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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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'Burgh derby girls smash the mold

By **Bonnie Pfister**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Thursday, April 17, 2008



To those who think that women's roller derby is a faked sport akin to pro wrestling, Jen Bernardinelli has an illustrative comeback.

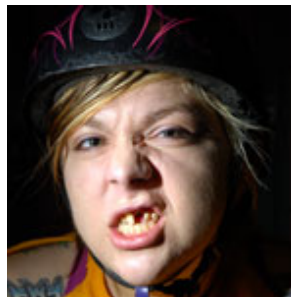
The mental health counselor from Mt. Washington, also known as "Betty Bonecrusher," flips out a cap covering the gap where a front tooth used to be until she smashed her face on the track during a January bout.

"I played the rest of the game," Bernardinelli, 25, said with a shrug, lacing up her skates for a practice scrimmage in Shaler last week. "We won."

Bernardinelli is one of 70 Western Pennsylvania women who are members of the [Steel City Derby Demons](#), the roller derby league that plays its second bout of its second season Saturday at Blade Runners Ice Complex in Harmar.

Photo Gallery

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'Betty Bonecrusher'

Justin Merriman/Tribune-Review

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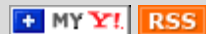
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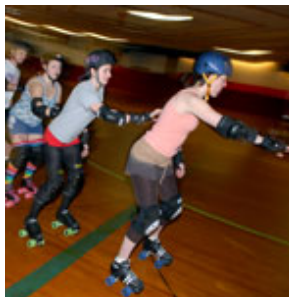


The league's four teams compete monthly through the regular season, which starts in March. An all-star traveling team competes against some of the nation's other 100-plus leagues.

Popularized during the 1950s as a sport for both men and women, roller derby involves speed-skating through blocking players to earn points. It continued for women into the 1970s, where it was sometimes known for hyped-up rivalries between players in tight jerseys and shorts, aptly encapsulated in the 1972 Raquel Welch film "Kansas City Bomber."

Members of today's Women's Flat Track Derby Association have a different attitude -- and a rakishly feminist sex appeal. Owned and operated by the players, the league strives for the do-it-yourself spirit of punk rock. Gone are the banked tracks in favor of a flat track that can be set up almost anywhere, keeping costs low and flexibility high. Information is touted online and through the players' MySpace pages.

Pittsburgh's "derby girls" range in age from 21 into their 40s and are teachers, artists, therapists and stay-at-home moms of all shapes and sizes. They describe their feverish love of derby as, variously, about camaraderie and competition, and an outlet



Steel City Derby Demons

Justin Merriman/Tribune-Review

Rules of play

Five players for each team are on the rink. At front is one player called the "pivot" for each team, noted by her striped helmet. She sets the pace for the pack of three blockers from each team behind. Twenty feet behind the pack are the two jammers, noted by the stars on their helmets.

The jammers race to get past the blockers and pivots. After the lead jammer has lapped the rink once, she begins scoring points for every opponent she passes legally. It's no mean feat, as blockers are skating in wide stances and employing the "booty block" to slow the jammers.

Elbowing, pushing and shoving are illegal and earn penalties.

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for aggression and creativity.

"We all get different things from it," said Jamie Hudson, 29, a lawyer from Beechview who learned to skate just as the league was forming. "Some girls put on a cute skirt and stockings and are really comfortable in that. Other girls want to wear shorts. You can be taken seriously as an athlete but also have a fun side, be playful with it."

Ripped stockings, lipstick and tattoos should not obscure the athleticism of the players, said Dana Valente, a team captain and blocker known as "Dresta Kill."

"For anybody who has the stereotype, 'It's girls in fishnets showing their bums,' they need to come out see what these girls are really capable of doing," said Valente, 34, of Parks in Armstrong County. "It's a sport where you have to play offense and defense at the same time, like combining football and hockey."

"You really feel like an athlete," she added. "You go to practice, and your muscles ache the next day, and you're so proud that you pushed yourself so far. You got this great workout, and you're thinking, how can I skate faster and hit somebody harder next time?"

Training is key to avoiding such injuries as broken and sprained legs and ankles, quadriceps injuries and the numerous separated shoulders, said Natalie Gilchrist, aka "Busty Brawler," a league founder from Leetsdale. It's an ongoing process learned in bits and pieces from national conferences, visits by players at more established leagues, and discussions on online derby message boards

"People think it's a violent sport, but violence isn't the first thing that comes into my mind," said Gilchrist, 40, a blocker. "I'm thinking about being in good position to stay in somebody's way. You want to be in front of somebody and make holes, make room for other plays to happen. And the more that you hit and pound on somebody, the more tired you get and the less stamina you have."

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At a recent practice, Lindsey Waltonbaugh -- "Damage Dahl" -- showed trainees hoping to join the league how to slow their pace with a snowplow move, taking up maximum space.

"All of this is yours," she said, circling her arms the width of her personal space. "It's all yours. Either you're going to give it to (the opposing team), or you're going to protect it."

Later Waltonbaugh, 25, of Lawrenceville said, "The whole idea of taking up space and owning it, owning the track and owning the position is very empowering, as an individual and as a team."

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