Lord of the Guys

International Mr. Leather flaunts his family values

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Big, bad and sweeter than sin, Joe Gallagher is sort of a Superman story: By day, Gallagher is a publishing-systems consultant; by night, clad in glistening black, he's International Mr. Leather. Blame it on the nuns. "I'm a leatherman because I grew up Catholic," says Gallagher, 36, "and I love a ritual."

He's certainly made the folks back home proud. Forget the fascinated fear that S&M strikes in many hearts; his former, blue-haired lady coworkers at the Simplicity Pattern Company followed Gallagher's career in leather competitions. They'd watch him on a gay cable show he often appeared on, and compliment him later on his silver-and-black accessories.

To outsiders, leather contests may seem like little more than butch beauty pageants, but it's been a long time since bulky biceps and a studded codpiece were enough to cinch the title. Each winner brings to it his own brand of personality and politics. "It was time to claim my place in the tribe," Gallagher says about his decision to pursue 1996's sash and rose bouquet (black leather, of course). It was also time to come out as HIV positive, the first Mr. International Leather to do so.

Meanwhile, Gallagher heads a tribe of his own (or at least a trio), including a lover, Joel, the "M" to Gallagher's "S," and his boy, doug -- spelled with a submissive lower-case "d." They're one big happy family, though Gallagher's HIV diagnosis a few years back was a painful blow. "For a few months, we held each other and cried," Joel says. "Now, the three of us set an example. Our top has HIV, and it doesn't interfere with our wonderful, rambunctious sex life, even though doug and I are negative." As might be expected, doug agrees, though some of his friends urged him to break up with his Master. "I've only ever had safe sex, so I wasn't giving anything up to be with Joe," doug says. "And I love him. I could never leave him."

Jealousy isn't an issue for this three-way; quality time is. "doug has done nothing but add to our relationship. The capacity of the human heart to love is so much greater than anyone understands," says Joel. These days, they're looking for a dream house -- a New York City fixer-upper with enough space for a finished dungeon where they can live happily ever after.

How does Gallagher assess life with two lovers? "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," he says.

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