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Roller Derby: Past, Present, Future
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SUMMARY

Is roller derby a sport? Okay, sure, but, “Is it a *legitimate* sport?” No matter how you’re disposed to answer these questions, chances are that you’re asking without a firm grasp of roller derby’s past or present. Knowledge of both is crucial to understanding, or predicting, what derby’s future might look like in Sport 2036. From its official origins in Chicago in 1935, to its rebirth in Austin, TX in 2001, roller derby has been an outlier sport in ways admirable and not. It has long been ahead of the curve on diversity and inclusivity, a little-known fact. Even players and fans who are diehard devotees—who live and breathe by derby—have little knowledge of how the sport began, how it was different, or why knowing all of that might matter. In this paper, which is part of a book-in-progress, I offer a sense of the following: 1) why roller derby’s past and present, especially its unusual origins, its envelope-pushing play and players, and its waxing and waning popularity, matters to its future; 2) how roller derby’s cultural reputation (which grew out of roller skating’s reputation) has had an impact on its status as an American sport; 3) how roller derby’s economic history, from family business to skater-owned-and-operated non-profits, has shaped opportunity and growth; and 4) why the sport’s past, present, and future inclusivity, diversity, and counter-cultural aspects resonate so deeply with those who play and watch. If past is prologue, roller derby isn’t going anywhere. Roller derby is so regularly reborn—and so often found at the cutting edge of athletic culture—that anyone who cares about sport would be foolish to write it off as a carnivalesque flash in the pan.

Roller derby is regularly referred to today as the world’s fastest growing sport. Then again, we live in a country, and at a time, when claims that something is the fastest, biggest, or strongest are perhaps best met with skepticism. What is clear is that roller derby has had explosive growth over the past twenty years. From its reincarnation and revival in Austin, Texas in 2001, roller derby has evolved to include thousands of amateur leagues worldwide in 2019, playing under a number of different rulesets. Although these 21st-century leagues first emerged, by design, as women-only teams, they are now organized as female, male, and co-ed, junior and adult, on both flat-track and banked-track ovals. “Derby” is not a single thing on skates.

Yet thanks to people who still remember roller derby best from its storied 1970s television broadcasts, the question “Is it real?” just doesn’t stop coming. The answer is, unequivocally, “Yes.” But the frequency with which the phrase roller derby finds itself in a sentence with the word legitimate may suggest either the enormous cultural power of those 1970s experiences, or the ineffectiveness of getting the word out about today’s game, or both. As one writer put it, “no sport has had more myths attach themselves to it with barnacle-like tenacity than Roller Derby.”¹ Even if that’s an exaggeration, too, it’s a great line.

Modern roller derby locates its roots in those mythical earlier days. The game is still played five on five, still with one jammer (a point scorer) and four blockers, who are simultaneously playing offense and defense. Points are racked up when the jammer passes an opposing player, having met certain requirements in order to be eligible to score. Today, a full roster often consists of fifteen skaters, a number well up from 20th-century conventions for team size. A player’s position is not set in stone, however. Within one bout, a skater might switch from jammer, to lead blocker (i.e. pivot) to blocker. A cover (“panty”) on the helmet allows players to change position even within the same “jam” (the shortest unit of play, which lasts up to ninety seconds or two minutes, depending on the rule set used). The player with the star on her helmet panty is the jammer. The one with the stripe is the pivot. Plain helmet panties signify the players who are blockers. Players often end up with regular positions, but there is no reason why a particular skater, with a particular body type, must be relegated to one aspect of play. That said, jammers tend to be faster and more flexible than other skaters, and blockers tend to be harder to knock over, although there are times when a team might benefit from moving a particular

¹ Matthew Stolle, “Mythbusting at the Roller Derby,” *507 Magazine*, 20 April 2017. https://www.postbulletin.com/magazines/507/mythbusting-at-the-roller-derby/article_lead0698-2613-11e7-9205-ff4e653318bf.html

player to another position, if going up against any single player from the other team. Even in former days, when roller derby was more exhibition than competition, many of these conventions held.

ROLLER DERBY TODAY

Today, the largest group of derby players consists of females competing on flat tracks that can be temporarily set up on a basketball court, a sport court, or a roller rink floor—any flat surface—often using rope covered with removable tape. The sport is played on “quad” skates (eight-wheeled skates), speed-skate style, which means they go up only as high as the ankle. Toe stops are always used, and their size and material are largely unregulated. Equipment includes a helmet, knee pads, wrist guards, elbow pads, and a mouth guard. Safety is a concern for most leagues, and bouts are officiated by trained referees, with non-skating officials (NSOs) volunteering to assist with statistics, scoreboard, and other aspects of the competition. Players, refs, NSOs, announcers, sponsors, and regular fans are all considered part of the “derby community.” It takes a large number of people to put on a bout, not just two rosters of 15 skaters. The derby community, which calls itself the “derbyverse,” has a significant online presence. Its large annual convention, RollerCon, takes place in Las Vegas in late July.

