

Jason's FAQ on Being a Titleholder and Running for a Title

Here are some questions I asked as I considered running for the SCCLA title last year, and the answers I'd give to those same questions after almost a year in the title role.

This document is not finished. Contact me if you'd like to get updates as I write them. More information will also be available on our website, www.sccleather.org. And please don't hesitate to email or call with further questions. (version 1.1, 10/5/02)

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What is running for a title like in general?

Above all, you'll be given lots of attention by many different people at every stage of the process. You'll likely be encouraged, examined, encouraged some more, put in a spotlight (figuratively and literally), praised, encouraged, smiled at, flirted with. You might receive hints of criticism secondhand but none is likely to come directly.

I'm not kidding about the *lots* of encouragement part. People want to see contestants do well and feel comfortable, and first and foremost the contest staff and judges want that.

Should you win the title this will largely continue on into your title year, though you'll also probably feel the weight of expectations suddenly focused upon you – everyone has their own idea of what a titleholder should look like, act like, and spend his/her time on. For me it took a few months to realize that I should work on the things I wanted to work on, and that I should project the leather image which I thought was appropriate and let people deal with their own expectations!

But being a titleholder is too much work!

It's whatever work you want it to be. Most of the time I spend a few nights / weekends a month being a titleholder. I usually spend a few hours getting ready for schmooze at the beginning of each month, I attend schmooze, and then usually attend 2-4 other events a month, including SCCLA events, other groups' events, and sometimes extra planning meetings (such as for the Leather Weekend). Most of these are things I would have attended anyway.

Schmooze is actually easy to run. Talk to me about it. And if you don't want to run it we've been discussing having a rotating moderator rather than the titleholder(s) do it. Also, you don't have to have a full color agenda like I do – that's just my own little thing I like doing.

What is important when you're a titleholder is actually showing up for the things you commit to do, and showing up for schmooze. Once you win we definitely want to keep seeing you! Beyond that, people will likely be by and large satisfied with what you do. Events like movie nights and dinners are quite easy to plan and are things we really enjoy.

What will I have to do when competing?

- On Friday night you meet the judges and others in an unstructured social atmosphere.
- On Saturday you'll have a short private interview with the judges.
- On Saturday evening you'll appear in the contest. At the contest you'll be expected to
 - appear in leather ("erotic image")
 - put on a 3-5 minute fantasy
 - deliver a 3-5 minute speech
 - appear on stage a few more times (but won't have to do or say anything).
- At the end of the contest the winners will be announced, sashes will be awarded (and medals and patches if we have enough lead time).
- It's customary for a group of us, and especially the new titleholders, to visit the local leather bar (sigh, used to be plural!) or clubs after the contest.
- Sunday there's brunch.

You say Friday night is unstructured – how should I handle that?

The goal of Friday night is for contestants to get to know each other, the judges, the contest staff, and the community. Ideally you'd spend at least a bit of time talking with each of the judges and with others in the room too as time allows. Smile often, be happy, and consciously choose to enjoy meeting the new faces in the room – at least that's the formula that works in my head for me. Shake hands and take the initiative to introduce yourself. Being a contestant is a great excuse to walk up to anyone and everyone, introduce yourself, talk for a few minutes, and then excuse yourself and move on. Be sincerely interested in what other people say to you. Try to listen about 70% of the time and talk about 30% of the time. Keep in mind that many of the folks who come out for contests go way back in leather in the area and they're really cool people.

Oh no, a "private interview"? Does that mean the judges will grill me? What will they ask? Is this like an interrogation scene?

The "prejudging", as the interview is called, is a formal chance for the judges to get to know you better. You'll walk into a room where they'll all be seated. They may offer you a chair or not – just go with the flow and meet your needs while showing respect to them. They will ask you questions and expect you to answer. If there's time they may give you a chance to ask them a question. The interview may last less than 10 minutes or 30-40. Longer is better, but longer isn't always an option. I was recently a judge in a contest where we decided in advance that we would spend 8 minutes with each contestant during the interview, no more and no less.

All the contestants I've asked about prejudging in every contest I've been a part of enjoyed it. And virtually all of them were also sweating bullets going right up to the interview.

Judges will ask you questions designed to let you show who you are and what kind of a person you might be as a titleholder. ("How would you respond to X situation?") They'll ask you questions based upon what you write in your application form. ("You mention you're a ____, can you tell us more about that?") They may ask you questions to see that you know a little about this community. ("Do you know what the (name of institution) is?")

If they're professional about their jobs, the judges will be friendly and warm. And in San Jose as well as at IML or IMsL you're likely to encounter very "professional" judges who will treat you with dignity and respect. They can and may ask you about anything they want (sexual orientation, sexual preferences, political views, family status, etc.). You needn't answer anything you don't think is an appropriate question, but if you chose not to answer you should decline tactfully. And if you feel strongly that something is out of line you should simply say so. The judge may be asking to see how you might respond to someone who were to ask you an importune question.

It's to your benefit to be open, honest, and brief with the judging panel. I can't emphasize the "brief" part enough. The time will fly by, and if the panel is doing 10 minute interviews you'll be out of the room before you know it. By being brief you give as many of the judges as possible a chance to ask you a question and get to know and like you.

