

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

MARKETPLACE

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 2005 ■ 1

All-Female Roller Derby Packs a Punch With Hockey Fans

By CHRISTOPHER RHOADS

USUALLY AT this time of year, Costa Ledes, a devoted New York Rangers fan, is planted in front of his television for the National Hockey League playoffs.

But last Friday night, Mr. Ledes, 32 years old, battled rush-hour traffic for an hour and a half from his home on Long Island to get to a rundown roller-skating rink in the Bronx. He plunked down \$25 for a front-row seat to watch the Manhattan Mayhem beat the Brooklyn Bombshells, 86-77.

The sport: all-female roller derby.

With the NHL season canceled this year due to contract disagreements between owners and players, some die-hard hockey fans like Mr. Ledes are easing their pain with roller derby—a once popular, rock 'em sock 'em sport that all but faded away in the 1970s but is now enjoying a national revival.

Roller derby “more than makes up for it,” said Mr. Ledes, wearing a Rangers jersey with an erasable board on his knees for his frequent messages to the players from his rink-side seat. “I’m hard-core.”

Just then, a player nicknamed Anne Phetamean, wearing a short blue skirt and a striped sleeveless top, plowed into Roxy Balboa, in ripped fishnet stockings, and sent her careening into the second row of spectators along the oval-shaped



Roller derby players 'Suzy Hotrod,' 'Emma Badapple' and 'Anne Phetamean' (left to right).

track. “Oh, that has to hurt,” shouted an announcer in large sunglasses and a fedora named David “Lefty” Leibowitz, who is also a co-founder of the league. “These women take their lives into their hands every night!”

The Manhattan Mayhem and the Brooklyn Bombshells make up the Gotham Girls Roller Derby league, New York’s contribution to a renaissance of roller derby that began in Austin, Texas, in 2003. Since then, more than 20 all-female leagues—skating on inexpensive flat

tracks rather than on the sport’s original banked tracks—have appeared around the country, including the Dallas Derby Devils, Kansas City Roller Warriors and Seattle’s Rat City Rollergirls. All-male teams have not cropped up—men participate mostly as referees, announcers and, of course, as audience members.

Attendance was strong from the start: matches in the Texas league routinely attract sellout crowds of 1,100. The Seattle league’s 600-plus seats were sold before its first-ever match in April 2004.

The “leagues” are grass-roots operations—more like local recreation teams than organized businesses. The Gotham Girls league, for instance, has no owners and doesn’t make a profit. It consists of 27 skaters who pay \$25 monthly dues to fund matches, which are called “bouts.” Ticket sales and sponsors, such as local restaurants, help cover costs for rink time, uniforms and insurance.

Teams mostly play locally, though there are plans for inter-league bouts. The Gotham Girls league, with its kitschy, heavy metal flair, began its first season this month and has eight matches scheduled this year. A third team, from Queens, is expected to join the league in May.

What accounts for the sudden return of a sport that went the way of sweatbands and feathered hairstyles in the 1970s? “There’s something about

Please Turn to Page B2, Column 3

Roller Derby Packs a Punch With Hockey Fans

Continued From Page B1

being in a competitive sport, on skates, wearing a sailor uniform, where you get to hit other girls," says 29-year-old Tracey DeBenedictis, a decorative painter by day who goes by the nickname Ariel Assault. The uniform of her team, the Bombshells, resembles a sailor's uniform, though more revealing.

Mr. Leibowitz, the league announcer and a Rangers hockey fan, says both sports have grace and brutality. "You have some finesse players and some goon players, who are out there to send a message," he says.

None of the participants in the leagues are fulltime skaters. The New York players, who range in age roughly from their early-20s to late-30s, include a fashion designer, a guitarist in an all-girl punk band, a high-school English teacher, a former Playboy model and a computer technician.

"We're misfits," says a 28-year-old player for the Mayhem named Natily Blair, who designs Web sites. "The only thing we have in common is the need to beat up chicks on skates."

Ms. Blair says she got her nickname—Ginger Snap—from breaking her arm during a practice last autumn. "It went 'snap,'" she explains. She also has ginger-colored hair.

It's a far cry from the early days of roller derby. The sport was founded in 1935 in Chicago, as a distraction from the Depression. It was originally an endurance race. Male-female couples were required to complete tens of thousands of laps, until they reached the equivalent of skating from New York to Los Angeles.

Noticing that occasional collisions between couples elicited the biggest howls from the crowd, promoters made it a contact sport and introduced a point system. It evolved into a co-ed team sport and boomed in the next decades, with teams playing before crowds of 40,000 or more in big venues like New York's Madison Square Garden. Actress Raquel Welch starred in a 1972 roller derby movie, called "Kansas City Bomber," and another film, where the teams tried to kill a player in each bout starring James Caan, called "Rollerball," appeared in 1975.

Nevertheless, financial troubles, declining crowds and a recession at the time forced the main leagues to shut down in the mid-1970s. Several attempts to revive the sport since then—often using a choreographed, pro-wrestling-style

approach—failed.

The latest incarnation, initiated mostly by the female players, seems to have found the right formula, particularly for hockey fans in withdrawal.

For Jonathan Dyck, a 25-year-old investment banker who moved to Manhattan from hockey-crazed Canada six months ago, discovering roller derby came just in time to distract him from the absence of the NHL playoffs this year. Roller derby "has the exact same elements as hockey," says Mr. Dyck, who grew up playing hockey in his native Canada.

He admits he's had trouble persuading his girlfriend to go to any matches. She doesn't really get it, he says. "It's girls going around fighting and skating," he explains. "What more do you need? It's perfect."

Though the rules of roller derby are evolving somewhat as the leagues take shape, the basics of the game consist of two teams with five players each. Each team has three "blockers" who skate around the track in a loose group, jostling each other for position. A "pivot" on each team leads the players, calling plays and setting the pace of the pack.

Starting some 20 feet behind the pack is the team's offensive player, usually the best—or toughest—skater, called the "jammer." Each team has one jammer, who tries to skate through the pack. The dual task of her blockers is to help her through the thicket of swinging arms and legs while knocking the other jammer on her back or into the crowd.

At the Bronx rink, nothing separates the track from the crowd, typically several hundred people, who are seated on the floor. (There are a couple of rows of VIP seats like the one in which Mr. Le-deas sat.)

A jammer wins a point for each person on the other team that she passes. Each round, called a jam, can last up to two minutes. An entire bout consists of three, 15-minute periods. In addition to skimpy uniforms, players wear a helmet, mouthpiece, elbow pads and knee pads.

For some fans, roller derby replaces the family bonding that hockey normally provides. Brian Thomas, who designs commercial space for a company in Brooklyn, usually goes every year with his father to several Philadelphia Flyers hockey games. Since that's not possible this year, Mr. Thomas says he has invited his father to a roller derby bout in

June.

"I've almost given up on hockey," says Mr. Thomas, who dates one of the Mayhem, Erica Pair, a.k.a. Roxy Balboa. "I didn't have to look too hard to find something to fill the void."

Mr. Thomas acknowledges that it's taken awhile to get used to his girlfriend's injuries. "I've never been with a girl with a black eye before," he says.