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Roller derby resurrection turns women into 'Demons'

By Robert Park
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With disco lights flashing and '70s music blaring, Elaine Rolain, 23, wove in and out of the crowded roller skating rink at the Neville Roller Drome. She effortlessly twirled around and took a few laps backward.

But this was not just a leisurely skate. It was practice for the full-contact sport of roller derby.

"It's a sport where we can bash in other people and still be feminine," Rolain said of the new roller derby league starting in Pittsburgh.

Rolain and as many as 70 women -- called the Steel City Derby Demons -- meet Wednesday nights for group skates. They have two missions: sharpen their skating skills, and socialize.

The Steel City Derby Demons remains in its embryonic stages. No teams have been created, a regular practice site has not been

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determined, and some participants are just leaning to skate.

But judging by its popularity in other cities -- Philly has two roller derby teams that draw crowds of 2,000-plus -- the sport has rolling momentum. Roller derby has dozens of leagues in cities across the United States: Gotham Girls in New York City, Brewcity Bruisers in Milwaukee and Assassination City in Dallas, to name a few.

"It's a resurrection that was waiting to happen," Rolain said.

Fanning the flames of its popularity is the show "Rollergirls" on the A&E cable channel. The program features the Austin Thunderdrome, where the drama and entertainment of roller derby's past dons a sexy, post-modern punk and feministic sensibility.

This new movement is trying to regain the glory of the 1970s when roller derbies used to sell out arenas to fans of 40,000, according to the show's Web site.

"Sugar Plum Scary," also known as Barb Girone, 36, from Swisshelm Park, is an elementary school art teacher -- but don't let that fool you.

"I would never attend a home candle party or costume jewelry party," Girone said.

Teaching requires her to be nice and pleasant, she said, while roller derby is a way to express a competitive and aggressive side she usually represses.

Like many of the women, Girone found out about the league through Myspace.com, an online Internet community, where more than 100 people belong to the site's group about Pittsburgh roller derby.

Natalie Gilehirst, 38, said she tried to start a league a couple of years ago but couldn't garner enough support.

The buzz got around this time. The response has been so huge, the league had to close skater enrollment and is compiling a wait list.

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Of those to join the Demons early are a couple mother-daughter teams.

Girone's mother, Cathy Venturini, does marathons and runs five to six miles daily. Rolain's mother, Anne-Marie Flaherty, 45, is a retired city fire fighter. Both witnessed the roller derby phenomenon of the past and support their daughters' involvement in its resurrection.

To flip an old saying on its head, this *is* your mother's roller derby league.

For Rolain, even though there are no prizes, she looks forward to competition.

"Just to know you kicked another team's *** is good enough for me," she said

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