Although “derby” is not one type of game today, the largest number of leagues—423 full member leagues and 46 apprentice leagues worldwide officially—affiliate under the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). WFTDA is a non-profit organization with a volunteer board of directors that sets rules, organizes tournament play, and provides resources and insurance to skaters, leagues, and officials. It began as the United Leagues Coalition in 2004, made up of just a handful of flat-track roller derby teams, all skater owned and operated. Interestingly, Phoenix’s league, Arizona Roller Derby (AZRD), was founded in 2003, making it the second-oldest modern league. It rightly calls

itself “one of the best-established flat track leagues in the world.”² In 2005, a meeting of twenty leagues came together to discuss the future. It changed the organization’s name to the WFTDA. Leagues that are skater-owned, organized, and operated have remained the norm in 21st-century roller derby.

Contemporary derby is bigger than WFTDA. It is believed that across the globe there are now approximately 1250 leagues. Some of those leagues do play under the WFTDA rule set, even if they are not WFTDA-member leagues. Those leagues that do not fall under the WFTDA umbrella in their affiliation or ruleset are, however, potentially important to the future of the sport. Roller derby’s Team USA has developed entirely outside of WFTDA, under the auspices of USA Roller Sports (USARS). Roller derby was recently part of an unsuccessful bid to be included as a roller sport for the 2020 summer Olympics. The version of derby that was part of the bid was the one overseen by the International Federation of Roller Sports—now called “World Skate,” as of 2017, after its merger with the International Skateboarding Federation.³ This is the organization recognized by the Olympic Committee. (Skateboarding was the only successful roller sports bid for Tokyo 2020.)⁴ World Skate roller derby uses a ruleset commonly known as USARS, which differs from the WFTDA rule set in notable ways. The most significant way involves USARS’s stipulation for continuous forward movement on the track, always heading in a counterclockwise direction.⁵ WFTDA rules allow both for stopping and for moving clockwise. It is, therefore, a very different game to play and to watch.

The two rule sets, and organizations, have been famously at odds. WFTDA dominates in terms of number of players, leagues, and fans. At one time, it counted an estimated 10,000 athletes and

² “Who We Are,” *Arizona Roller Derby*, 2018, <https://arizonarollerderby.com/who-we-are/>

³ “Roller Derby,” *World Skate*, 2019. <http://www.worldskate.org/roller-derby.html>

⁴ For more on the history of roller sports and the Olympics, see Carlesa Williams, “The Olympic Status of Inline and Roller Sports,” *ThoughtCo.*, 3 May 2018. <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-olympic-status-of-inline-1963611>

⁵ “Regulation,” in “Roller Derby,” *World Skate*. 1 January 2019. <http://www.worldskate.org/roller-derby/about/regulations.html>

officials. USARS/World Skate, however, now have the lock on Olympic and therefore (to some minds) its “legitimate” future national and world competition. This means that the future is uncertain particularly for the highest levels of the sport. It remains to be seen where the best players would affiliate, as well as how many leagues would choose to switch over to a now little-used USARS playbook, if an Olympic bid for roller derby were ever successful or if global play under USARS ever became any more interesting. Now USARS and WorldSkate derby are seen as by far a worse competition. When Team USA competed against the National Team of Australia in roller derby at World Roller Games in 2017, the score was an embarrassing 228-5. Spain also beat Japan 231-16. Those were the only four countries participating.⁶ World Roller Games seems unserious about roller derby in other ways as well. The roller derby portion of its website is half constructed and rarely updated. By contrast, WFTDA runs high-level tournaments, nationally and internationally. It produces a widely watched regional ranking system. It controversially stopped contracting with the now-defunct Derby News Network to start up its own pay-per-view opportunities and has sometimes contracted with ESPN.

The independently run Roller Derby World Cup (held in 2011, 2014, and 2018) uses the WFTDA rule set and is the global tournament of choice for female roller derby athletes. The Roller Derby World Cup, too, has traditionally been dominated by the United States, which has won each time, albeit by a narrower and narrower margin. The 2018 World Cup was held in Manchester, England and had teams entered from 38 countries, including the Philippines (17th), Iran (24th), and Costa Rica (38th). The tournament featured a “Team Indigenous,” with skaters from Canada, the United States, Argentina, New Zealand, and Samoa (27th). The Korean team (22nd) did not identify North or South in its name.

⁶ “WRG17 Roller Derby: USA and Spain Dominate During the First Day of Competition,” *WorldSkate*. 2 September 2017. <http://www.worldskate.org/roller-derby/news-roller-derby/1574-wrg17-roller-derby-usa-and-spain-dominate-during-the-first-day-of-competition.html>

The competition was available via the World Cup’s own pay-per-view, and the last day of the tournament was carried by BBC Sport.⁷

It is difficult to see an easy way forward for the sport with these two very different groups at odds. What conversations might be going on, if any, behind the scenes at this time is unknown. A famous exchange that dates back to 2011 suggests that things may be at an impasse. The WFTDA organization released its reply to a 12 May 2011 letter from USARS. USARS wrote to ask WFTDA to “endorse our efforts and help pave the future of roller derby with USARS.” WFTDA refused, citing its governing philosophy of “by the skaters, for the skaters,” its vastly overshadowing USARS with its “membership, programs and resources” and its own active partnership with the Men’s Roller Derby Association (MDRA) and junior roller derby groups as reasons why it was not going to simply get in line behind USARS.⁸ WFTDA’s partnerships with MDRA and junior leagues have deepened and formalized since 2011. It seems just as unlikely that the International Olympic Committee would ever recognize a progressive organization such as WFTDA as that WFTDA would ever bend to the IOC. (Its statements and policies are further considered below.)

