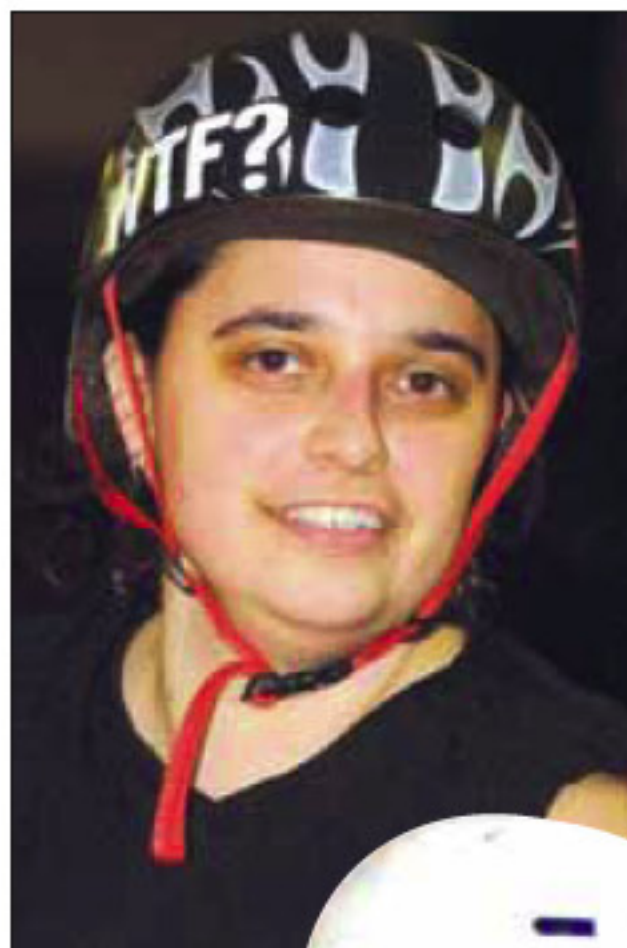
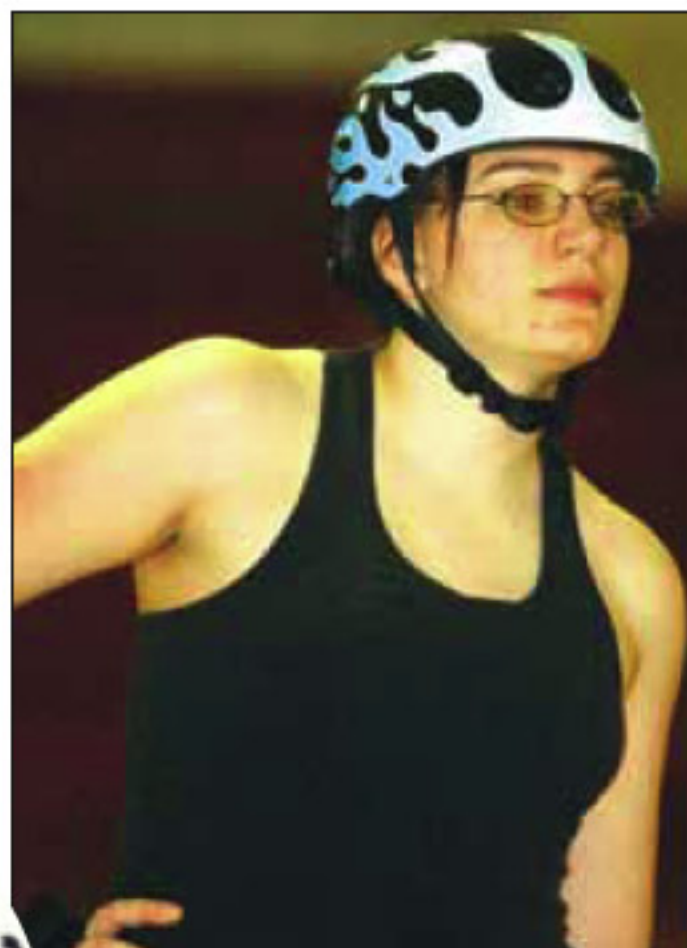




Washington native Susanne Forquer's skater name is "Lolli Pop!"



