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Rink leaders bond while starting roller derby league

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Steve Mellon, Post-Gazette photos

Members of the **Steel City Derby Demons** roller derby league take off during a recent practice at the Romp 'N Roll in Shaler.

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By **Bob Batz Jr.**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Working together to birth a Pittsburgh roller derby league, a diverse group of women from across the region are bonding; forging friendships; and celebrating their womanliness, sisterhood and grrrl power as they create something breathtaking and new.

Meanwhile, they can't wait to kick each other's asses.

"Most of the girls that I've talked to, they're like, 'I just want to knock people down and knock out teeth!' " says Summer Hixon, her laugh making clear that she's not sweating the prospect of "serious pain."

She is seriously sweating, however, and breathing hard, during a break in the recent first private practice of the **Steel City Derby Demons**.



She and more than 60 other women have survived the first weeks of public skates at places such as this -- the Romp 'N Roll, an old-school roller rink in Shaler that is for now headquarters for weekly Wednesday practice.

As one male rink regular observed, these gals sure have spiced up Family Night.

The Derby Demons aim to be Pittsburgh's entry into the flashy, flashback world of flat track, all-girl roller derby, which ain't your grandma's roller derby for more reasons than that the tracks' corners aren't banked.

You just have to look at these relatively raw recruits, many of whom sport brightly colored hair, piercings, exposed flesh -- tattooed and not -- and Gothic garments such as fishnets and short skirts that you'd expect at a punk show.

They are rockers but also researchers, social workers and at least one soft-porn star. They have to be at least 18 -- and insured, but we'll get to that later. Most are 20- and 30-somethings -- too young to remember roller derby the last time it was popular -- but a few have been around the rink. All kinds of women, including the solid one in the powder-blue track suit who looks like, and in fact, is the Demons' coach.

Her name is Lisa Reuter. By weekday, she's a pharmaceutical applications scientist; otherwise she's a competitive skater and, now trainer. She heard about this grass-roots group, checked them out on the Internet and at the rink, then volunteered to help build them into a contender in the [Women's Flat Track Derby Association](#).

The Demons don't expect to "bout" -- derby lingo for compete -- until 2007, but even on the first practice, Coach likes what she sees: "We've got some potential jammers, and I see some blockers." They want to jam and block. She grins: "Their enthusiasm is going to take them a long way."

The derby association was founded in 2004, formalizing a few-years-old "neo-derby renaissance," in the words of Pamela Simmons, one of a trio of women organizing the local league. A previous effort here failed, but now, "It's booming," with a response so big, according to the Demons' Web site, that they closed enrollment and opened a waiting list.

By day Ms. Simmons works Web sites and by night works the guitar for the punk-rock band the Motorpsychos, which also would be a fine moniker for one of these new-wave roller derby teams.

Audio Slideshow / Queens of Pain: Click image to view this presentation.

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Pamela Simmons works on Web pages and plays guitar for the Motorpsychos. She's also one of the organizers of the Steel City Derby Demons, who all have edgy skate names. Hers is "Suzy Sydle."
Click photo for larger image.



South Side's Elaina "Insane" Rolain, 23, says she already had a perfect last name for roller derby.
Click photo for larger image.

The association has more than 30 leagues, from Portland, Ore. (Rose City Rollers), to Columbus (Ohio Roller Girls) to New York (the Gotham Girls). Their teams, such as Atlanta's Apocalypstix and the Sake Tuyas, bout amongst themselves and against others for paying spectators. Most skaters, however, do this for kicks. Many teams depend on dues and sponsors -- Pabst Blue Ribbon is a big one -- and donate leftover money to charities such as women's shelters.

Entwined with the trend is the A&E show "Rollergirls," shot in Austin, Texas, where this all restarted a few years ago. Alas, the reality show was just canceled last week.

Many of the Demons watched it and can't wait to get in on the (insert catty noise here) action -- the more physical, the better.

"I'm a bigger girl, you know. I'm not afraid," says Ms. Hixon, suppressing a giggle. The 25-year-old South Sider, who tends bar, thought this would be a fun way to exercise and hang with girlfriends. But many have floored her by how much trash they talk.

"Omigod," she says, "I love it!"

Her mom is not so sure and warns her to wear a mouth guard, which they all will, with the required helmets, wrist braces, elbow and knee pads, plus special \$35-per-year injury insurance.

The first practice is far from the rough-and-tumble of competition, but there are plenty of accidental tumbles. One of the first drills is how to fall, and even Coach gets into the new roller raciness by describing falling on all fours as "the porn star."

Some roller derby purists (if you can imagine such a thing) sniff at this modern incarnation's marketing as "burlesque meets the X Games meets the World Wrestling Federation." Indeed, today's game "uniforms" can be more R rated, and bouts can include bands and other twists.