Beyond WFTDA, there are several others forms of modern roller derby that deserve mention. One that operates in a number of cities is so-called “renegade” roller derby. Such leagues pride themselves on a brutal, fast-paced game that includes no referees and no rules. Phoenix and Tucson both have renegade derby, as do Portland and Los Angeles. The Phoenix Renegade Rollergirls were founded in 2004. They say they “broke away” to play a “less restricted, more unadulterated game,” without a penalty box and promote competition on “any surface, any time.”⁹ Although renegade leagues have a

⁷ “Watch the Roller Derby World Cup Live on the BBC,” *BBC Sport*, 2 February 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/42688607>

⁸ “Open Letter to USA Roller Sports,” *Women’s Flat Track Derby Association*, 26 July 2011. <https://wftda.org/press/open-letter-to-usars>

⁹ “Renegade Rollergirls,” Wikipedia. 2013. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renegade_Rollergirls

reputation for fighting, Phoenix’s claims that it promotes “the Golden Rule” of “Whatever you dish out, you will probably get back.”¹⁰ Even so, moves that you would never see in WFTDA-sanctioned play, such as tripping, slide tackling, and body checking of all kinds, are allowed.

Another lesser-known derby organization, Modern Athletic Derby Endeavor (MADE), states that it “started with only a few forlorn leagues who realized the current status quo did not fit their league's needs.” Those needs arose because of a given league’s too “close proximity to current WFTDA leagues, a co-ed or LLC status, the desire to evolve to banked track, or the simple wish to play a more streamlined ruleset.” MADE-rules derby differs from WFTDA in being a faster-moving game. It differs from USARS in allowing for co-ed play.¹¹ MADE leagues do not require players to purchase WFTDA-sponsored insurance, as WFTDA-sanctioned league players must.

Derby now also exists in an exercise-class franchise format, Derby Lite, which is a no-impact version of the sport’s skills and drills. It describes itself as “Roller Skating for Fun & Fitness.TM”¹² Low-contact versions of the sport have been touted as a possible future for aging, injured, or differently abled players. Most junior roller derby leagues (under 18) also feature low-contact games. The Junior Roller Derby Association advertises, as of this writing, 131 leagues, many of which are affiliated with a WFTDA league, and all of which play by a modified version of its ruleset.¹³ There is one defunct modern roller derby league, Old School Derby Association (OSDA), established in 2007 and inactive by 2013. It advertised itself as allowing for rougher play than was allowable under the WFTDA rule set, as

¹⁰ “Arizona Renegade Rollergirls,” *Facebook*. 31 January 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/RRGAZ/>

¹¹ “Our Story,” *Modern Athletic Derby Endeavor*, 2019. <https://www.skatemade.org/>

¹² “FAQs,” *Derby Lite*. 2019. <http://www.derbylite.net/home.asp>

¹³ JRDA Rules of Flat Track Derby,” *Junior Roller Derby Association*, 2019.

<https://www.juniorrollerderby.org/page/show/2944856-rules-and-officials>

well as providing rules that could be used in common with flat- and banked-track play. It appears never to have attracted more than single-digit numbers of member leagues.

Depending on your perspective, today's roller derby may be either branching out or fracturing. Over the past five years, roller derby has also cropped up on many college and university campuses, in one way or another, although there is currently no collegiate derby organization. Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, GA, has had a roller derby club with a social media presence since fall 2011, but they don't compete as a team. Another, the Australian National University Varsity Derby League in Canberra, Australia, made an almost immediate transition from a university league to a community one in 2011. As a result, the University of Arizona Derby Cats, founded in 2012, declares itself the "first-ever official college flat-track roller derby team," a claim that has gone undisputed. Arizona State University's team followed in its wake, formed in the fall of 2013, thanks to student-skater, Alisa Lee, aka Maiden Asia, who did her senior honors thesis on how to form a college roller derby team, both writing about it and doing it. (Maiden Asia continues to skate with the Arizona Derby Dames, Phoenix's banked-track league.)

Collegiate roller derby seems particularly congregated in the West. The University of California at Berkeley and Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff have also been known to support roller derby clubs. A small number of other campuses now host them, too, in England. Sheffield University and Bournemouth University in Poole formed roller derby societies. It is unclear against whom and how often these other teams are competing or if they are skating together but not competing.

