



Derby Grrrrls

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The underground sport
of women's roller derby
is on the rise and
these ladies are
not afraid of a few
bumps and bruises

To fill the hour, that is happiness; to fill the hour, and leave no crevice for a repentance or an approval. We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well upon them."—Ralph Waldo Emerson

It's a Sheena-and-Xena world of weekend warriors zooming around on ball bearings, where egos are never left at the door, alter egos are all but mandatory, and women of all shapes, sizes and roots bond in the name of female empowerment with hip checks, shoulder shoves, elbow swings and booty bangs. • God knows why women's roller derby is suddenly back from the dead after all these years—think back to 1972 when Raquel Welch's cheesy flick *Kansas City Bomber* hit theaters—but for the last five years, this post-feminist Fight Club sorority has been steadily bubbling to the surface. It's been reinvented with a pinup-girl tease, retro kitsch and punk-rock edge, and is popping up everywhere from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Huntsville, Alabama, and Raleigh, North Carolina, to Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Chicago. • In New York City, the league that rules is the Gotham Girls, a self-proclaimed "rotten-to-the-core" group of four borough-repped teams—Manhattan Mayhem, Queens of Pain,

The Gotham Girls are ready to rock and roll. Clockwise from left, Sweet Sherry Pie, Anne Phetamean, Roxy Balboa, Ginger Snap, Ariel Assault, Suzy Hotrod, and Rolletta Lynn.

Bronx Gridlock and Brooklyn Bombshells—that consists of 54 players with such over-the-top, pornstar-like names as Baby Ruthless, Surly Temple, Carmen Monoxide and Sybil Disobedience.

By day, these women hail from careers all across the spectrum: fashionistas, lawyers, artists, event planners, bartenders, accountants. But by night, on any given Friday or Saturday, dressing up in fishnets, miniskirts, wifebeaters and pounds of black eyeliner, they transform into badass derby chicks known strictly by their stage names. “I’m not sure if I know the real name of one girl,” admits Lil’ Miss Stuffit, a 25-year-old middle-school teacher named Laurel Woodhouse who skates for the Mayhem, voicing a common thread in this skating-on-the-fringe underworld.

It’s a desperately hot, rain-damp Saturday night in late July, and a SRO crowd of over 1,500, paying between \$12.50 and \$25 a pop, cram into a non-air-conditioned gymnasium in the bowels of downtown Brooklyn for the third bout of the second Gotham Girls season between the Bombshells and Gridlock.

Two huge floor fans whirl by an open set of giant double doors, circulating nothing but bursts of sweaty air. The speakers boom out a reverberating Van Halen: “Girl, you really got me going...” And with a sudden blast of a whistle blown by an earringed ref whose moniker, Mr. Pink, comes straight from Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, 10 women—pigtailed, tattooed, helmeted, knee-padded, mouth-guarded, hair-dyed, pierced—begin whizzing around a flat, bright-blue oval



The Gotham Girls roller derby league likes to describe itself as “rotten to the core,” so it’s no surprise that the action is always fast and furious, and the flying elbows unforgiving.

track, followed instantly by the lusty, faux angry screams of fans raising fists, clapping hands and stomping feet:

“Go, girl, go!”

“Hit her!”

“Knock that bitch down!”

To the untrained eye, the action is maddeningly jumbled and hopelessly indecipherable—a colorful but blurred strip of absolute crash-and-burn chaos. Essentially, a mishmash pack of eight players box each other out, while a couple of others search for gaps to surge through. But soon girls are flying off the track, left and right, after being clobbered

A Roller Derby Primer

The Game: Two teams take the track for every bout, with each side fielding five skaters: one pivot, three blockers and one jammer. A bout consists of three 20-minute periods.

The potential scoring sessions are broken down into racing-around-the-track “jams.” There can be an unlimited amount of jams per bout, but each one can last no longer than two minutes.

A whistle signals the beginning of the jam and for the defensive players to start skating. A second whistle releases the jammers, who try to fight their way through the pack. The first jammer to make it through is designated the lead jammer, who has the right to call off the jam by putting her hands on her waist. This is a strategy that can prevent the other team from scoring or to solidify a lead.

Four whistles signal the end of the jam, and each team has 20 seconds to line up for the next one. If a skater is not on the track when the whistle is blown, her team must skate short.

The Positions:

Jammer: Designated by a star on both sides of her helmet cover, the jammer is the point scorer and usually the team’s best skater. She starts the jam 20 feet behind the rear of the pack and scores

by skating through the entire pack once, then lapping the opposing players. She receives one point for each skater passed legally. She can also strategically pass her helmet cover to her pivot if she gets stuck in the pack.

