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WHAT COMES TO MIND UPON HEARING THE WORDS “Roller Derby?”

For many people, a sense of nostalgia is evoked with images of a WWF-esque, theatrical sport from the 1970s. For others, it's visions of burly, tattooed, and dyed women in fishnets and knee socks gunning for each other. For me, and for many other people intimately connected to roller derby, it evokes a sense of camaraderie, sportsmanship, responsibility, and time commitment. And I mustn't forget tons of fun!

Back in late 2005, thanks to fliers and Myspace, a handful of women from Lancaster and Harrisburg met up at a brewery to form a Central Pennsylvania derby league. We discussed our vision for the league, voted on a board of directors, and delegated duties. We began holding private practices twice a week at a rink in Middletown, ironically enough, as that was a central point between Harrisburg and Lancaster. Due to a few different circumstances, the main one being that the rink could not physically accommodate a regulation roller derby track and any other rink would require an hour+ commute for many, the league split in two. Shortly after, the Dutchland Derby Rollers League was conceived. We were a group of women on a mission to spread the derby gospel and to be taken seriously.

We are now an LLC, working toward a non-profit status. We've raised over ten thousand dollars for local charities. We

are members of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, which is responsible for legitimizing the sport, establishing the official rules, and allowing us to be nationally ranked among 80 other leagues. We are many different types of women—moms, social workers, small business owners, veterinary assistants...—each with a passion for playing roller derby. In addition to a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, we have an active Board of Directors and numerous committees that consist of coaching, public relations, bout production, website production, maintenance, merchandise, events, and marketing. With names like Peg Legs, Rachel Slur, Cole Slaughter, and Megan Whoopie, you might find it surprising that roller derby can be taken so seriously.

I, Swoop Deville, am on an “undetermined hiatus” from derby because of graduate school and frequent traveling. I miss everything about the sport, especially knocking girls down. Roller derby reaches all aspects of life for many, if not all, of the women who play it. I've seen it make women become more confident and fit. It has given many women something about which to be passionate. I've seen it enhance personal relationships where partners and spouses have joined the DDR family by refereeing or helping at bouts. I've also seen roller derby fracture relationships and cause physical injuries (the first major injury on the league was yours truly, when I broke my ankle in two places a few weeks before our first bout). Partners and spouses of those involved in derby are jokingly referred to as “derby widows” (and thanked often

for their patience) because being an active member of a roller derby league takes a great amount of commitment and time.

Similar to other subcultures, there is a supportive community—a mighty kinship—in every city. I can go to a city in which I don't know anyone, get in touch with the local derby league, and have a place to stay, new friends to hang with, something to talk about, and even attend a practice. I've done this in Texas, Colorado, North Carolina, and even in London. This is absolutely what I love most about roller derby.

The hardest part about roller derby for me, in all honesty, was picking a name. There are just so many good ones! Roller derby names and personas typically are a play on words. These vary from literary works, interests, slang, and famous people, to alcohol, cars, and candy. Your creativity is the limit when picking your name. When I was conjuring up my name, there were only a few hundred already existing names. I knew this because there is a national derby name roster in which every active derby participant is listed, so that nobody picks the same names. For those that are very similar, derby etiquette suggests contacting the person with the name similar to the one you fancy and asking if she (or he for refs and stats) minds if you choose the similar name. I can imagine that selecting a name would be much harder today because there are now thousands of people participating in the sport.

Continued on next page

Roll with it

By Jaclyn Downs / Photography by Kate Greenawalt / Fashions provided by aZura / Jewelry provided by Brent L. Miller



Fashion: Pura Vida sundress
 Jewelry: 37 inch necklace
 with 3 round peridot stones,
 Tropezienne collection
 bracelet with one oval hy-
 drothermal peridot, Melrose
 sterling silver drop earrings,
 all by Rebecca



Jaclyn Downs (aka Swoop Deville)



Fashion: A n M Modal all
 over print dress
 Jewelry: Tropezienne
 necklace with blue topaz,
 amethyst and peridot,
 Tropezienne ring featuring
 amethyst, citrine, and
 peridot, both by Rebecca

Jen Cole-Bricker (aka Josie Cuervo)

Continued from previous page

Of the founding members of the Dutchland Derby Rollers, Josie Cuervo, White Thrash, Treasure Chest, and Laverne N. Surly are currently active skaters. All have contributed an enormous amount of time and effort toward the advancement of the league.

