



Girls' Night Out with Bunco



TEXT BY RODIKA TOLLEFSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MOLLY SHURTLEFF

They come from different backgrounds — homemakers, teachers, dentists, bankers, retirees. They come in all ages, sizes, and fashion senses. But they have one thing in common: They are bunco girls. Where men have their poker nights, women have bunco nights — monthly affairs where no men are allowed, where good food, conversation and relaxation are the focus, and the game of bunco... well, bunco is mostly the excuse to get together.

Unlike poker, which requires strategy and decision making, bunco takes no brainpower. Winning is all about the luck of the draw (or rather, the dice), or perhaps about whose shoes are the luckiest that day.

"It's a mindless game... The whole purpose is just to have a good time, relaxing and forgetting the stress at work or at home, and just be with a bunch of gals who want to have a good time," says Lydia Rush, who started a bunco group more than a year ago in Poulsbo.

Mindless doesn't mean boring, mind you. True, the main skill involves rolling three dice, but the rounds could get heated nonetheless, as some commonly quiet ladies come out of their skin, releasing their competitive spirits, cheering on their table mates, and shouting as the dices roll. Losers get as



Above: A typical bunco night may start with conversation and food on the porch, if the weather is nice.

Left: Hostess Ginger Shields serves up her delicious meal.

excited as winners, because, as one such loser puts it, "It sure beats getting a kick in the (behind)."

During the monthly get together, the bunco scene in Rush's group may look something like this: About a dozen women congregate at the house of the month's hostess. They warm up with drinks and appetizers, then move on to dinner, all the while talking about kids, grandkids, jobs, community and current events, social issues and just "girl stuff"; dinner leads to the game, and prizes top off the night.

No matter how many times they've been together, there is hardly a bunco night when the women don't learn something new about each other. This night, it's Rush's time: As it turns out, she grew up in a rock family band who performed at state fairs. Who would have guessed?

The newbies may be easily spotted by their quieter behavior while they're being initiated into the game and into the circle. By the end of the night, even the most introverted ones will likely blend in. Bunco is no place for the shy.

The topics may range from basics — pretty nails, nice new outfit and other such necessary observations — to the more complex, such as the best place to live in Washington, D.C., for a soon-to-be moving bunco girl whose husband is being relocated. After dinner, the conversation moves on to the game tables. As the dices roll, so do the discussions.

The players rotate through three tables throughout the night, as luck dictates. Each table has two sets of two partners, and losers either stay or move on, depending on the table. Since two players cannot partner up twice in a row, and since luck only lasts so long, seats change often — which means by the end of the night, each player is likely to partner up with every single guest at least once. By the time the dices go back into the box until next time, the hostess would have shared the night's recipe, phone numbers may have been exchanged with newbies, and a list of next month's players, complete with a hostess, would have been prepared.

"It's a fun, social thing, a way to meet people," says Kelly Hadley, a Poulsbo



Mindless, but not mellow—Bunco can get pretty intense.

resident who works as a psychiatrist. "Visiting and socializing is as fun as playing the game."

The group is as different as a bag of M&Ms: The "bunco girls," as some of them call each other, range in age from 20-something to 80-something; some are professionals while others are retired, and

several share a common bond of being military wives.

"It's more about the people for me," says Alice Thomas, a Bremerton resident whose husband recently retired from the Navy. "I wouldn't just go play bunco with anybody... This is a chance to get together and talk with a nice group of women." ►



Ardis Morrow may not always keep score—it's not necessarily about the points.



Amy Hager (left) and Kelly Hadley share a laugh.



Alice Thomas (left) and Trish Ingalls are among the bunco regulars.



Margene Smaaladen scored more than points—she gets a prize!

Bunco, also known as Bunko, was a popular game in gambling parlors. Shortly after being introduced to the United States in the 1850s, the name bunco became a general term associated with scams and swindling. During the Prohibition, some of the most notorious parlors were located in Chicago, where they were routinely raided by detectives from the so-called "bunco squad." Today, the game has become a pastime for women, some of whom plan elaborate parties for the occasion, often based on themes. The scheme is really pretty simple: You come in, have dinner, play by a simple set of rules, and have a good time. You may even get a prize... for losing. Not bad for a "scam."

Rules for a Bunco Night

Serious bunco players can go all the way to the top and try their dice-throwing prowess at regional tournaments and even a world championship. But most bunco followers are more like groupies, motivated by nothing except good company.

