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Colorful characters put on spectacular show

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If Shaler residents listen closely, they'll hear what can only be described as a blast from the past.

It involves the humming of bearings, the grinding of wheels on a wooden track, the squealing of sudden stops and turns, the crunching of shoulder-to-shoulder body checks and the grunts of passion and exhilaration.

Women's roller derby is back.

The Steel City Derby Demons resurrected the sport from the dead like a George Romero zombie, and the legions of women unite twice weekly at the Romp 'N Roll in Shaler to hone their craft.

Natalie Gilchrist, a North Hills skater known as Busty Brawler, is on the league's board of commissioners and is one of the co-founders. The idea for the league, she says, originated a few years ago between herself and some of her friends. They all roller skated when they were younger and remember when roller derby was in its heyday in the 1970s.

"It was such a cool sport," she says. "And it's something for women to do."

Then, last year, she saw an article in a local newspaper with a list of things that Pittsburgh

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needed. Roller derby was on that list.

So she and the other co-founders put their plans into action and held a meeting last January. To her surprise, nearly 30 girls showed up to find out how they could participate in the sport.

Since that day, the league has morphed into a legitimate venture with four full teams totaling 60 girls, a corps of referees and a rookie group of 13 other girls known as the Fresh Meat Squad.

The Derby Demons are part of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, a national women's roller derby league that certifies their existence. They even held their first exhibition match on the last Saturday in January to show off Pittsburgh's latest buzz sport.

The event drew 1,200 fans to Blade Runners in Harmarville, where the teams gave the screaming legions a taste of what they'll be witnessing when the season fully wheels in on March 17.

The teams are colorfully named and uniformed, and the girls follow suit with creative character names and personas.

The four teams are known as the Bitch Doctors, the Hot Metal Hellions, the Slumber Party Slashers and The Wrecking Dolls.

And the girls' names don't disappoint.

Dresta Kill, Anita Cocktail, Betty Bonecrusher, Wham Bam Pam, La Diabla and Sugar Plum Scary make up just a portion of the ranks.

Even the referees get in on the character names with monikers like Hannibal Refter, Donnie Rotten and Ref'ecutioner.

But while the names and characters are a fun part of the sport, fans shouldn't look at it like World Wrestling Entertainment.

"It's a serious sport," Busty says. "There's nothing staged here."

That means there are injuries. The girls are fully padded with wrist guards, helmets, and knee and elbow pads, but in a full contact roller sport, some things can't be avoided. Already there have been a broken ankle and a broken wrist among the group.

The skaters are all insured under the WFTDA, but they still had a little bit of trouble finding a place to call home. They went through a few different rinks -- some not interested



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and some closing their doors for business -- before finding the rink in Shaler for practice and a match site at Blade Runners, but Busty says both places have been great.

A recent practice at the Romp 'N Roll featured just a few of the veterans mixed in with the Fresh Meat Squad. The girls were given a day off after their opening exhibition.

Even though it wasn't a match, many of the girls still dressed the part of rebellious roller derby skaters.

Busty was dressed in a black tank top, red short shorts with stockings underneath and her knee pads stood out among the pack with their zebra stripe design. She and La Diabla ran the practice that consisted of stretching, sprint and track skating and body contact and falling drills.

Even with the success the league has gained in its short existence, Busty admits they're at a crossroads in trying to decide where to go from here.

"It has been a lot of pressure," Busty says of establishing the league. "We want to travel."

They currently only play each other, but are allowed to play any other teams in the WFTDA that are in their division. After they get a season under their belt, they'll be able to play teams from Philadelphia in matches that would give the winners statewide bragging rights.

They want to recruit more girls and form more teams. They also wouldn't mind playing in bigger venues so they can squeeze in more fans.

And Busty has an ultimate goal.

"I would love to build my own rink," she admits. "But that would take a lot of money, and I'd probably have to quit my job."

Poll

How would you rate snow-removal efforts in the North Hills?:

Great! The roads were in very good shape considering what road crews had to deal with.

OK, about what I'd expect. There was some snow and slush.

Poor. I expected better.

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