Pivot: Designated by a striped helmet, the pivot is the pack’s strategic thinker and pace setter, skating in the very front, and serves as the last line of defense against the opposing jammer.

Blockers: The team’s toughest and biggest girls, the blockers work together by knocking opposing players out of the way and clearing paths for their jammer. Blockers also prevent the opposing team’s jammer from passing.

The Rules of Conduct: Legal blocks involve the blocker using her arm, from shoulder to elbow, to make contact with the front of her opponent’s body, from her shoulder to her hips. Blockers may also use their bodies to block other skaters. Illegal blocks include grabbing, tripping, blocking from behind, elbows in the face and fighting.

—M.P.G.

with ramming shots, spinning out of control and slamming into track-side seats (since no railing keeps them from doing so), plopping to the ground with a thud or tripping over one another, occasionally forming this flailing pile of terribly tangled limbs and hooked skates.

Bashing anyone in an enemy uniform is 30-year-old Natily Blair, a.k.a. Ginger Snap, the Gridlock's flinty-eyed captain. Blair got her tag from the British term for redheads and the sound her right wrist made when it was driven into the asphalt during a practice session. (She underwent two operations for the injury and around her neck wears the metal pin that once held the fracture together.)

Blair came to the Big Apple from Phoenix with dreams of being an actress. That was until three summers ago when she experienced an epiphany at the Mermaid Parade in Coney Island and became transfixed by a bunch of girls on skates, she says, "beating each other up." She emerged almost overnight not only as the quintessential derby girl but, like so many in this game, ultimately became consumed by the entire life of it, going in the sport's parlance from a "fresh-meat" newbie to a "rotten-meat" diehard within the space of a New York minute. "You don't become a derby girl really," she once said. "You realize that you are one already—dying to come out."

At 5 feet 2 inches, 130 pounds and innocently blue-eyed, Snap is notorious for her thumping, well-timed hits, a chiseled-chip, in-your-face attitude and a lip-glossed mouth that roars at the mere drop of an

askance look from an opponent. It's no wonder that on the back of her T-shirt reads "80," the atomic number of mercury. Consider it a warning label. "Ginger can really go off," says Hyper Lynx, a player for the Queens of Pain. Mr. Pink, however, makes an important distinction that applies to most of these women. "Natily is very sweet," he says, "but Ginger is argumentative."

"I used to be the fat, red-headed kid with glasses that everybody picked on," explains Snap before the bout while sucking down bottled water at an alarming rate. It's a humiliation she suffers from no longer. Instead, she is puffed to the hilt with the adrenaline rush of feeling. All at once, she is infinitely powerful and aggressive, athletic and graceful, and sexy and feminine. It's a combination, she says, that's so unusual, so alluring, that it can't help but captivate the men who watch them and addict the women who join them.

For the players, there's that irresistibly luscious tingle of unbridled tension release, the rare opportunity to pound thy fellow sister after a particularly stressful workweek, boyfriend problems or simply a rough ride in on the subway. At times, it translates into heat-of-the-moment helmet throwing, nose-to-nose shouting matches or down-and-dirty catfights.

"There's a lot of female testosterone going around," Snap concedes, but adds that the current code of women's roller derby is akin to that of Vegas: "Everything that happens on the track stays on the



Since its formation, the Gotham Girls roller derby league has been filling seats with hard-core roller derby fans in the mood for excitement.



A Gotham Girls referee, bottom left, sports a clever moniker of his own; a member of the Brooklyn Bombshells, top left, flies the team flag; Joey Hardcore, center, strikes an intimidating pose; Leggs Luthor, top right; Emma Badapple and Tramp O'Lean, bottom right, discuss strategy.

track." It's that or the unseemliness of appearing privately before a conflict-resolution board to settle the issue.

No one wants that.

"What we're all about is competition and camaraderie, kicking each other's ass for an hour, then having beers afterwards," says Snap, who's the Gotham Girls' public relations "mistress," as well as the past media and marketing director of the national Women's Flat Track Derby Association. "There's no money in this yet. So we're all here out of nothing but the love for the game."

That notwithstanding, the most memorable fight in the Gotham Girls' short history was between Joey Hardcore, the Pain's baddest bad girl, and the Mayhem's Roxy Balboa, who sports a perpetual shiner around her left eye and, according to her league profile, is 64 inches of "pure fighting power."

The two went after each other during the Gotham Girls' first championship bout in October 2005. The hostilities, according to Roxy, started with a stiff elbow by Joey jabbed to somewhere around the chest. They continued with a supremely growled "Bitch!" that Joey shot Roxy with her typical sneering glare, which prompted Roxy to vow, "The next time we go around the rink, you're going down!" And so it happened, on that next 45-degree turn, with both pulling shirts and dragging each other to the ground, tumbling around on the track, and throwing wild but healthy punches before the refs pulled them apart. It was quite the scene.

