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# YOU JUST CAN'T KEEP THE GIRLS FROM JAMMING

*Over the last six years, roller derby has been reborn — this time as sport, not theater.*

BY PAUL WACHTER

At the whistle — two short bursts — Suzy Hotrod dashed past the opposing jammer, Eva Dead, and settled into a loping skater's stride. Just minutes into the 2008 Women's Flat Track Derby Association's national championship game in November, Hotrod's team, the Gotham Girls, were in an unusual position — they were losing, the first time they had been behind all tournament.

As a jammer, it was Hotrod's job to score; she got a point for each Chicago skater she lapped. Ahead on the oval track, her four teammates got out of her way, but Hotrod quickly found herself trapped behind a wall of three blockers for Chicago — Ying O'Fire, Hoosier Mama and Nina Millimeter — who wanted nothing more than to send her tumbling into the crowd. As they rounded the turn, Hotrod feinted to the right, and the phalanx reacted, freeing up a sliver of space on the inside. With a





▲▲ The Gotham Girls are an all-star roller derby team assembled from players in the Gotham derby league. ▲▲▲ Ana Bollocks (Kristin Carney) blocking out Hyper Lynx (Jeannice Angela) in a scrimmage. ▲▲▲▲ The outfits (fishnets) and names (Raggedy Animal) may be camp, but the athleticism and injuries are real.

leap she was free, and the crowd of several thousand roared at the nifty move. Now, to capture the lead, she had to make it through the pack once more.

In its earlier incarnation, which started in the mid-1930s and had all but petered out by the early 1970s, roller derby featured teams of professional skaters, men and women, whose races along a banked track were leavened by pratfalls and punch-ups. Then, about seven years ago, roller derby resurfaced in Texas as an amateur, women-only game, played not on the expensive banked tracks of old but on flat surfaces where a track could be laid out with little more than a roll of tape. Participants took stage names and wore miniskirts and fishnet stockings, adding a campy sexuality to the violent theatrics of old. Today more than 15,000 skaters compete in more than 300 flat-track leagues — the bulk of them in the United States but some as far off as Australia. (Leagues typically have three or four teams, plus an all-star squad that represents them in regional and national competitions.)

The rapid growth has made the game more competitive. Suzy Hotrod, whose real name is Jean Schwarzwald, still dabs lipstick on her cheeks before she skates, but that was the extent of the theatrical gestures on display at the nationals. The country's eight best teams had come to Portland, Ore., not to perform but to win. In its 70-odd-year history, roller derby has been many things, but never until perhaps now has it been a legitimate sport.

**The national tournament**, nicknamed the Northwest Knockdown, was held at Hall D in the Portland Expo Center, between the Ski Fever and Snowboard Show in Hall E (the facility's largest hangar) and the Adidas warehouse sale in Hall C. But there was no mistaking the derbygoers among the crowds. Women with spiky hair and checkered Vans; hipsters in skinny jeans and flannel; brawny men with looped earrings and leather jackets that bore the logos of their preferred derby teams. Tattoos abounded. A typical T-shirt: "My Marxist Feminist Dialectic Brings All the Boys to the Yard."

Inside, portable aluminum bleachers surrounded the track. But the most daring fans sat on the floor, well within distance of errant skaters. From a stage at the head of the track, the announcers called the action ("From the city of sisterly shove...") and shilled for the sponsors ("When they're not skating, some wear Doc Martens") that set up retail booths on the other side of the bleachers.

Teams from the West have dominated the short history of modern women's roller derby — the first champions, the Executioners, were from Austin, the birthplace of the women-only revival, and their successors were

*Paul Wachter has written about the tennis player Donald Young and the mixed-martial-arts fighter Shad Smith for the magazine.*

from Kansas City — but this year the Gotham Girls entered the tournament as the favorites. According to the Web site for Gotham Girl Roller Derby, the New York City league, every Gotham Girl "is an amalgam of athlete, pinup girl, rocker and brute rolled into one badass derby girl." But few skaters fit this description as snugly as Jean Schwarzwald, who is covered in tattoos, plays guitar in the punk band Kissy Kamikaze and has been sponsored by Manic Panic, the hair-dye company favored by Dennis Rodman and Marilyn Manson.

"I think this is the one perfect sport for me," says Schwarzwald, who is 28 and works as a photographer. She played sports in high school but didn't like the jock crowd. "And I'm not someone who's going to get on a treadmill to get my exercise."

Not all of the skaters are punk rockers. Schwarzwald's fellow jammer, Nicole Williams (Bonnie Thunders), works for a nonprofit dedicated to conserving the world's 36 species of wild cats. Beyondslay, the team's only African-American, says that because of her job she can't reveal her real name. "I think that's the most unique thing about derby, that it does bring you in touch with people you would never meet otherwise," Williams says.

Reduced to its basics, roller derby is a simple game. There are two 30-minute halves, during which each team fields five women at a time in shifts (called jams) that last up to two minutes. They skate counterclockwise around an oval track, slightly smaller in circumference than a basketball court. There's one jammer per shift, who scores a point each time she laps an opposing skater. After her first, nonscoring pass through the opposing team, the leading jammer also has the strategic option of ending the jam prematurely by tapping her hands to her hips. The other eight players skate in a pack and make judicious use of their hips and arms to clear space for their jammer and stymie her opposite number.

A game in which skaters simulate bumper cars can be dangerous, of course. I attended the Gotham Girls' last practice before nationals at a small, unmarked warehouse in Astoria, and just minutes into their scrimmage, Kelly Morrison (Scarlett Rage) tripped and fell hard onto her shoulder and burst into tears. Her teammates escorted her to the sidelines and consoled her before resuming practice. Later, at the hospital, Morrison was treated for a broken collarbone, which meant she would miss the trip to Portland.

