

# WALL STREET JOURNAL

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PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

## So Easy to Love

Ms. Fucci, a peppy brunette who keeps 125 rats and 50 mice in her three-room apartment in Ossining, N.Y., is an ardent rat booster. As pets, she explains, they are both loving and low-maintenance. "Rats greet you, they interact, they try to please," she says. "They are as close to a dog as you're going to get in a rodent."

Ms. Fucci, who has thinned her colony from an earlier peak of 700 rats and 500 mice, has few illusions about the magnitude of the rat's public-relations problem. Still, club members believe that as the rat comes into its own on the show bench, the scorn heaped upon animal and owner alike should diminish. Says Bob Rizzie, the host today: "Shows take the rat out of the sewer and make it respectable."

Fancy rats—the purebred cousins of the wild rats that scurry along alleyways and lunch in garbage cans—have been bred and shown in England for almost a century. Shows in this country began about 20 years ago in Southern California. In 1966, Ms. Fucci and four other fanciers started the Northeast Rat and Mouse Club. Today, it has about 100 members, divided about evenly between "ratters" and "mousers," as they sometimes call themselves.

The 38 rats being exhibited in Bob Rizzie's back yard are all Norway rats. Rarer breeds, such as *Rattus rattus*, or the roof rat, and the African giant pouched rat, aren't represented today.

COLLINS  
London  
ENGLAND

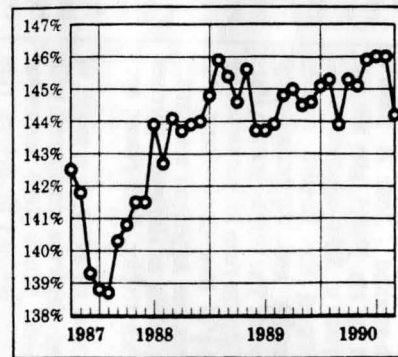


There's always one smartass in every batch.

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## Leading Indicators

In percent (1982 = 100).



COMPOSITE of key indicators of future economic activity fell in August to 144.2% of the 1982 average from a revised 146% in July, the Commerce Department reports. (See story on page A2.)

## What's Not to Love In a Long Pink Tail And Big Red Eyes?

\* \* \*  
Finest Rats on East Coast  
Line Up to Be Judged;  
And the Winners Are ...

By ELLEN GRAHAM

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL  
BLOOMFIELD, N.J. — Groomed and powdered, their whiskers aquiver with excitement, some of the finest rats on the East Coast line up on the judging bench, awaiting what may be the pinnacle of their show careers.

A back yard in the New Jersey suburbs may be a far cry from Madison Square Garden, but then, this isn't the Westminster Kennel Club.

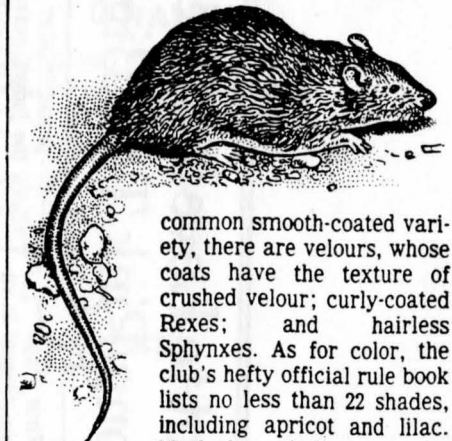
It's the fall show sponsored by the Northeast Rat and Mouse Club, a group beguiled by the rodents that most people love to loathe. Rat fanciers, especially, confess that until they found the club, theirs was a lonely and more or less secret passion. "We kind of soft-pedaled it because we didn't want to be pegged as kooks," says Elizabeth Fucci, club president.

## DENNIS THE MENACE/Hank Ketcham



No, I don't do any mouse calls.

These "fancies" come in a dizzying array of colors and coat types. Besides the



common smooth-coated variety, there are velours, whose coats have the texture of crushed velour; curly-coated Rexes; and hairless Sphynxes. As for color, the club's hefty official rule book lists no less than 22 shades, including apricot and lilac. Marked varieties may be

hooded, blazed, striped, spotted, masked or "potpourri."

Once classified, animals are scrutinized for conformation to strict standards. Rats must have full tails—equal to or greater than the body in length; points are deducted for missing tips. Overlong teeth are faulted. Eyes—black, pink or ruby red—must be large but not bulging; whiskers

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# What's Not to Love in a Creature Endowed by Nature With a Long Pink Tail, Big Red Eyes and Soft Fur?

*Continued From First Page*

should be straight and long—except in varieties requiring short, curly ones.