There have, however, been collegiate competitions. ASU has played a major role in establishing and participating in them. In April 2014, the first ever collegiate roller derby competition was held in Tucson, AZ, as the University of Arizona Derby Cats took on the Arizona State University Derby Devils. That bout, covered in *Slate*, ended in a rout, as the U of A beat ASU, 341-115, with 400 people

in attendance.¹⁴ A rematch was held in Tempe, on April 25, 2015, as the Derby Devils hosted the Derby Cats, in the first collegiate bout ever held on a college campus. (The Tucson bout took place in an off-campus facility.) That year, ASU emerged victorious, 243-205, in front of a sold-out crowd of 240 at the Sun Devil Fitness Complex. Both collegiate squads, with full rosters, were for the first time made up entirely of current students. Both squads were co-ed, in a bout played using the WFTDA rule set. The Derby Cats have, in the years since, apparently either disbanded or gone on hiatus.

The Derby Devils traveled in spring 2018 to play the Claremont Colleges roller derby team, for a road loss.¹⁵ Spring 2019 marks the first time that the Derby Devils trained and successfully passed through the derby skills test enough players to put on an intramural bout. (The skills test is a baseline standard of speed, strength, and agility that all WFTDA players must meet prior to their first competition.) The intramural bout used just a handful of alumni skaters and was held at the Sun Devil Fitness Complex on March 16, 2019. It was billed as a “Back to the Future” bout, with the two teams named “1985” and “2015.” Team 1985 won, 202-118. This event makes the Derby Devils the largest, and longest running, collegiate roller derby team in competition. P

Phoenix, Arizona, and ASU, have become a kind of epicenter for modern roller derby, because the Valley now offers every kind of modern derby play and competition. Very few cities in the world can boast that. One of the reasons for that is because Phoenix has a banked-track league. It is important to mention a bit more about this new form of the banked-track game that was so well known to 20th-century audiences. Banked track roller derby, like WFTDA play, does not allow elbowing, tripping, and

¹⁴ Devoney Looser, “Roller Derby vs. the NCAA: Can Maiden Asia, Haute Flash, and Stone Cold Jane Austen Save College Sports from Itself?” *Slate*, 2 May 2014. <https://slate.com/culture/2014/05/college-roller-derby-can-maiden-asia-haute-flash-and-stone-cold-jane-austen-save-college-sports-from-itself.html>

¹⁵ Yijie Wang, “5C Roller Derby Team Skates Into First Ever Game, Will Take On ASU,” *The Student Life*, 1 March 2018, <https://tsl.news/life-style7364/>

the like. It has its own seven-year-old, volunteer-run “Coalition of Leagues,” made up of eight U. S. teams and approximately 400 skaters and officials. The banked-track version of the sport has been more difficult to grow over the past twenty years. That is certainly due to its requiring either a permanent facility to house a track, or a buildable track and a large rentable venue in which to construct and deconstruct it (and then store it), at great cost.¹⁶ It seems predictable that the banked-track version of the game would have flourished during the sport’s era of greatest audience interest and profitability. It’s equally predictable that its costs would become harder to sustain, or become unsustainable, during audience-fallow years. (More about the banked-track game will follow in a subsequent section of this paper.) That said, the *number* of banked-track teams active today matches the largest number active in derby’s heyday, when a bout could draw tens of thousands of fans and attract national television coverage.

The leagues that make up today’s roller derby, then, are all very different. Still, some unusual cultural traditions are commonly held among them. One is the phenomenon of finding a “derby wife.” This no doubt grew out of the older tradition of the “work wife” or “office wife,” which dates back to the 1930s and had a resurgence in the 1980s. The office spouse, however, generally referred to an opposite sex but platonic, close professional relationship. A derby wife is usually a same-sex phenomenon and refers to a relationship of equals, another skater who is there for you throughout your experience in derby. She is not a romantic or sexual partner but a best friend who always has your back. It used to be more common for derby wives to propose, give each other rings, and get fake-hitched, or put on a display of becoming connected to each other, at bouts or another public forum, such as an after-party. In recent years, this practice seems to be falling off, although I have seen several actual proposals of marriage happen during bouts. Each year at Roller Con, however, there continues to be held a mass

¹⁶ “About Us,” *RDCL: Roller Derby Coalition of Leagues*, 2019. <http://therdcl.com/>

“Derby Wedding.” It involves hundreds of derby-couples choosing to fake-marry in Vegas, in front of derby witnesses, in a costumed wedding procession with fake vows.¹⁷ Hundreds of couples participate. The history of the practice of taking a derby wife goes back more than a decade: “The tradition started in November 2003, when a load of Derby Dolls went to see the first AZRD bout and the derby wife concept was born,” in a six-hour van ride to Phoenix with a fifth of Jim Beam. The first RollerCon to feature a mass derby wedding was in 2005. It was officiated by Deez Nutz, a skater from Arizona Roller Derby (AZRD), who dressed up as Elvis to officiate. (Deez Nutz is, incidentally, a current ASU employee.)