Josie Cuervo, also known as Jen Cole-Bricker, was (and most feel still is) the key ingredient in the raising of the Dutchland Rollers. She served as president for the first two and a half years and is now “acting president” until someone else is willing to fill her position. Since her position, as well as some other positions on the Board of Directors, would require some large shoes to fill, the league has begun to split up duties, small and large, to more skaters so that everyone can hold weight in the league and feel a sense of ownership. It will allow a greater number of skaters to have more of an investment in the league.

Josie is an extremely organized, focused, overachieving woman when it comes to both work and play. I met up with and interviewed Josie over a few beers at Brendee’s, where you can ALWAYS find a derby girl.

When asked “What does roller derby mean to you?” Josie promptly responded with “family.” As a social worker, it’s her social support. “These girls know when to step in and help, and when skaters just need time alone.” Josie told me a perfect example of the time she was on her way to practice and found out her sister had passed away. She still went to practice, and one of the skaters sat and talked with her the whole time. “Everyone on the league stood by me and let me know they were available to help in any way at all, but still allowed me to have my space.” As any member of the league will tell you, you have 50 women that have your back if need be.

I totally agree. When I broke my ankle (dodging one of Josie’s noteworthy booty blocks), every skater on the league offered me accommodation. I had groceries bought for me, food made for me,

Alexis Biondi (aka White Thrash)

*Fashion: (right) Weston Wear Willow dress
Jewelry: St. Barth Collection necklace with enamel and rose gold plated ovals, St. Barth collection dome ring with enamel, St. Barth Collection bracelet with oval enamel design links*

*Fashion: (far right) Heartache long printed dress
Jewelry: Griffé 36 inch necklace and Griffé triple circle drop earrings*

*Fashion: Double Zero mini dress
Jewelry: Melrose Collection 35 inch sterling silver necklace, Melrose sterling silver large circle pendant on a box chain, Melrose sterling silver ring and cuff, all by Rebecca*

switched cars with me for a few weeks since I was not able to drive my stick-shift. Thanks again to everyone!

“My favorite part about roller derby is that you can physically assault somebody and have a friendship grow out of it,” says Josie with a smile. “Roller derby goes beyond common interests like music and going to the same college. Everyone comes together from all social backgrounds, and what is respected about a skater is her strength, speed, competence, and good sportsmanship.”

Although derby has affected Josie Cuervo’s life in many positive ways, it has a few drawbacks. Due to all the time she dedicates to it, she can’t volunteer elsewhere like she did before. She still participates in Relay for Life, but not as often as she had previously. She recently got married and has not gone on a honeymoon, as all her vacation days are used for derby! I thought that would be her answer to “What’s the hardest part about roller derby?” since she has undoubtedly devoted more time to the league over the years than any other skater. I was wrong. She said that the hardest part is the potential for injury since derby is a contact sport. This point is generally underrated until someone gets hurt. When recently watching a bout, a skater got rolled over and wasn’t moving



Sara Sarro
(aka Treasure Chest)

Valerie Stephan
(aka Laverne N. Surly)

for a few minutes. Josie said she began to cry when she saw the hurt skater because that could have been her or any other skater on her team. By the way, the skater was okay.

In regards to derby names, Josie Cuervo says her name is the worst mistake she ever made. In the beginning, people would buy her shots of tequila every time she went out, to the point she now despises tequila. If given the opportunity to go back in time and choose another name, she would. However, I don’t think she’d come up with another tagline as brilliant as “Lemon or salt with your booty block?”

So, with myself being a potentially retired skater, I asked Josie what her vision is for her derby future. She responded by saying that she does not think she will ever stop being a part of the Dutchland Rollers. Twice in the past, she had said that she was going to retire but didn’t because “too much good comes out of it to ever leave it behind. Seeing all the positive things that it has done for so many of the skaters is validation for starting the league. I will skate as long as my body will let me.”

The Dutchland Rollers are currently voting on new positions within the league. Laverne N. Surly, also known as Valerie Stephan, was the Public Relations chairperson for three years and has very recently become Vice President. When asked how roller derby has affected her life, she responded with “I can’t say enough about how good it is. It has helped me to develop who I am and to be more comfortable with myself. So many women are divorced from their physical selves; they are not comfortable with who they are or how they look. It has helped me to know that I don’t have to be somebody’s idea of what I should be. I can be me.” She paused to let me catch up with her words and then added, “Derby gets you in touch with your physicality. It makes you better able to own how you treat your body, so that you can have a better body to skate

with." She elaborated by saying that her physicality wasn't too much of a priority in her life before derby, but now it definitely is.