"We're civil but we still don't get along," the 26-year-old Roxy, a sweet-faced girl with short, light-brown hair, is saying now, perched in

the bleachers tonight, as is Joey Hardcore, though the two are separated, thankfully, by about a hundred people. "I try to get along with everybody, but she's so smug, way too cocky for her own good. Such a punk ass." She claims the whole to-do exploded from something that "had been building all season. I just couldn't take it anymore, couldn't control myself. I finally said, 'I'm done with you.'" She giggles. "It's funny, I've blanked out on so much of it by now, but I do remember punching her good to the gut."

Unsurprisingly, the broad-shouldered Joey had an entirely different take on this she-said, she-said matter. "You mean the time I beat the shit out of her?" she asks. Then, after an eye-staring pause that one usually sees in the center of a boxing ring: "Yes, I tangled with Roxy, and I'm sure she won't forget it." A sex educator for teens by trade, the 24-year-old Israeli-born Hardcore is decked out in all dominatrix black, including a T-shirt that reads "XXX" across the back. She casts this positively unctuous grin that makes her look like Ricki Lake's evil twin. "I have a lot of anger," she offers bluntly, which explains her penchant for temper tantrums, incessant trash talking, giving the finger to booing crowds and for generally being an all-around troublemaker.

"Roxy was aggressively fouling me, not just hitting me with her forearm—which is a foul—but chopping away at me," is Joey's version. "So I took her down, grabbed her ankle and punched her." She then abruptly pulls out from under her shirt a ball bearing hanging on a chain around her neck—the Gotham Girls' low-rent equivalent of a World Series ring—and with an overtone of utter payback adds with finality: "And we won the game."

Balboa has recovered from a derby-caused posterior cruciate ligament tear, which kept her out of several bouts during the 2006 season. She still exhibits long, jagged scars all over her left elbow, left knee and right forearm. Not to mention having that dubious black eye that she swears she got from a flagrant elbow flush to the socket. "Are you kidding?" says the fashion designer by day, revealing a pierced tongue while giving a guided tour of her body bruises. "This is nothing. Just look at this," as she points to battle wounds of varying severity. She shakes her head and sighs. "I'm a mess."

It all comes with the bump-and-grind turf: assorted aches and pains, split lips, bloody noses, floor burns, scrapes, sprained ankles,

Learning the Lingo

Bout: A derby match between two teams made to sound as ominous as a prizefight.

Jam: A single period of time in which to score, lasting no more than two minutes. Look at it as a boxing round.

Pack: The combined eight defensive skaters—blockers and pivots—in one big group skating around the track.

Quads: Old-school four-wheel skates—required equipment for derby—as opposed to modern-day inline skates.

Snake Drill: A pre-bout practice drill in which all skaters skate single file around the track, while a single jammer weaves through the entire line from back to front.

Giving a Whip: An assist move in which a blocker extends an arm to her team's jammer and pulls her around the track, propelling her with momentum and quite possibly taking out unsuspecting opposing blockers along the way.

Pack It Up: A yell to teammates to tighten the defense.

Take-Down: A wallop check that flattens an opponent.

Spank Alley: The penalty box, where players go when they commit fouls.

Solid: A compliment when a skater is stable and tough on her skates.

Clawing/Swimming: A term used when the jammer pulls herself through the pack.

Crash Pad: The roller rink.

Crash Zone: A possibly dangerous trackside area where skaters are prone to come crashing into the audience.

Fresh Meat: A newbie or pre-drafted player.

Rotten Meat: A player after joining a team.

Fishnet Burn: When the friction from a skidding fall on the track rips one's fishnets and causes a reddish fishnet-pattern mark on the legs. Exceedingly painful.

Rink Rash (or Track Rash): Similar to fishnet burns—and equally as painful—except these inflict exposed skin, such as thighs, elbows and parts of the buttocks.

—M.P.G.

strained and ripped ligaments, pulled muscles, cracked ribs, dislocated shoulders and hematomas the size of grapefruits in glorious shades of black, blue, purple and brown. "If you can walk away from it," says the Bombshells' Penny Larceny, "it's a badge of honor. In fact, if it's a really good bruise, we'll have somebody snap a picture of it." To which her team's captain, the stunning, long-legged Anne Phetamean, chimes in: "That's what is so empowering. When somebody hits you and you fall to the ground and you can just shake it off and say, 'I'm fine,' it's an amazing feeling. That you can keep on going, that you learn that your body can take almost anything."

