

AMBIDEXTROUS

We hope you've been enjoying this article from Ambidextrous!

It is part of our effort to provide a forum for the cross-disciplinary, cross-market community of people with an academic, professional and personal interest in design. Please support the community by becoming a subscriber!

Subscribe to Ambidextrous: <http://ambidextrousmag.org/subscribe>

The Hair of Their Chinny Chin Chins

by Hugh Musick

“What then can this passion be, which has crystallized into a doctrine, and has formed a number of outstanding devotees, this unwritten code that has molded so proud a brotherhood? It is above all, the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions.”

Charles Baudelaire,
The Painter of Modern Life, 1863

Graphic by Hugh Musick. Photo by Sheri Manson.

Though one aspires to be judged by character and inner beauty, in reality, looks count. Like it or not, physical appearance conveys to the world a sense of who you are. Though slavish devotion to fashion is frivolous, developing a personal style is a serious matter. This notion is particularly difficult for men to embrace in the U.S. where style remains largely a matter for women. In spite of this strong cultural prejudice, there exists a realm in which the cultivation of extravagant personal style among men is celebrated: competitive beard growing. No one has done more to bring the values of individuality in facial hair to the U.S. than Phil Olsen, self-appointed captain of Beard Team USA and the man who brought the World Beard and Moustache Championships (WBMC) to America in 2003.

How did you enter the world of competitive beard growing?

I stumbled into the World Beard and Moustache Championships in Sweden in 1999 where I was immediately enthralled by the event. The USA was badly under-represented and I resolved to make America competitive in the future.

What do judges look for?

There is a difference of opinion. I think judging should be wholly subjective: whose beard looks best, works best for the competitor, best advances the competitor's "personal style?" Others think the judges should try to identify the beards that best conform to the standards defined in the category descriptions.

As captain, how do you decide who will compete in the various categories?

I try to use my familiarity with the categories to direct the team members into the categories where they have the best chance of winning. This is not always easy. The Association of German Beard Clubs developed the categories years ago but with little if any input from anyone outside that association. Intentionally or not, the Germans developed a scheme that runs counter to our notion of what facial hair is about. For the Germans, the competition comes down to who can make his beard or moustache conform most closely to the ideal found in the category description. For us, beard wearing is all about individuality and self-expression.

Many of our team members do come to the competition with established styles they have developed themselves. When these do not conform to any one of the ideals embod-

ied in the category definitions, there is a dilemma. Should the competitor change his style to conform to category definition in order to increase his chances of winning or should he stick with his own personal style?



Do you help team members develop their own styles?

I encourage my team members to experiment with different ways to care for their facial hair. In America, at least until very recently, daily shaving was almost required as an element of good grooming and hygiene. It has now become more acceptable to wear a well-groomed beard, but beard grooming is understood to mean keeping the beard closely trimmed and shaped—witness the numerous beard trimmers advertised on TV.

I hope to show there is more to beard grooming than just trimming. A beard can grow to its natural length and still be tamed. Aside from trimming, shampooing, conditioning, styling, brushing, shaping, and even spraying can all contribute to maintaining an attractive beard.

What factors play into outfit selection?

The rules say that the judges should not consider the competitors' costumes, but everyone knows they do. A good costume should complement the beard. Traditionally, many of the costumes worn at the WBMC reflect a national heritage or historic period. For example, many of the Bavarians wear lederhosen. Others wear military garb from imperial times.

Americans associate costumes with Halloween. In Berlin in 2005, many in our group wore Halloween-like outfits.

I prefer boldness over extravagance. My full beard has grown practically untrimmed for years. I mold it into a bold, solid, symmetrical shape that I think makes a statement.

Unfortunately this led to some bad feelings among some of the European groups, who thought we were making fun of the event. This time, in England in 2007, I emphasized that above all, everyone should wear good quality clothing and try to look his best, rather than trying to look silly or outlandish as one would for Halloween. We were received much better this time.

How much time is spent grooming and styling?

I probably spend about the same amount of time caring for my beard as a normal person does shaving. Those who wear highly styled beards/moustaches daily, such as Juergen Burkhardt from Germany and Schani Mitterhauser from Austria, spend approximately an hour a day styling. At the extreme end, it takes three-time full beard freestyle champ Elmar Weisser about three hours to get ready for a competition. In England his beard depicted the Tower Bridge. In Berlin it was the Brandenburg Gate.

In fashion, good taste is usually equated with restraint. Are there particular style guidelines you follow?

Extravagance does not necessarily lead to victory except in the freestyle categories. I would not be comfortable appearing in public behind some of the outlandish creations that will win in these categories. I prefer boldness over extravagance. I have allowed my full beard to grow practically untrimmed for several years. I mold it into a bold, solid, symmetrical shape that I think makes a statement.

How does one's personal style play out in day-to-day social interactions outside the competitive arena?

Strangers frequently approach me and comment on my beard, invariably in positive terms. I am a shy person and am usually quite uncomfortable approaching strangers. However, I love to meet new people. So, for me, the beard is tremendously helpful in breaking the ice in otherwise uncomfortable social situations. It gives us something to talk about. Also, people remember me because of my beard, or maybe they just remember my beard. I can't speak for others, but I certainly enjoy the attention. I assume that they do too. Otherwise, they would shave.

Which competitor's personal style do you admire?

Seventy-five year-old Fritz Sendlhofer from Zell am See, Austria has a solid Garibaldi beard that does not draw attention to his perpetual smile and his beaming eyes. Even though he speaks no English, he manages to make friends with everyone in the room. He sets a great example for beard wearers everywhere. 🖐️



Photos by Sheri Manson