Christa Puskarich of Peters Township, a.k.a. "Anita Cocktail"



Crystal Rupp, a student at Cal U., skates by the name "BB Basher."

BY HEIDI PRICE, Staff writer
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GLENSHAW – Come May, Crystal Rupp will not take part in the traditional after-graduation "flight" from Pennsylvania.

Unlike many students who attend colleges and universities in Pennsylvania, the 22-year-old from eastern Pennsylvania plans to stay and find a job here after graduating from California University of Pennsylvania with a communications degree.

This way she can keep skating with the Steel City Derby Demons, Pittsburgh's newly formed roller derby league.

"It's just wonderful. I love the athleticism," said Rupp during a recent Tuesday night practice at the Romp n Roll in Glenshaw, north of Pittsburgh.

In March, Rupp saw an episode of the short-lived show "Rollergirls" on A&E and became intrigued by the notion that women could be physical and aggressive yet still be pretty. She searched around and found a league in Harrisburg but wanted something closer to home. Then she connected with a group of women trying to start a league in Pittsburgh.

In nine months of twice-weekly practices, Rupp has noticed some changes in her body and her attitude.

"Roller derby is excellent for all females. It gets you in tune with your body. You feel so much more confident. You look great. You feel great. It's amazing," said Rupp, whose skater name is "B.B. Basher."

It is late December, one of the few winter-like nights, and Krupp, like many of her fellow skaters, is wearing tights, a teeny skirt and a T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. Her entire ensemble is dripping with sweat.

She makes the commute from the Mon Valley to this rink north of Pittsburgh with Kortney Kinkaid, a student majoring in illustration and air brush design at the Douglas Education Center in Monessen.

Kinkaid, a North Carolina native, also plans to move into Pittsburgh after graduation in May so she can stay involved with the league.

"When I originally came, I wasn't intending to stay, but, because of the bond I've made with the girls in the derby and, being grandfathered in as one of the first Derby Demons, I've decided to stay," Kinkaid said.

Kinkaid has been with the team since its inception. Wiping a crown of sweaty ringlets from her forehead, Kinkaid, whose skater name is Kinky Kurlz, explained that she always had a hard time getting along with other girls until she joined the league.



Susanne Forquer, clad in a miniskirt and fishnet stockings, rounds a corner during practice.

"I think that a lot of us are the girls that don't get along with other girls. That kind of makes us get along," she later mused.

That's not to say she doesn't enjoy knocking girls down.

In their more than two-hour practice, Christa Puskarich leads the nearly three dozen women through an intensive series of stretching and drills.

Puskarich, who skates under the name "Anita Cocktail," tells anyone who will listen that roller derby saved her life.

More than a year ago, she moved back to Peters Township to be closer to her family after spending most of her childhood in Dallas, Texas.

Initially, it was a difficult adjustment, and Puskarich was ready to move back to Dallas when she saw a notice on MySpace that a group of women were trying to form a league in Pittsburgh. She went to the first meeting.

"I met all these wonderful women, and now I wouldn't trade it for the world," Puskarich, 29, said. One skater in the league helped her find a job as a trial consultant.

Then they break into teams to scrimmage.

It is at this point in the evening that the need for all the safety gear – the mouth guards, knee and elbow pads and the wrist guards – becomes apparent.

Each "jam" pits two, five-member teams against each other. A pivot sets the pace of the pack while the three blockers try to prevent a jammer from the opposing team from passing them and getting points.

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HELL ON WHEELS

Rough-and-tumble roller derby brings out competition, camaraderie



Watch video of women's roller derby action.



JIM MCNUTT/OBSERVER-REPORTER

Crystal Rupp, a student at Cal U., collides with another skater during a Dec. 19 practice at the Romp n Roll in Glenshaw.



JIM MCNUTT/OBSERVER-REPORTER

A player takes a breather during practice.