The rules of the game, as well as the party plan, vary slightly from group to group. According to the official rules from the World Bunco Association, the game involves 12 people at three tables, and players sitting across each other are partners for that round. If the group is short, "ghost" players join in (Hello, Teddy Bear!). Some hostesses even sneak in their husbands when desperate measures call for it, though players admit that maneuver puts a bit of a damper on the girl talk.

The "head table" controls the round, which is over when a team from that table either rolls a "bunco" or reaches 21 points. Points are added based on the dice rolls, and a bunco is when the dices roll "three of a kind" corresponding to the round number (ie three points rolled on each dice during round three is a bunco). Points are given for other combinations as well, and each player keeps track of personal buncos and other "achievements," which lead to the prizes. Some players don't bother with their scores, but no one minds.





Lydia Rush (right) started her bunco group as a pastime for military wives.

A bunco night typically means dinner, which is an enticing proposition for working professionals who are coming straight from work. Some groups hold potlucks, while others take turns hosting, which is no different from entertaining any other crowd (dinner, drinks, dessert etc). Each group finds its own perfect blend of activities and a schedule, deciding whether to stop at half-time and mingle some more, whether to wait until the end to have dessert, or whether to eat at the bunco tables or out on the deck.

Money is usually collected. Some groups use those funds for cash prizes, others buy gifts, but some chose "white elephant" type exchanges. For Rush's group, shopping for the prizes is half the fun. During a recent game, the elegant prizes ranged from floating candles and party glasses (perfect for hosting a bunco dinner) to window chimes. Even the "loser" walked away with a gorgeous glass bud vase — this is definitely a game where it pays to lose! And no matter what they say about this being a game of luck, some bunco girls are notorious for taking home the prize for most wins (it's gotta be the shoes!).

Ready to Bunco?

Starting a bunco group is simple. All you need is nine dice, score cards, a bell (for the head table), 12 people (give or take), and a home. Since not every member will be available each time, you should try to have as many as 20 ►

interested women. You can play every week, or once a month; you can set monthly themes and even give prizes for the best costume — the details are up to you.

Rush, a Poulsbo Navy wife who owns a mortgage company, has played the game for many years while her husband was stationed at Whidbey Island. Several years after moving to Kitsap, she decided to start a new group as a social outlet for wives whose husbands are deployed for months at a time, and as a way to meet people new to the community. She invited her friends, who then invited their friends. Their circle kept extending, and they still try to have new players each time. Her daughter got caught up in the fun, too, and has since started her own group in Texas.

“What does it take? Just wanting to have fun,” Rush says. “It doesn’t mean you have to do it in a certain way... This really is to build friendships. Our circle of friends just gets bigger.”

While no woman would admit bunco may give an addictive buzz, many do concur they hate to miss those bunco nights. The camaraderie and the de-stressing is like a morning caffeine infusion — if you don’t get one, you can kiss your day goodbye.

“I do get disappointed when I miss it,” says Teresa Shetler, whose group has been playing since 2004. “It’s a big deal for us, to get out and have girlfriend time with no men, no children.”

Shetler started her group with a girlfriend and other stay-at-home moms. They contacted high school friends and other people they knew, and soon the group became diversified. “A dentist, a teacher, a banker — we have it all,” she says. “The chemistry is great, and we always have something to talk about.”

This last summer, Shetler had to part with her bunco girls, having to leave her Silverdale home. Her husband was deployed to Japan with the Marine Corps. She isn’t worried. With another bunco player who moved to the same area recently, she plans to get a new group going. “It’s a great social time,” she says.

If you’re thirsty for some good times with a bunch of fun gals, look no farther than



Everyone relaxes at the end of the night, as points are tallied and prizes revealed.



Goodies waiting for the top winners—or the loser.



The food, dessert included, is a big part of the night, and the hostess usually shares her recipes.

bunco. It doesn’t take much to get the perfect party mix down, and it shouldn’t be hard to find a dozen women ready to run away for a few hours, shed away their burdens, leave the husbands and children to fend for themselves, and spend some quality time talking about family issues, current events, or new nails. What woman out there doesn’t need an excuse to do that? Bunco is as good as any. All you need is a stressful life to get away from, and a pair of lucky shoes. ♦

