championship game, when the Eagles rallied to defeat Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers, 17-13. Stricken with MS and legally blind, James continues to watch the Phillies and Eagles at home, his face inches from the television.

Four of his sons—Charles, Kevin, Jimmy and John—would also become policemen, and all of his kids would inherit his love of sports. Sadly, the youngest Wood, Thomas, passed away this spring after an auto accident. Tom, who was 21, was a Wolf Pack member and is memorialized in spraypaint on their banner. It's easy to be cynical about clichés when your team is in last place, its star player wants out and the sport is laden with economic disparity and a threat of a work stoppage.

But the Wolf Pack truly is about fathers and sons, and brotherly love, and root-root-rooting for the home team.

"Being family has definitely helped us stay together and keep it going," Patrick acknowledges. "We know we can always count on one another."

So, does all this cheering have any effect? It's possible. Wolf, the numbers show, gets more strikeouts and fewer walks per inning when he pitches at home, and his ERA is a full run better here than on the road. That he's not winning more often, the Pack will remind you, is in part because the offense has tended to struggle when he pitches. That turns out to be the case again this afternoon. The Phillies manage a single run, and after Torii Hunter belts a three-run homer off reliever Carlos Silva in the ninth, the Phillies and Wolf lose, 5-1.

Wolf in any case appears grateful for the support. He's met his fan club a number of times and has even attended a family gathering away from the park. Some nights, he'll tip his cap toward left field in appreciation. "We couldn't have picked a better guy to get behind," Patrick says. "He's been great to us."

The Wolf Pack's impact is felt in other

ways. In the months since they first began gathering in Section 739, pun-making, costume-wearing fan groups have sprung up in support of other Phillies, including pitchers Terry Adams (The Adams Family), Robert Person (Person's People), Brandon Duckworth (The Duck Pond) and Vicente Padilla (Padilla's Flotilla). Should it continue, Philadelphia (birthplace of the in-stadium courtroom and prison) just might risk getting a positive reputation for its sporting passions. They have it as long as Wolf is around, and he's done his part. He's pitched well enough to stay in the starting rotation (just imagine the logistical demands of cheering a relief pitcher); he's avoided lengthy trips to the disabled list and, so far, it appears the Phillies don't have intentions of trading him. Any of those things could end the Wolf Pack at any moment, and someday, assuredly, one of them will.

"It'll be a sad day for us when it finally comes to an end," says Kevin. "We'll always cheer for the Phils, but I don't think we'd ever get behind a player like this again. Our jobs will be done. We'll get back to leading normal lives."

I can wait. Go, Wolfie.

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