Wheels: Women bond, bruise thanks to new roller derby team

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Bam!
One skater drops to the floor.
Thump!
Another blocker falls after trying to stop a jammer from passing on the outside.

The league recently divided into four teams and will hold its first-ever bout on Jan. 27 at Bladerunners in Harmarville. The Hot Metal Hellions will square off against the Wrecking Dolls while the Bitch Doctors will try to take down the Slumber Party Slashers.

Most of the 56 Derby Demons have been active in the league since its inception. League rules require that skaters attend half of the two to three practices scheduled each week.

The majority of women are in their 20s and 30s and represent a range of backgrounds, including a graphic designer by day/mother by night whose skater name is "Twiggy Stardust" and an attorney with a downtown Pittsburgh firm who skates under the name "Ally McKill."

Skater names are serious, as integral to roller derby as the attitude, fishnet stockings and makeup.

"It's an important part of the roller derby culture," explained "Suzy Sydal," a co-founder of the league who would only give her skater name.



JIM McNUTT / OBSERVER-REPORTER

Skaters practice at Romp n Roll in Glenshaw in December.

Susanne Forquer's skater name is "Lolli Pop!"

Forquer has been skating since she was 5, rolling her way around the Roll-R-Skate in Canonsburg.

Now a behavioral therapist, Forquer, of Washington, skates as a pivot with the "Bitch Doctors."

"It's an adrenaline rush for me," said Forquer, her mint-green skirt and T-shirt plas-

tered with perspiration an hour into the practice.

Forquer, the daughter of Washington artist Ray Forquer, said her entire family is coming to the bout later this month.

"They are all coming, even my grandmother," said Forquer, 36. "She was the first one to buy a ticket."

The league is women-only, keeping with a tradition held through most of roller derby history.

Men can officiate, and Forquer's boyfriend, Jimm Dunn – who skates under the name "Buck Hughes" – referees during the practice.

Historical accounts, including one published on A&E's Web site, place the birth of roller derby in Chicago in the early to mid-1930s and credit sports promoter Leo Seltzer as the creator.

Like the dance marathon craze of those days, roller der-

“WHEN YOU ARE REALLY USING YOUR BODY AS A TOOL, IT CHANGES YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO IT.”

SKATER ZOE “WHISKEY MICK” O'REILLY

by started as an endurance event. Seltzer billed his event as the "Transcontinental Roller Derby" in which team made up of a man and a women would circle the rink 57,000 times, the equivalent of a cross-country race.

It wasn't long before the collisions created more of a spectacle than the perseverance.

Roller derby reigned through the early 1970s, and, in the last six years, experienced a dramatic surge in popularity. "It's been a crazy few years for derby," said Zoe O'Reilly, a league president of the Tucson, Ariz., Roller Derby and a board director on the Women's Flat Track Derby Association.

Roller Derby, as it is played now, on a flat track, was brought back into fashion about six years ago by the Texas Roller Girls, a group of women in Austin who did away with the banked tracks.

A flat track allows for more physicality, including the shoulder and hip checks that prove

more difficult on a banked track, O'Reilly said.

Not long after the Austin league formed, a league was started in Phoenix, Ariz., and the Tucson league started a short time later.

"Starting in 2004 is when it started to snowball," said O'Reilly, estimating that there are more than 100 active leagues in the United States. "It's a very grassroots, do-it-yourself organization. It's like, 'Hey, I'm going to have a meeting at this restaurant this day.'"

O'Reilly skates with The Vice Squad as "Whiskey Mick."

"We wear fishnets and short skirts if we want," she said. "I don't see why you can't be tough and still look cute."

O'Reilly said competing in roller derby has been empowering.

"When you are really using your body as a tool, it changes your relationship to it," O'Reilly said. "It's more like, 'I've got this belly sticking out,' and it's like, 'Wow,' it's sticking out cause there is a lot of muscle under there."

The Steel City Derby Demons will host their first exhibition bout Jan. 27 at Bladerunners in Harmarville. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit www.steelcityderbydemons.com.