Temperament is crucial, too. Here the rule book is crystal clear: "Any rat which bites any judge shall be eliminated." Judges nuzzle the animals to assess their sociability, and sniff their fur for "off" odors, another serious fault. "Rats have a sweet natural odor" that smells like sandalwood, says Ms. Fucci. "If you wore it, people would flock to you."

But this show isn't just for the body beautiful. Some rats are entered in the more democratic "pet" class, an event designed to encourage adoption of defective animals that might otherwise wind up as snake food—the dread fate to which pet stores consign culls. Today's entrants include Ms. Fucci's Weebie, a young male with a wry neck, and Pudgy, a rat born without eyes.

"This is horrible—I hate doing pets," mutters judge Roxanne Fitzgerald, a teacher from Los Angeles who is flustered by the lack of firm standards in this category. "When you see a little face like that looking up, how can you eliminate it?" After much stewing, she awards top honors to "Dr. Eric Joshua III," whom she pronounces a "nice big buck rat—very responsive."

Judging of the main event—rat stan-

dards—proceeds after a tense moment in which the judges search frantically for a missing rat belonging to Ms. Fucci. It turns out that the rat, Fuzzy Britches, was disqualified at the door when he began wheezing. "Just a stress reaction," Ms. Fucci shrugs. "This happens."

One by one, rats are eliminated—this one for skittishness, that one for obesity. Judge Gina Loiacono gives the top prize to Suki, a black and white hooded doe, whom she holds by the tail, inspecting its underbelly. "No spots on the groin—that's good," someone remarks.

Suki's owner, Eileen Brown of Trevoise, Pa., has 25 rats. "I like their temperament—so gentle," she says, kissing Suki on the nose. Her husband isn't as smitten, but Mrs. Brown says he tells her, "If it keeps you sane, go ahead."

To break the tension of the day-long affair, rat races are held during lunch. Bob Rizzie has constructed a wooden track complete with a sliding starting gate. Grouped in heats, the contenders run down the track, coaxed along by their owners, known as "jockeys."

The two-dozen spectators cheer as Mr. Rizzie's rat Molly and Ms. Fucci's Weebie compete in the final heat. It's no contest. Molly dawdles at the gate, while Weebie—after a detour to gnaw on a wooden strut—sprints across the finish line.

"He was born to it," Ms. Fucci crows, clutching Weebie's golden, winged trophy. She says that Weebie has been in training for months, tirelessly running laps on her bed, where he sleeps.

The much-awaited "Best in Show" event, judged by Ms. Fucci, pits the top rat—Mrs. Brown's Suki—against three mice: winners of the English mouse, American mouse and Egyptian spiny mouse categories. The trophy goes to Harlequin, a black satin roan mouse owned by Wanda Wilson of New Cumberland, Pa. "He epitomizes the American standard," Ms. Fucci declares, as Harlequin perches atop its 18-inch trophy. Suki places second.

Today's show, all agree, is a model of efficiency and decorum compared with previous events, which were somewhat fractious affairs plagued by delays, rule disputes and, in at least one instance, a narrow brush with flying fur. A TV crew completely disrupted one show, Ms. Fucci recalls indignantly, by trying to "stage a showdown between a neighborhood cat and an exhibitor's beloved pet rat."

Club members grow weary of defending their hobby. Wanda Wilson, whose article, "I'm OK, You're OK," appeared recently in the club's bimonthly journal, writes of her relief at finding kindred spirits in the club who are "so reassuringly sane" and

who don't bore her, as other friends do, with chatter about baseball scores, star charts and high-fiber diets.

After all, baseball scores don't come when called (rats respond to their names) or have endearing, humanlike ways. Ms. Fucci is charmed by the way her domesticated rats wet their hands in their water bottles, carefully shake off the excess and wash their faces.

Yet humans tend to fear the rat, and club members offer lots of theories that address this. Some trace it to the plagues of the Middle Ages, and the wild rat's reputation for spreading disease. Others think it all boils down to the animal's long, hairless tail. For Bob Rizzie, it's the name itself. "Just the word turns people off," he says.

Not much help are lurid newspaper accounts of jumbo "killer" rats stalking the subways. But club members are quick to draw a distinction between their pampered pets and rats in the wild. "Wild rats probably deserve the bad rap they get," concedes Ms. Loiacono, a Manhattan artist. "It's like the difference between a pet dog and a wild dog."

Even Liz Fucci, who spends eight hours a week cleaning out 62 cages of rats and mice, wouldn't tolerate an invasion of her home by a street-wise rodent. "I'd have no qualms about [trapping] it," she says. "A sewer rat is an absolute no-no—you don't know where it's been. I'd have to protect my own colonies from disease, even if it meant killing a wild rat to do it."