

- Lifestyle
- Previous Articles
- Columnists
- Food
- Homes
- Restaurants
- Proms
- Fashion
- Gardening
- Travel
- Senior Class
- Events Calendar
- Consumer
- Pets
- Weddings

Steel City Derby Demons put their bodies on the line for the thrill of the game

Thursday, January 18, 2007



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette

Skaters for the Steel City Derby Demons roller derby league jostle during a scrimmage at the Romp 'N Roll in Shaler.
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By Bob Batz Jr., Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Steel City Derby Demons are rarin' to roll.

Even the gimpy ones.

Especially the gimpy ones.

"I just got chills thinking about it," says Summer Hixon, a roller derby league member whose skater name is "Miss Ass Fault." Due to a hard fall on not her butt but her knee, she's only watching a recent scrimmage. But she vows she'll be skating at the long-anticipated exhibition bout on Jan. 27.



The violent spectacle, to unfold at BladeRunners in Harmarville, is described as "When there's no more room in hell, the dead will skate the Earth" and titled "Dawn of the Demons."

A year after it started, and after nearly a

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year of weekly-plus practices, Pittsburgh's women's flat track derby league is ready to perform for the paying public. They've been skating in ovals, sure, but these grrrrls have come a long way.

Consider Ms. Hixon. When the Post-Gazette first profiled the nascent league in March ('[Rink leaders bond while starting roller derby league](#)'), she was a naive rookie who giggled at how some girls already wanted to knock people down and knock out teeth.

Now she's a more buff, battle-tested blocker for one of the league's four teams, the Slumber Party Slashers. She's even stopped smoking and otherwise made her lifestyle healthier, so she can better bring the hurt against any and all opponents.

Earlier this year, she fell at one practice and broke her hand, but she shrugs that off.

"You sit out a few practices, you go to the doctor, you go to physical therapy, and you come back," she says. This league, "It's a bunch of tough girls."

Tough ones such as Hot Metal Hellions captain "Twiggy Stardust" (Christine Korekach), who was off skates at last week's Romp 'N Roll practice due to a knee she sprained in a scrimmage scrum. She, too, shrugs: "It's a dirty sport sometimes."

"It's physical enough when you abide by the rules," says Bitch Doctors captain "Dresta Kill" (Dana Valente), who'll be out for a while yet with a separated shoulder.

One skater fell and broke her leg and gave up the sport. But after so many practices, it's remarkable how the majority of those who started the league -- about 50 of the original 70 who tried out -- are still at it and better, not worse, for wear.


Organizer Natalie Gilchrist, aka "Busty Brawler," is delighted to have lost 25 pounds. She changed her number from 38DD to 36DD. That's not to say any one of

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K.C. Jones, 23, of Tarentum, takes a break during practice last week. Her skating name is "Slam Halen."

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Video

 [A bashing good time with the Steel City Derby Demons](#)

Derby Demons Lineup

The Steel City Derby Demons will hold their first exhibition bout, featuring all four teams, at 6:30 p.m. Jan. 27 at BladeRunners in Harmarville.

Admission is \$10 in advance or \$15 at the door, which opens at 5:30 p.m. Anyone who brings a donation for no-kill animal shelters -- from dry food to cleaning supplies -- gets a Demons button.

The after-party is at Belvedere's in Lawrenceville.

The league opens its season with its first real bout -- Slumber Party Slashers vs. Hot Metal Hellions -- at 6:30 p.m. on March 17 ("The St. Patrick's Day Massacre").

The rest of this season's bouts are scheduled for BladeRunners on the following Saturdays:

- **April 21** -- Wrecking Dolls vs. Bitch Doctors
- **May 19** -- Slumber Party Slashers vs. Wrecking Dolls
- **June 16** -- Hot Metal Hellions vs. Bitch Doctors
- **July 7** -- Slumber Party Slashers vs. Bitch Doctors
- **Aug. 18** -- Hot Metal Hellions vs. Wrecking Dolls
- **Sept. 15** -- Championship bout

After that, the league hopes to form a traveling team to bout with teams from other cities.

For more information, visit the league's Web site:

steelcityderbydemons.com

them is a shrinking Violet.

"My arms are getting huge, because we have to work out," says the captain of the Wrecking Dolls, "La Diabla" (Venezuelan-born Dubraska Sosa).

She says a spirit of sisterhood continues to sustain the women and, "What happens on the rink, stays on the rink."

But now that they've been drafted on to teams, and the closer they get to actually competing, the more the adrenaline is flowing, along with the smack.