Another common tradition across all forms of modern roller derby is taking a nom de skate. Skaters are often known by their derby names by those in the community, rather than by their given names. Female skaters’ partners are often referred to as “Mr.,” followed by some portion of their partners’ derby name. I have skated as “Stone Cold Jane Austen,” combining my scholarly expertise with a professional wrestler’s stage name. My husband was commonly called “Mr. Stone Cold” by my teammates. That nomenclature, reversing gendered expectations, is yet another part of the wink-wink nudge-nudge feminist drill in derby. Finding a derby name that says something about oneself is considered important in the culture. A player with severe ADD chooses the derby name “Adderoller.” A journalist chooses “Pull-Hitzer Prize.” A pop-culture pun is often a common choice, as are puns about violence, alcohol, or a skater position (jammer, blocker, pivot). This adds another yet layer to the comic or theatrical effect of derby competition. Many skaters select names that are ribald riffs on female icons or pop stars or fictional characters.

¹⁷ “Derby Wedding,” *RollerCon: The Original Worldwide Roller Derby Convention*. July 2018. <http://rollercon.com/events/derby-wedding/> This post includes the six characteristics of a derby wife and notes that it is perfectly acceptable to have more than one.

Today's famous players include Bonnie Thunders (Nicole Williams), Suzy Hotrod (Jean Schwarzwald), and Mota Matrix, formerly Atomatrix (Julie Glass). In twentieth-century roller derby, players had nicknames, like Ann "Banana Nose" Calvello, "Toughie" Brasuhn, "Ma" Bogash, and culturally insensitive names, like Mary "Pocahontas" Youpelle. (Youpelle was Italian American.) Players had signature looks and styles—Calvello favored dyed brightly colored hair and noticeable lipstick—but game fashion was not nearly so central to the early game as it is today. Today, it is customary to wear makeup and to engage in cosplay (costume play) during bouts. Strangely, then, as roller derby became a "real," "legitimate" sport in the twenty-first century, skaters themselves took on more of the personas and visual trappings of theatre and professional wrestling. Perhaps this reversal, too, leads to some confusion. It certainly builds on the myth.

Much of what is known of the "who" of the sport of roller derby comes from WFTDA data. The last survey the organization undertook was its 2012 white paper, "Roller Derby Demographics: Results from the Third Annual Comprehensive Data Collection on Skaters and Fans."¹⁸ The survey may not pass muster with social scientists as a representative sample, but the data came from 8346 respondents. The findings brought together data about the sex, sexuality, age, educational, and economic backgrounds of skaters and fans, often dispelling notions of these groups' interests, work lives, and buying power. One significant finding is how much skaters are paying to play. Most leagues are non-profit and DIY community efforts, with sponsorship, venues, audience size, and ticket sales varying widely. There is no question that, for most leagues, the focus falls on creating an experience for players, rather than on building or maintaining an audience experience. (There are notable exceptions, such as the Minnesota

¹⁸ WFTDA, "Roller Derby Demographics: Results from the Third Annual Comprehensive Data Collection on Skaters and Fans," Women's Flat Track Derby Association, March 2012, <https://wftda.org/files/roller-derby-demographics-2012.pdf>

Rollergirls, which offer half-time musical entertainment, season tickets, and a regular venue at the Roy Wilkins Auditorium.) By and large, this is a pay-to-play sport. The survey found that female skaters in 2011 were reporting having spent an average of \$622 on skating equipment and gear in 2011, along with \$656 in travel, and another \$223 in support costs.

Players are drawn to the sport for many reasons, but high among them is the spirit of fun. The campy aspects of the sport were, and continue to be, important to skaters and fans alike. Survey participants were also asked if they would enjoy roller derby more if skaters skated under their real names. It was a distinctly minority view. By far the largest number to say they would like to see the change made were male skaters, at 17 percent. Just eleven percent of active female skaters agreed. Both groups were, however, trailed by the fans. Only seven percent of them agreed that they would enjoy derby *more* if skaters skated under their real names. This commitment to the theatrical in derby bears out, too, in the large number of photographers, creative writers, television and filmmakers who are attracted to capturing the sport. This pop-cultural fascination with derby also dates back a century and more. (See the bibliography for a selected list of such materials.)

Of course, commitments to storytelling and visual flair, and creative representation of all kinds are central to many sports. Still, roller derby seems to have attracted a larger share of this kind of attention in comparison to the “serious” coverage, study, or attention that it receives. The sport’s statistics and star players are rarely reported in the mainstream media. When Suzy Hotrod (Jean Schwarzwald) of the Gotham Girls Roller Derby was featured in *ESPN*’s “Body Issue” in 2011, that seemed a watershed moment. But the incredible photo of her tattooed, naked, perfectly poised and posed

body flying through the air on roller skates (think about that!) didn't prompt an outpouring of further mainstream media coverage of her or of the sport.¹⁹ (She does have her own playing card.)