Surly's favorite aspects of derby are also the camaraderie and support that being on the league has to offer. "Everyone cares about your success. You get encouraged and supported to do what you need to do and to be." Also, because she is a founding member, she added that "seeing what an organization can accomplish has been very rewarding. Every league is a grassroots organization that has a slightly different mission. It's what the people involved want to make it." The Dutchland Rollers' mission statement includes being "contributing members of the local community through outreach, volunteerism, and fundraising," and as a not-for-profit, they can spotlight on local organizations and help them to raise money (and have). "It shows that like-minded people can accomplish a lot!"

"Laverne N. Surly" was the name she decided on after mulling over a few others. She chose it because she loved the show as a kid and "because I get to wear a neck scarf!" It allows her persona to be a perfect blend of being "churlish" and showing her appreciation for the 1950s and '60s. You do wear it well, Surly.

When asked if there were any drawbacks to playing roller derby, Surly's answer was "I can only skate for a finite period of time," and then mentioned a quote that will be appropriate someday when "the spirit is willing, but the body is weak." She tells me that she has chronic bursitis in her knees as a result of repeated assault. It's true. Knee injuries are the most common injury for the sport. Yes, pads are worn over the knees, elbows, and wrists (in addition to helmets and mouth guards), but most times, the falls are backed with serious force. One of the very first things newcomers (aka "skater tots") learn is how to stop and fall correctly to avoid injury. Laverne N. Surly has no intentions of ever leaving the league, even if she can no longer bout. She states that she will continue to be involved by refereeing or holding another staff position.

It is not uncommon for skaters to sometimes need time off from the league. There is an official "Leave of Absence" status, with strict regulations connected to the amount of time away. There's also

retirement status, and then there's the unofficial "undetermined hiatus" that I use to describe my current relationship with the Dutchland Rollers. I'm leaning toward "active retirement," which is less of a time commitment and allows me to pay less dues and still be able to skate at practice from time to time.

Treasure Chest, known by day as Sara Sarro, is a force to be reckoned with on the track. Throughout the past few years, she has really honed in on her blocker abilities and packs a solid punch with her checks and blocks. On the track she is quite serious about her game, but off of it she is always laughing with her infectious, hearty laugh. With a mix of Sara working long hours and living quite a distance from downtown Lancaster, I conducted our interview via email.

Treasure feels that derby is one of the best sports available to women. "Not only does it challenge you athletically, but it is a very supportive environment in which to become immersed. I feel that it is one sport that fosters women who might never have thought of themselves as sporty, athletic, or capable of playing a competitive team sport." I see proof in every league that I've encountered. There is finally a place where women can use their weight as an advantage. Having greater "physical assets" than the average girl can put you in a favored position (literally) on the track, or at least intimidate the hell out of other skaters.

If you have seen Treasure Chest, you know she chose her name for obvious reasons. "I like pirates and feel my name fits me perfectly in many regards. As announced at every bout during my introduction, 'Not all Treasure is silver and gold.' Many an unsuspecting skater has been forced to walk the plank at the mercy of my checks." For real - I've seen her send girls flying out of bounds... Including myself!

When Treasure mentioned her feelings on the derby sisterhood, she also included the refs, many of whom are men. In women's roller derby, coaching, refereeing, and other official jobs are often held by men. They love to be a part of the sport just as much as the women. They are volunteers who are there at the practices, bouts, fundraisers, and parties. "Wow. You truly inherit a second family when you join roller derby. The skaters become your sisters, and the refs become

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your beloved bossy older siblings who tell you what's best for you, even when you don't want to hear it. You are immersed in a group of people who will support you no matter what, and who will tell you off when you're being an idiot. It's very loving, and very much like sisterhood in that aspect. I wouldn't trade it for anything," admits Treasure.

In regards to her favorite aspects of derby, Treasure loves the competition of bouting and would never forget to mention how enjoyable it is "sending an opponent flying as a result of hitting her as hard as I possibly can - which is really hard." She also loves "being able to wave to my husband on the sidelines, see his reactions when I play, and hear him congratulate me for laying someone out. I love that our league is family friendly and our spectators (and skaters) bring their kids to cheer us on." As for her most trying part of derby, Treasure's answer is threefold: "Smelling bad, pushing yourself past your limits during a difficult practice, keeping everyone sane." Treasure holds the league's secretary position and is captain of the travel team, so she is well aware of not being able to appease everyone at all times.