Inspired by a gimmicky skate marathon during the Depression, roller derby peaked somewhere between the late 1940s and early 1970s, becoming a pop culture phenomenon. Bouts were televised and drew as many as 40,000 fans, with one match at Chicago's Comiskey Park in 1972 attracting more than 50,000 spectators. Tracks were banked and enclosed within a metal railing and players were nothing less than household names, such as Ann "Banana Nose" Calvello, "the meanest mama on skates," who dyed her hair purple before Dennis Rodman was even born, and Judy "The Blonde Bomber" Arnold and Loretta "Little Iodine" Behrens and Joanie "The Golden Girl" Weston.

Then, just like that, roller derby was all but dead and without a smidgen of public outcry or an official burial. And that's the way things stayed until 2001, when, on a whimsical prayer, four women in Austin, Texas, who called themselves Bad Girl Good Woman Productions were determined to revive the game but with the inclusion of rock and roll acts. "We were a bunch of chicks who booked bands and worked in bars," Heather Burdick, one of the quartet, once said. "We were building it from the ground up." They found a rink and a figure-skating trainer, began to study old derby footage, then practiced and raised money. It wasn't long before this morphed into a league of its own, the TXRD Lonestar RollerGirls, from which came the since-cancelled A&E reality series, "Rollergirls," that immediately put women's roller derby back on the American landscape and smack into the national psyche.

The gospel of derby queendom began spreading. Flyers began circulating in dive bars, coffee houses and rock clubs. There were newspaper ads recruiting wannabe derbyites and a buzz on the Internet, especially on the ubiquitous MySpace. Before long, a slew of organized, all-girl amateur leagues were forming not just in the United States, but also in Canada, Japan, France and even the exotically remote Cayman Islands. "I think the novelty of it, the sense of nostalgia, the appeal to the average woman, the grassroots heart and the fact that it's a genuinely exciting game all factored into derby growing so much and so quickly," says Lefty Leibowitz, who cofounded the Gotham Girls.

Penny Larceny, who doubles as Megan Gerrity, a 31-year-old production editor for a major book publisher, first read about roller derby in a magazine article. Soon afterwards she spotted a flyer for a Gotham Girls fund-raiser and figured it'd be something fun and different to do. An odd little hipster escape, if not a wonderful talk piece at parties. "I joined for the mischief" is the way she puts it.

Though she'd taken up martial arts and kickboxing in the past, something about derby intimidated her to no end. "I had the impression that these were a bunch of really tough chicks and I wouldn't be cool enough," the bookwormish and bespectacled Gerrity says. "That

I'd be like the high school geek always off in the corner who didn't know what she was doing." Even her mom said, just short of pleading, "Wouldn't you rather do something else?"

But Penny trained with that Do It Yourself ethos that seems to permeate this derby incarnation. She honed her skills by doing such creative things as weaving speedily through holes in the morning subway crowd heading to work, and within time, evolved into a fearless player wearing skull and crossbones on her helmet and having complete tunnel vision. "This weird thing happens when I'm skating," she says. "I lose all sounds. I don't remember girls yelling at me or people cheering."

Despite the Bombshell fans' Beastie Boys rallying cry of "No Sleep Til Brooklyn," the seemingly faster, stronger Gridlock are dominating so thoroughly that its players start mugging a bit for the crowd after nearly every score: the freckled, spit-curved Brigitte Barhot sticks out her ample tongue, Gene Simmons style; Beyonsláy, grinning widely, her cheeks forming the shape of bubbles, wiggles that much-hyped bootylicious butt that seconds before had sent rail-thin opponent Leggs Luthor flying.

"Beyon-slay!...Beyon-slay!...Beyon-slay!" comes the chant rolling down from high in the stands, compelling the Round Mound

of Takedown to softly blow kisses to her admirers as Iggy Pop's "Search & Destroy" blares.

By the time it's all over, the Gridlock win going away, 87-69. But as the Bronx players sashay away from the track and down to the lockers with huge smiles and slapping palms, there are a few Bombshells with pursed lips and sideways stares grumbling about illegal hits and conduct unbecoming. Anne Phetamean tries chilling out the uncomfortably steamy air with a gracious comment: "They were scrappy and played real hard." This, of course, is the only way to go at this point—along the high road. Because the bad feelings, the negative vibes, must all end here and now, before these double-lived derby divas dress into their civvies and exit back into the real world again, before things ever end up in front of the conflict-resolution board.

In the religion of women's roller derby of the new millennium, this twisted sisterhood of resurgent Girl Power, the commandment is crystal clear: what happens here stays here. Which means it's time to knock down a few rounds of beer together at the nearest pub. ❖

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Interborough rivalries rule the day for the Gotham Girls. Here, the Manhattan Mayhem and the Brooklyn Bombshells do battle.