According to WFTDA, ESPN has been a fair-weather friend to derby. In August 2018, WFTDA's Interim Director went public with her and the organization's ongoing problems in being treated as a legitimate sport by the network. The letter described what the organization saw as wrongful censorship. It lays out concerns with ESPN's plans for broadcasting, and then canceling live coverage, of bouts.²⁰ One matter seemed to be whether the network would allow (or could trust?) its announcers to say a particular skater's name on air: Bicepsual. WFTDA indicated that, of course, it would follow the network in adhering to FCC obscenity guidelines, but it sought clarification about what precisely was being described as obscene. Another issue appears to have been an ESPN one-off feature called "The Battle of the Buckets," billed as airing on ESPN8: The Ocho, in August 2018. It would include players of several "seldom seem" sports, including roller derby, who would compete with KFC buckets over their heads. Advertisements suggested that roller derby was "barely a sport." To make it clear why it mattered to cast roller derby in those terms, alongside bowling and boxing, WFTDA wrote:

The roller derby community is not naive, ESPN. We know that you are a machine, driven by dollars and sponsors like KFC, who are probably thrilled to put their buckets over the heads of boxers in an effort to portray a "Seldom Seen Sport." What KFC might not know is that some of these sports are marginalized by the systems you perpetuate.

¹⁹ Jane McManus, "Let Suzy Hotrod Take You For a Ride," *ESPN.com*, 7 October 2011, <http://www.espn.com/espnw/athletes-life/article/7071275/let-suzy-hotrod-take-ride>.

²⁰ Erica Vanstone (aka Double H), "An Open Letter to ESPN (and to some extent, KFC) from Erica Vanstone and the WFTDA," WFTDA, 8 August 2018. <https://wftda.com/an-open-letter-to-espn-and-to-some-extent-kfc-from-erica-vanstone-and-the-wftda/>

The hashtag #DoBetterESPN was used with a Tweet linking to the open letter.²¹ Feminist activism is central to the work of WFTDA—a remarkable thing for a sport’s governing body. Yet relatively few studies of derby’s politics, impact, and history have been published, which is surprising, given the sport’s unique aspects and cultural force.

By far the largest number of skaters and leagues in the world now is female. In 2012, the WFTDA survey found that women made up 94 percent of active adult roller derby skaters, a percentage of dominance that seems likely to have fallen, with the rise of men’s leagues since 2012. Interestingly, however, in 2012 the ranks of volunteers and referees was 56 percent male. Age, too, was significant. Most female skaters (59 percent) fell between the ages of 25 and 34, but 27 percent were older than 35, and 13 percent were 24 or younger. The age of the average female skater was 31.2 years old. A third are single, a third are married, and a quarter live with a partner. Some six percent identified as divorced or separated. A third were found to have children under 18 in their households.

The high levels of education reported among skaters and fans are noteworthy. The survey results show that the present incarnation of roller derby goes against traditional stereotypes about the sport’s being embraced by those without opportunities to pursue post-secondary education. In the WFTDA survey, some college education was reported by 84 percent of skaters. A college degree was reported as earned by 65 percent. Some graduate education was the experience of 32 percent, and 24 percent had a graduate-level degree. Fans surveyed reported similar levels of education. These numbers are, of course, far higher than we see in the population of the United States, where two percent of the population holds a doctorate, nine percent have master’s degrees, and one-third earn bachelor’s degrees. (It’s important to

²¹ @WFTDA, “We are calling on [@espn](#) as the worldwide leader in sports coverage to do better. To do more to make the world of sports more inclusive, to adequately cover and promote women’s sports, and to properly represent non-mainstream sports. #DoBetterESPN.” 8 August 2018. <https://twitter.com/WFTDA/status/1027225124863442944>

acknowledge, too, that the WFTDA survey data was not limited to the U. S. but also drew from derby players and fans in other countries.)

Another significant finding was that 25 percent of adult female skaters identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other. The derby community prides itself on its commitment to LGBTQ issues. WFTDA has a diversity and inclusion statement that goes far beyond sexual identity:

As a value, “diversity” refers to many things: socioeconomic status (social class), gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, culture, language, and all of the categories of social difference that exist among our members. By making this commitment, the WFTDA will work to ensure that diversity is a value that informs all of our daily operations. We want every WFTDA skater, volunteer, and staff person to take ownership of this value, and be an active participant in this commitment. The reason we are telling you this now is that we would like for this to be a dialogue that happens both within the WFTDA, and between the WFTDA and the entire roller derby community. We are making these commitments publicly so that as a community, we can maintain the momentum around this issue, and remain accountable for making change beyond this announcement.²²

The survey data did not ask members to report on others kinds of diversity as indicated in this list; for instance, it excluded questions of race and ethnicity. Questions of sexuality and gender identity have been central to the sport across its history, however, and are, in that sense, not a surprise to see included here.