I asked Treasure to tell me her thoughts about when the league began and how far it has come. "I literally think back to our humble beginnings every single day. I am floored, amazed, and flabbergasted at how far we've come since I met two of our first skaters at an open skate session. It's like when you have a dream, and you wake up and think 'Wow, that was great but how could that ever become reality?' I'm happy to say Dutchland is living it!"

Every skater has different details of when and for how long she will continue to play roller derby, but the ending is always the same. "I am so excited to see how derby grows in the coming years. I want to see more recognition for Roller Derby as the true sport that it is. I would love to see skaters get paid to play derby. I think every derby skater dreams of being able to list 'Roller Derby Skater' as their occupation. I personally plan to play derby as long as I can. Bury me with my skates on!"

I believe that derby still has not reached its peak in performance or popularity, but when Drew Barrymore's roller derby movie, "Whip It" comes out this fall, I'm sure everyone will be aware that it is back and here to stay.

Even though I have history with laying the foundation for an incredible league with the three women mentioned above, I must say that White Thrash and I had a special bond, as we were the original head coaches for over a year. Aside from wanting to help start a roller derby league, we had a few things in common right from the start, the main ones being that we were girls that didn't hang out with many other girls (which, ironically, is true for many women on the league). I hardly see her anymore because she works long hours and lives in Washington Boro. I truly miss being able to see her and all the other skaters on the league regularly at practice.

White Thrash, also known as Alexis Biondi, recently came back to roller derby after taking a short "sabbatical." This time off from the league came about after getting a new job that required a good bit of traveling, which placed extra stress on her coaching duties. She stepped down from coaching and took time off to get a fresh perspective of the league, as coaching was causing her to get angry about things she felt

were not worthy of being angry over. Now that she's back and not currently on any committees, she has a much better disposition. "I'm not as angry as I was before. Now I'm able to channel any aggression I may feel to take out your jammer!" she said jovially. White Thrash has two favorite aspects of derby. The first is "knocking people over—but only when they actually fall down!" and the second is being able to have a positive outlet for the stresses of life. "You can go to practice, see friends, and forget your day because you are focusing on something else. As Laverne N. Surly says, 'Skating in circles is good for your head!'" I agree. I always feel great after skating.

I asked Thrash if she has seen a change in herself since beginning roller derby. "Oh definitely," she quickly replied. "I was never involved in team sports, but now that I have been, I see that teamwork transcends beyond just skating on the track; it benefits my relationships with my work, my family, and my home life. I know that sounds cliché, but now I can better understand other people's approaches to things." She also attributes derby to helping her follow through with things that she would have left unfinished in the past. Even though she was direct and to the point about endurance training being her least favorite part about roller derby, she still can find some positive aspects to it. "An hour of endurance training at practice gives me more drive to push through the other things that aren't much fun outside of practice." Like Surly and many other skaters, derby has also affected how Thrash treats her body. Even though she still smokes occasionally, it's much less than in the past. She feels a difference in her skating ability if she doesn't eat well. She has begun to "eat better to play derby better."

As with most roller derby names, the one you decide on is not usually the first one you pick. When asked about her name and persona, Alexis gives me all the credit. Early on, her name was Samora Slaughter, but one night at a derby gathering, which can involve a good amount of booze, we were thinking up derby names. I mentioned White Thrash, but since I already had changed my name once (from MC Jammer), and due to minor specifics like me not being fully white, Alexis was dubbed with the name. She thought this was hilarious and took the persona to the fullest with her number being 16oz (as in a 16oz can, or pounder) and a tagline of "Straight outta the double-wide to skin your hide!"

So, if you've noticed by now, the theme of "sisterhood" has reverberated throughout this article. When asked about her thoughts on derby sisterhood, she had a very realistic answer for me. She responded with "Anyone that actually has a sister will know that you don't always get along because you have different opinions, so yes, this is similar to real sister and family relationships, as opposed to just being 'friends.' The team dynamic definitely adds that element."

Thrash doesn't want to think about when the time comes where she will have to quit skating. She said she would probably continue to help the league during bouts, although it might be painful to see everyone skating if she is not able to do so. She likened it to being a kid who is grounded or sick seeing all her friends playing outside and having a great time together.

Alexis, as well as Jen, Val, Sara, and I, feel pride for how the league has progressed since day one. Members will come and go, and the league will continue to change, but our memories of derby and the many things that it has done for us won't.

If you haven't already been to a bout, I highly suggest attending one to acquaint yourself with the sport. You can also check out www.Dutchlandrollers.com for bout schedules, skater profiles, and details about the league and sport. 🍷



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