**It may surprise some** that the idea for women-only derby was a man's. In 2001, Daniel Eduardo Policarpo, a drifter musician, began recruiting women in downtown Austin to realize his psychedelic vision of roller derby as a centerpiece of "a crazy circus with these clowns unfortunately

stabbing each other, these bears on fire on these unicycles." When Policarpo skipped town, several women who called themselves the She.E.O.s staged the inaugural bout on June 23, 2002. In lieu of knife-wielding clowns, there were fake fights and Spank Alley, a sexed-up penalty box in which fans were encouraged to slap the skaters' behinds.

Soon after, most of the rank and file, bristling at the undemocratic tendencies of the self-appointed leaders, left to start their own league in which each skater would have a say. The new skater-owned organization became the model for women-only amateur leagues across the country, and in 2004 the Women's Flat Track Derby Association was founded with the motto "By the Skaters, for the Skaters."

As new leagues formed, bawdy hijinks were emphasized — "pillow fights in the penalty box and fake fighting," according to Dakota Prosch (Kola Loka), who skates for the Windy City Rollers. "That's what got butts in the seats," says Colleen Bell (Crackerjack), the president of W.F.T.D.A. But the skaters quickly discovered that they were more interested in competition than in theater, and that the game itself drew fans. "I remember a bout in 2005 with live music, where for the first time fans left when the concert started and not the other way around," says Emily Langmade (Fisti Cuffs) of the Gotham Girls. Her boyfriend, Justin Campoy (Endless Justin), is a derby referee and says he hasn't seen a fight in three years. (Men play a large supporting role in women's derby, volunteering as referees, coaches and mascots.)

Now many of the new skaters are accomplished athletes. While Schwarzwald barely knew how to skate when she joined up, Nicole Williams was a competitive figure skater, and several other Gotham Girls have ice-skating or hockey backgrounds. "Roller derby's become less of a kitschy, girly thing and become a serious sport," Prosch says. Indeed, after Portland, angry skaters called up the sports editor of *The Oregonian* and demanded to know why the newspaper didn't cover the tournament.

**Viewed only as sport**, the roller derby at the Northwest Knockdown produced few moments of genuine excitement. Most of the games were blowouts. In their opener, the Gotham Girls stormed out to a 23-1 lead against Duke City Derby from Albuquerque. New York dominated action within the pack, clearing paths for its jammers, who gobbled up points and then called the jams to a halt before Duke's jammers could score. Frustrated, a Duke City jammer cut the track in an attempt to improve her position,

but the referees — as many as seven of them, on skates, patrol a game — spotted it and sent her to the penalty box, leaving her team with no chance to score. For the full two minutes, Bonnie Thunders zipped around the track, earning the Gotham Girls points for each opponent she passed, including those in the penalty box. It was a 15-0 run, and the rest of the game, which finished 182-25, was more of the same.

The Gotham Girls' semifinal triumph against Philadelphia was nearly as lopsided. The closest game of the tournament was the other semifinal, in which regulation play ended with Chicago and Texas tied and the crowd on its feet. But overtime itself was anticlimactic, because the Texas jammer was relegated to the penalty box, leaving Chicago's jammer as the only eligible scorer on the track.

In the finals, Chicago stayed within striking distance of New York for much of the first half, taking an early lead, absorbing a Gotham surge and then clawing back to a mere 12-point deficit. But on successive jams, several Chicago skaters were called for penalties — low blocks and cutting the track — clearing the path for Gotham's jammers, who went on a 22-3 run to finish the half. Yet again the Gotham Girls coasted to victory, 134-56. But despite another blowout, as they filed out of the Expo Center, skaters and fans alike seemed more than satisfied.

In December, back in New York, the Gotham Girls held an awards gala at Southpaw, a Brooklyn dive bar cum music hall. There was a derby-themed trivia contest and a trophy presentation, and as the award winners — best blocker, best jammer, M.V.P. — made their way to the stage, Fisti Cuffs delivered a playful squeeze on the rump to each.

Even the skaters themselves couldn't fully explain their recent dominance — counting nationals, they were in the midst of a 12-win streak, a W.F.T.D.A. record. "Going into the tournament, we were confident but really had no idea how well we'd do," Schwarzwald told me.

"I'd say the skating proficiency was the same for the top four teams, but I think we were the only team that could adapt to every style of play,

**AS NEW LEAGUES FORMED, SEXED-UP HIJINKS WERE EMPHASIZED — 'PILLOW FIGHTS IN THE PENALTY BOX AND FAKE FIGHTING,' ONE WINDY CITY ROLLER SAYS. BUT SKATERS QUICKLY DISCOVERED THAT THEY WERE MORE INTERESTED IN COMPETITION, AND THAT THE GAME ITSELF DREW FANS.**

fast and slow," the team's co-manager, John Wyatt (Abraham Drinkin), said. In each of their games, the Gotham Girls also accumulated fewer penalties than their opponents. On Internet message boards there was speculation that, seeing as how New York, Chicago and Philadelphia finished 1, 2 and 3, even a fringe, amateur sport like roller derby was destined to be dominated by the major cities.

Already the Gotham Girls were looking forward to next season — training starts in February, and the home league kicks off in the spring — which culminates with the November nationals, this time in Philadelphia. But the Gotham Girls were not done making up for their abstemious time in Portland. I left the party at its peak with the lingering image of Bonnie Thunders and Fisti Cuffs on the dance floor, their movements only slightly less graceful for the absence of wheels. ■