We can see that, again, in an annual derby tradition held at RollerCon. There are theme days each year at the convention, which allow for common dress. There is often a jammies and robes day, as

²² “Diversity and Inclusion,” *Women’s Flat Track Derby Association*, 2019.
<https://resources.wftda.org/membership/diversity-and-inclusion/>

well as “Gay Friday.” One of the most popular ticketed bouts of the annual convention is staged between those who identify as straight players and those who don’t. Most who don’t identify as queer. In recent years, the competition has been cast as Team Vagine Regime versus the Caulksuckers. This bout is often described as the hottest ticket for an audience member and as one of the most hotly contested bouts each year. It has taken place since 2006. Vagine Regime is a group that exists outside of the confines of RollerCon as well, and it has recently been the subject of a film documentary. The film, *In the Turn*, is billed as an exploration of Vagine Regime, “an unusual queer community at the heart of roller derby.”²³ What the documentary makes clear is that this group has been a physical, emotional, team-building lifeline for many, both children and adults, who are not able otherwise to find a place of personal, physical, and community growth and acceptance as athletes—or as people, period.²⁴ The film follows several people, including a ten-year-old transgender girl, Crystal, and her mother, into her first experience with Vagine Regime at RollerCon. It shows her being around other skaters who welcome her presence, in a world that rarely has.

The ways in which the questions of gender have come up most centrally for 21st-century derby, especially WFTDA derby, have been in what counts as a “woman” when it comes to designating participation in the sport. WFTDA tackled this question in its “Gender Statement,” which lays out for its 450+ member leagues just who could count as a player in women’s flat-track roller derby. This is a statement that emerged from much debate and fraught conversation in the sport, particularly after roller derby’s rebirth in 2001 had so forcefully described it as a women-only sport. Today, WFTDA and its member leagues subscribe to the following statement: “The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association

²³ Genevieve Berrick, “What exactly is the Vagine Regime?,” *The Daily Life*, 27 February 2015, <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-culture/what-exactly-is-the-vagine-regime-20150226-13pntk.html>

²⁴ “In the Turn, Trailer,” *YouTube*, 10 September 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=ONcmU6pF2Fw

(WFTDA) is committed to inclusive and anti-discrimination practices in relation to all transgender women, intersex women, and gender expansive participants, and aims to ensure that all skaters', volunteers', and employees' rights are respected and protected." The practice in WFTDA leagues, and in most leagues with affiliations beyond them (except for USARS), is that anyone who identifies as a woman or as someone who affiliates most closely with women's derby as a player may compete in its ranks. This is the statement in full:

The WFTDA recognizes that identifying as transgender, intersex, and/or gender expansive is not in any way related to an individual's eligibility for participating as a volunteer or employee. An individual who identifies as a trans woman, intersex woman, and/or gender expansive may skate with a WFTDA charter team if women's flat track roller derby is the version and composition of roller derby with which they most closely identify.

The WFTDA will actively work to promote a climate that is welcoming and inclusive of transgender, intersex, and gender expansive participants. Any conduct which fosters a hostile environment for any participant on the basis of gender identity will not be tolerated. In addition, the WFTDA will continue to increase its knowledge of trans, intersex, and gender expansive issues through ongoing education for volunteers and staff.

The gender identity of any and all WFTDA participants is considered confidential and private.

Again, this is a remarkable statement and one of the most progressive in the world of sport. Obviously, the ways in which the International Olympic Committee is dealing with such questions for its Olympic athletes must respond to different issues, stakes, and concerns; I do not mean to equate the situations with this comparison. But this difference is yet another way in which roller derby seems to be addressing

social, political, and embodied issues for athletes on a different level of the conversation, perhaps ahead of the curve. It's certainly outside of and beyond the dominant paradigm.

THE HISTORY OF ROLLER SKATING AND ROLLER DERBY

If today's roller derby is outside of and beyond the paradigm for traditional sports, then that is not just a matter of coincidence or luck. The sport's outlier status is built into its history and, indeed, into the history of roller skating. Pinpointing the invention of roller skates is challenging. Legend has it that wheeled skates or skaites, patterned on ice skates, were the creation John Joseph Merlin (1735–1803), a Dutch inventor who came to England and was first the assistant in and then the proprietor of a mechanical museum. It's said that he invented not only the roller skate but the first wheelchair, many different varieties of watches and clocks, and a device that allowed a blind person to play cards.²⁵ It was said, perhaps apocryphally, in years afterward, that Merlin's first exhibition of his roller skates was disastrous. He allegedly debuted this "pair of skaites contrived to run on small metallic wheels" in the salon of a society woman, while playing the violin, at a masquerade party. Merlin discovered that he had not the capacity to stop and crashed into a wall, breaking a large mirror worth 500 pounds and severely injuring himself in the process.²⁶ If the story isn't true, it's long been repeated as if it is. It certainly makes a colorful, harrowing tale of origin, the sort of storytelling that's been part and parcel of roller skating's history.

²⁵ Charles Mould, 'Merlin, John Joseph (1735–1803)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2013.
<http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/view/article/46472>, accessed 14 June 2014

²⁶ Thomas Busby, *Concert Room and Orchestra Anecdotes*. Vol II. London: Clementi, 1825, p. 137.