When I prepared for my interviews, both in San Jose and at IML, I was terribly worried about (not) being able to answer very specific questions on leather history. You may get such questions. It's OK to say "I don't know", and best to follow that up with "I'd be happy to find out and get back to you later today with the answer". And if you say that you need to make sure you follow thru.

But I'm afraid of being on stage!

Yes, it can be scary, but I think you'll find the time goes by in a flash. Remember that the MCs want to make you look good, and your audience will be very friendly. The judges want to believe that you're doing well. Give it your best shot and people will think you did fine.

Microphones can be the trickiest part of your stage appearance. Try to get a chance to practice with a PA system if you can. Go do karaoke to get a feel for how to hold and use a microphone. There's a place on El Camino in Santa Clara, for instance, with private karaoke rooms for rental by the hour. Ask Jason if you can't find it.

Usually people hold the microphone too far from their mouth and then either don't speak loudly enough or have to yell and distort their voices. The mic should be right in front of your lips, generally about half an inch or so from them. When you speak you should be able to hear your voice in the PA system. *Listen for your voice.* If you can't hear it, speak louder or move the mic closer.

For many people it's helpful to practice by giving your speech in front of one or more listeners and/or having someone ask you questions that you might be asked in the interview and answering them. If you do these things, have a clock handy and try to get a feel for what the passage of time is like when others are watching. It can be slow or very fast depending upon the situation.

Hmmmm, I feel like I don't have enough leather

Wear the leather you already have. Especially clothing which for you signifies you being a part of the leather community. Of course if you've got great leathers please wear them, preferably someplace where I can watch (grin), but let lack of high-dollar leathers keep you from considering a run for this SCCLA title. That's not what this title is about.

I can't think of a fantasy!

Ask other SCCLA folks for help. Especially people who have held titles or run contests or shows before. They're not likely to give you a script but if you come with ideas they might help you flesh things out. (BTW, there is no fantasy portion of IML.)

Don't try to do any dialogue as part of your fantasy. Really. Or if so be really careful. You probably won't have a mic for the fantasy, so the audience won't hear you.

Rehearse with your music a few times before you get to the contest. And when you're rehearsing, assume the stage is very small – 6x6 feet or less. Measure it, mark the space somehow, and stay within it. Humor is good, as is clear sexual or BDSM chemistry between you and your other performers. The audience can feel that and will respond.

Shorter is better. 5 minutes is an absolute upper limit, and 3 minutes is better. Given them a good show and get off the stage. Try to do a few things well rather than all possible things (wax, then flogging, then canes, then bondage is likely too much).

But my body doesn't look like all those other leathermen/women!

Run as who you are. Your intentions, integrity, and soul are what are important and what should come thru, *especially* for the SCCLA title. There are other titles which are primarily about body or clothing or sex. The SCCLA title is primarily about community and a desire to help serve and foster it; the sexiness of leatherfolk of many different genders, shapes, sizes, and colors; and a passion for the diverse, queer, often outlaw sexual family that we are.

I live in Menlo Park / Fremont / Santa Cruz, not in Santa Clara County proper

Is Santa Clara County your primary leather community? If so then you're eligible to run. If not, then you're not.

If you live far away and win that will mean you'll need to be in Santa Clara County frequently to appear at events or help plan things – perhaps more often than you otherwise might come here,. Assuming you're willing to take that on we're willing to consider you as a candidate. (And that's what we'll tell the judges.)

Do I need to use my real name?

No. Other SCCLA titleholders have very successfully used either just their first name or just their leather / scene name. If being publicly recognized as a part of the leather community would be disastrous to you then you probably shouldn't run. But it is possible to maintain a degree of privacy even as a titleholder.

If you win you will get a degree of notoriety in the community. Your name – the one you tell us to use publicly for you – will go in the press release announcing the winners and will certainly make it

into a few local gay publications. Your photo might appear in one of those too. And there will always be a chance that some event you go to will get more mainstream media attention. Still, people will largely only know the things about you that you chose to reveal.

For me personally, being “out” about who I am is very important to the way in which I approach the world. I’m lucky that my profession and friends permit that.

At a national title level I doubt it’s possible to be a serious contender without using your full legal name. But that’s a whole different ballgame.

Do I have to be “out”?

See the above. If being “outed” would be disastrous to you then you might think hard about running. But for the most part our community is visible only to those who care to look at it.

Philosophically I think you need to decide how out you are willing to be. For instance, earlier this year it seemed like the religious right might be making a major effort to persecute BDSM communities. As a titleholder, chance events in your community could present you with an opportunity to represent leather to your city, your county, your state, or the world. You should consider what you might do if you won and if you were confronted with such an opportunity/choice. I’m not saying you always need to take such causes on, but I am suggesting you give some thought to what you might consider worth taking on.

I’m not gay / lesbian

The SCCLA is not limited to the GLBT community, though it does come from largely GLBT roots. As a contestant and potential titleholder you should be comfortable representing an organization which is predominantly GLBT, and doing so at events which are often predominantly GLBT. Also, as a titleholder you’re likely to be the title of much flirting and sexual attention from people of diverse orientations and genders. But most of them are very conscientious and some of them are even pretty cute!