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Women's roller-derby league begins its inaugural season

By **Regis Behe**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Thursday, March 15, 2007

There are many reasons why these women skate quickly around roller rinks, elbows flying and knees flexed, determined looks etched on their faces.

A leisurely, safe skate is not one of them.

"There are people trying to kill you while you're trying to do it," says Pam "Suzy Sydal" Simmons, one of the founders of the Steel City Derby Demons, a roller-derby league that begins its inaugural season Saturday. The first bout features the Hot Metal Hellions and the Slumber Party Slashers at BladeRunners, in Harmarville.

With stage names like Ally McKill, Electric Cher, Anita Cocktail and Slam Halen, there's a tongue-in-cheek malevolence implied. But there's also a visceral physicality. Roller derby taps into the kill-or-be-killed, survival-of-the-fittest instincts usually associated with football, boxing, wrestling and other sports dominated by men.

Part of the learning curve is learning how to fall, a skill that usually comes in handy for acrobats and gymnasts. Participants may wake up the morning

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Andrew Russell/Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

Steel City Derby Demons

What: Women's roller-derby league begins its inaugural season

When: 6:30 p.m. Saturday

Admission: \$10; \$15 at the door

Where: BladeRunners, 66 Alpha Drive West, Harmarville

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after a practice with welts, purplish bruises and tired muscles, but there is

also a wonderful achy feeling that comes after pushing one's body beyond its limits.

"It's a women's sport, and it's not your typical sport," says Kristen "Beth Death" Dunker, 26, of Monroeville.

"There's a lot of camaraderie going on," says Simmons, a South Side resident who will only admit to being the league's elder stateswoman. "There's a basic understanding that when somebody beats the crap out of you, they still love you."

The Steel City Derby Demons are affiliated with the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, which oversees leagues in more than 30 cities, including Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Tuscon, Las Vegas and New York. The Pittsburgh group -- incorporated as a nonprofit organization -- was launched two years ago, after one prior attempt had failed.

But via MySpace and old-fashioned fliers posted on telephone poles and message boards around the city, the Steel City league gained traction. So many aspirants signed up, tryouts eventually had to be held and those with minimal skills were dismissed.

The appeal of recklessly skating, of dodging assorted blows and hip checks, connects with the participants on various levels. Dunker, who works as an accounts payables and receivables specialist, was out of sorts when the league took a short hiatus over the recent Christmas and New Year's holidays.

"I missed it," Dunker says. "I couldn't wait to come back. It was all I could think about."

Part of what she missed was just having a bonding activity.

"You learn teamwork and become really close to your teammates," Dunker says. "It's a really good thing to do with my extra time."

Natalie Gilchrist, who works as a graphics artist, says the sport is a way to compensate for the routine drudgery of her 9-to-5 world.

"I hate my job sometimes," Gilchrist says. "OK, a lot of the time. You come here and you skate your butt off and you actually get to take your aggression out, hitting people and blocking and all that stuff. When you leave here, you feel great."

Simmons says because roller derby is a rare avenue for condoned aggressive behavior, it comes out, "maybe even more so, because women aren't typically welcome in society to behave that way.

Details: 412-826-0800 or **Steel City Derby Demons**




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"There's probably a lot more aggression that needs to come out here," she says. "I know that's attractive for some skaters."

While many of the women sport tattoos or piercings, they are not *de rigueur* for roller-derby participants; Simmons jokes that most of the skaters were already tattooed or pierced when they signed up. She's more in thrall with the uniforms, which can include short skirts and tights, stockings of varying geometric patterns and sheerness, and makeup worthy of a KISS groupie.

"That's the fun part, for me," Simmons says. "Other people I know would rather beat the crap out of girls and don't care what they're wearing while they're doing it, but I like that part. It's whimsical, it's creative, it's fun. ... It takes it beyond basic sports. We have fun team names and fun team themes and fun skater names. It adds visual stimulation for the audience."

The group's first public exhibition earlier this year sold out the Harmarville BladeRunner's facility. But while the sport has proved popular in other cities -- the Philadelphia league routinely attracts 2,000 fans to its games -- there's no chance the local skaters will become spoiled by success. There are no salaries, no profits to divvy up.

"We're a nonprofit situation, and we have an awful lot of expenses," Simmons says. "We always have to pay for the next bout. We do charity work, and we will give excess income to charities, 'cause that's the roller-derby way."

Roller-derby history

The Steel City Derby Demons, a women's roller-derby league, starts its first season Saturday at BladeRunners, in Harmarville.

But long before women rescued the sport from obscurity via the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, which supports leagues in more than 30 cities across the country, roller derby was on par with professional wrestling as a form of sports entertainment.

Here are some highlights of roller-derby history:

1935: Leo Seltzer, a Chicago businessman, stages Transcontinental Roller Races at the Chicago Stadium. Designed to mimic the then-popular marathon dances, skaters did laps that were meant to approximate the distance between New York and Los Angeles.

1940: A refined version of roller races with more contact and passing was popular across the country. Matches were held in 50 cities, attracting more than 5 million spectators.

1947: Roller derby first appears on television.

1950: "Fireball," a movie about roller derby starring Mickey Rooney and Pat O'Brien, is released.




1954: The San Francisco Bay Bombers, arguably the most popular team in the sport's history, are launched.

1970: An attendance record is set when 19,507 fans show up for a match at Madison Square Garden. Two years later, 50,000 show up at Comiskey Park in Chicago for a match.

1973: Seltzer's original creation is disbanded. Various leagues come and go for the next 30

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years, including made-for-TV leagues Roller Games and Roller Jam.

1978: "The Roller Girls," a sitcom featuring the fictional Pittsburgh Pitts, has a short run on NBC.

2004: Women's Flat Track Derby Association is formed.

Sources: Roller Derby Association, Women's Flat Track Derby Association, Bay City Bombers

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