As Ms. Kill puts it, even if an opposing player is a best friend, "she better try as hard as she can to take me out. Because that's what I'm going to do."

Players and fans will tell you, this is not your Aunt Mildred's roller derby, where often the crashes were choreographed and the fights faked.

Today's roller derby -- usually played on a flat rink, not banked track -- is a real athletic event, even if it is jazzed up a bit with edgy, tattoo-revealing uniforms and a loud rock aesthetic.

Skaters-in-training are called "fresh meat." And every skater takes on an oft-naughty name and punky persona. Some of the Demons' best -- or is that worst? -- include "Neo Havok," "Electric Cher" and "Sharon Fluids." Even the volunteer, mostly male referees, with more piercings than an officiating crew at a darts championship, adopt nicknames, including "Hannibal Refter" and "Reffer Madness."

But league organizer Pamela Simmons, who also skates as "Suzy Sydal," points out that swearing is outlawed and most of her fishnet hose is covered by knee and butt pads. "This is a family-friendly event," she says, just as some of the women's children run past. Nearby, one skater shows off photos of her newborn.

Ms. Simmons said the women-run league has progressed exactly as planned. It recently was accepted into



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Pamela Simmons ("Suzy Sydal"), one of the founders of the Steel City Derby Demons, says the group's bouts will be family friendly events.

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Origins of the Derby Demons

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- [Roller derby is really a blast from the past](#)

Rules of the game

The Derby Demons exhibition will include a demonstration and an explanation in the program of how the game is played and refereed, but basically:

- Each 12- to 14-member team skates five players at a time. Each has one "jammer" -- identified by the stars on her helmet -- who starts out 20 feet behind the pack and can start scoring after she catches and laps them.
- But she must get past the other team's three blockers and lead pivot (in the striped helmet), who work to impede her while helping their own jammer. After lapping the pack once, each jammer gets a point for every opponent she legally passes.
- Breaking the rules -- elbowing, back-blocking -- can result in the assessment of minor penalties, four of which equal a major and penalty-box time.
- The lead jammer can halt the shift of play, or jam, at her discretion; otherwise

the Women's Flat Track Derby Association and is one of some 120 North American leagues -- more than double as many as when they started -- in a sport that continues a resurgence that began to build around 2003.

Ms. Simmons, who has tracked attendance, says it's not unusual for 1,000 fans to attend bouts. The Columbus league -- the Ohio Roller Girls -- averaged that number during its first season last year, says president and founder Scarlette "Scar" Fury.

each jam lasts 2 minutes. An unlimited number of jams, with 20-second breaks in between, continue for a 20-minute period, and the game is broken into three of these periods, like hockey. If the score is tied at the hour's end, an overtime jam decides it.

■ The Women's Flat Track Derby Association plans to hold Western and Eastern regional tournaments this year, leading up to a national championship in Austin, Texas, this fall. For more, visit www.wftda.org.

-- Bob Batz Jr.

Ms. Simmons says the rink the Demons are renting at BladeRunners can hold 1,000, including some sitting in folding chairs separated from the track by only a few feet and a line taped on the plastic surface. So the helmets, mouthguards and the wrist-elbow-knee pads required for skaters might not be a bad idea for some spectators, too.

As hard-core as this full-contact pursuit can be, it also has a softer side, as many leagues support good causes. The Derby Demons -- supported by dues, sponsors (including a dentist), ticket sales, even merchandise -- will donate any money left over after expenses to charity. Already they've collected cell phones and toiletries and built and stocked a library for the Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, and the league is offering fans buttons for bringing to the exhibition bout donations of goods for no-kill animal shelters.

Also like most leagues, the Derby Demons will weave other entertainment into their bouts, from live music to jam skaters to circus acts. The specifics are to be a surprise. So will be their version of the National Anthem.

Still, you can tell, by watching how hard they scrimmage -- to blood-curdling screams such as "Nice, Basher!" and reverberating hits and falls -- how committed and serious they are about competing, about the game.

As they all bust it to get ready to open their season, more than one of these tough gals freely admits to feeling butterflies -- even fear.

But they're excited by the interest shown by the public and their friends and families. Even Ms. Hixon's mom, who was (and still is, frankly) worried about her daughter's teeth, wouldn't miss the opening jam. So says Miss "Ass Fault" with a smile much sweeter than the skull one tattooed on her upper arm.

"We just want people to come out and watch us," she says, "and enjoy the sport."



Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette photos

Members of the Steel City Derby Demons roller derby league line up during their first practice at the Romp 'N Roll in March.

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