But otherwise today's derby is basically a non-scripted, organizers say, but still-showy version of the old spectacle sport: Solo skaters called "jammers" score points for their team by lapping the other team's four-pack of "blockers," who aren't *supposed* to use hands or swing elbows. Still, as Coach tells them, there are rules and then there is reality.

Pittsburgh is a ways out from seeing an actual bout. At



Summer Hixon, a 25-year-old South Sider and bartender, picked the name "Miss Assfault."

[Click photo for larger image.](#)



This medically obsessed woman, 27, prefers to go just by her skate name: "Mel Practice."

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

How a team scores points

A game is composed of three 20-minute periods played between two teams.

There are two teams of five players on the track during each 2-minute jam. Each team has one scoring position called a jammer, one pivot, and three blockers. The pivots and blockers form what's called a pack.

The pack starts out 20 feet ahead of the jammers and starts sprinting at the first whistle blast. The jammers (identified with a helmet cover with two stars) start sprinting a few seconds later,

practice, the mood is light, even nurturing, with nobody being made to feel bad about their skill or lack thereof. Many of these women literally skated through junior high school, but just as many hadn't laced up since.

"Not bad for 43," says a huffing but smiling Sue Sposano as she clings to the side wall like a winded boxer. The Pittsburgh accessory designer says her husband's comment so far is, "Don't get killed."

Getting hurt, on the other hand, comes with the territory. Penn Hills' Sue Kelley, a 38-year-old postal worker, drove to the east end of the state to try out with the Philly Rollergirls, who brand newbies "fresh meat."

That league opens its season April 9 at Millennium Skate World in Camden, N.J., with the Philthy Britches vs. the Hostile City Honeys.

Such hype doesn't intimidate "very aggressive" types such as Rachella Harris, 29, of the South Side Slopes. The mosh pit dancer-turned-weight lifter can't wait to crank it up and says, "I hope to get some bruises, some bumps -- something broken for once."

Just call her "Neo Havok," which brings us to one of the coolest parts: Skate names.

Each skater has one, and it must be unique in the entire league -- and registered.

As Pam "Suzy Sydle" Simmons explained on the group's [MySpace.com](#) page, "The perfect derby name should not only be sassy, witty and tough, but it should also have some personal significance to the skater."

Skaters can agonize over coming up with the perfect persona.

Ms. Sposano wants to be cheered as "Me-Oww Kitty," with the emphasis on the oww.

Ms. Hixon aspires to be "Miss Assfault," a play on what she wants to kick as well as the fact that whatever pants she's wearing tend to droop in back.

Mt. Oliver's Zandra Herron, 24, a medical biller who stands 6 feet tall, is "Tower o' Terror." A West Virginia native, she knows she wants her number to be the area code 304. Her roommate, the diminutive Shannon Daley with the blond pigtails, is "Formalda Heidi."

Polish Hill's Rachael Vermillion picked, as a political statement, "Bitchin' Wiccan."

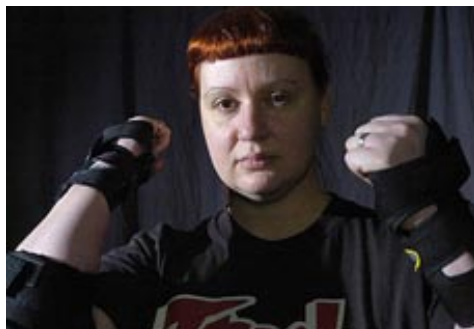
She's 35 and remembers roller derby on black-and-white TV, "watching these big, strong, amazing women fly around the rink and just, you know, really kick ass. And I found that even as a child really empowering." She finds doing it to be even

at the second whistle blast.

The jammers have to break through the pack and skate another lap before they start scoring points. On a jammer's second and future trips through, she gets a point for every opponent she passes. The blockers and pivots (identified with a striped helmet cover) try to stop the opposing jammer from getting through, while assisting their own jammer.

If the score is tied at the end of a bout, a final overtime jam will determine the winner.

-- Women's Flat Track Derby Association



more so.

She embraces having "support that only girls can give to each other." But she, too, is itching for the smackdowns to start. And the "girls" aren't the only ones.

Polish Hill's Rachael Vermillion or "Bitchin' Wiccan," is 35 and can remember roller derby from the last time around.

Click photo for larger image.

Says Ms. Hixon: "Every guy I know is saying, 'This is going to be awesome!'"

Whatever your gender or preferences, there is an undeniable sexiness to seeing all these women stretching, boldly trying something new, being not (too) worried about how their hair looks, helping each other up after they fall.

After two hours, they plop down on the benches and the floor, their cheeks, facial and otherwise, flushed. You feel their hearts pounding. There's no mistaking that smell -- and it ain't "perspiration."

They cite a litany of calves, thighs and hips when Coach at one point asks, "What burns?"

One skater's shouted answer echoes across the rink:

"My love for roller derby!"

For more on the league, visit www.steelcityderbydemons.com. To read more about the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, go to www.wftda.org.

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