The popularity of roller skating grew throughout the nineteenth century, as did the technology of the skates themselves. Eventually, skates became affordable enough for the middle classes to buy or rent. An American inventor, J. L. Plimpton, in 1863 made it possible for skates to turn, which meant skating in circles was possible.²⁷ These skates were called the “rocking-skate,” and its popularity led him to establish an early version of a roller rink, because it was now possible to go around in circles. The rinks were immensely popular. In London, in the 1870s, the fad was called “rinkomania.” In America, skeptics dubbed the skaters “rinkers.”²⁸ But by 1879, one source could lament the “Plimpton rinks we have just seen passing away from us.”²⁹

We hear often about the bicycle craze of the late nineteenth century. We hear less about the roller-skating craze. This is very interesting in itself, because roller skating developed a reputation as a morally dangerous, louche activity, particularly for women. Roller skating became a craze among young people, allowing them to mix with each other and with the opposite sex in ways they had not done before—or at least not with such speed and impunity. The problem may have stemmed from the fact that the young could skate, the old could not, and therefore close-by chaperones were evaded. One of the reasons for roller-skating rinks dwindling in the late nineteenth century may well have been that the churches were stepping in to condemn roller rinks and skating alike. Take, for example, the Baptist Congress held in New York in 1887. In the course of its deliberations, it offers the case of how it had earlier handled the sin of roller skating:

²⁷ Justin Parkinson, “The Victorian craze that sparked a mini-sexual revolution,” BBC Magazine, 6 April 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31831110>.

²⁸ Parkinson, “Victorian Craze,” n.p.

²⁹ Robert MacGregor, “Skating and Skaters,” *Belgravia: A London Magazine*, Vol. 40, no. 158 (December 1879): 208.

Take, for example, roller skating. As it began, and as it is still carried on in some places, the Church as a body had nothing to do with it. Soon the physicians were heard demurring, but the Church said nothing. But when the devil put his sign manual on roller-skating in the commingling of the sexes in positions suited only to the closest relationship, then the amusement ceased to be innocent and the churches condemned it.³⁰

Or take this statement, also looking back on roller skating's rise and demise, from J. M. Buckley, LLD:

Roller skating became a craze; a foe to home life, very bad in its effects upon children and youth, injurious to modesty, it was carried to great excess and gave rise to many scandals. The reaction was equal to the action, and only the rinks remain, a few used for public halls, and others for carriage repositories and all kinds of warehouses, as monuments of a short-lived fever.

Buckley does acknowledge that, as exercise, roller skating might be okay in moderation but that “in excess,” it “distorts the limbs” and “produces an ungainly walk.”³¹

Roller skating did not go away long, however, as a next generation picked up the activity in the early 1900s. By the Depression era, and the craze for marathons of all kinds, especially walking ones, there were already endurance races on skates that were being dubbed “roller derby.” Some of them were female oriented. An early instance seems to have been on a university campus, the University of Illinois, in 1927. A news item from Champaign-Urbana so captured the attention of the country that the story, and the accompanying photos, were run in local newspapers across the country:

³⁰ *Sixth Annual Session of the Baptist Congress for the Discussion of Current Questions Held at the First Baptist Church, Indianapolis, Ind, November 15th 16th 17th 1887.* (New York: Baptist Congress Publishing, 1888), p. 133.

³¹ J. M. Buckley, LLD, “Physical Culture,” *The Chautauquan*, Vol. XV (1892), p. 166.

Automobiles for students were banned at the University of Illinois-Champaign-Urbana.

As a result, a wake of roller-skating has swept the campus. Even the university band is



rolling something besides bass, as one of the pictures above shows. The co-eds are shown starting the first feminine roller derby ever perpetrated on an American university campus.³²

Whether or not the reporter got it right, that this was the first “feminine roller derby” on a college campus—that is, the first organized female students’ race on roller skates—it is an interesting and important use of the term.

As the history of roller derby is usually told, however, the sport started not with co-eds on a campus protesting cars being taken away but with a visionary businessman in 1935. Leo Seltzer, a Montana-born businessman, had moved to Chicago from Portland, where he’d run several movie theatres for Paramount. In Chicago, Seltzer arranged for a long-term lease on the Chicago Coliseum, and he set about filling the space up with many kinds of events. Walkathons were popular, and he ran those, but then, it’s said, he had an idea. He saw a statistic in a magazine story that suggested that almost all Americans roller skated at some point in their lives. Seltzer thought about staging a marathon on skates. He set up the “Transcontinental Roller Derby,” which debuted on August 13, 1935. It attracted a crowd of 20,000 spectators.³³ Seltzer staged the derby as a month-long contest on roller skates. The

³² “‘What! No Autos? Then We’ll Skate,’ Say Students at University of Illinois,” *DeKalb Daily Chronicle*, 14 April 1927.

³³ Keith Copping, *Roller Derby to Rollerjam*, Squarebooks, 1999, p. 4. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.

competition involved teams of two, one male and one female skater. The two skaters took turns skating in shifts, in a competition to see which teams could first skate the equivalent of the entire distance of the country: 3000 miles.³⁴

Roller skating, and the new roller derby, were set up by Leo Seltzer in a way that tried to distance his event from the “rather tawdry” marathon attractions of the day, especially by making sure that contestants were “well scrubbed, personable young people” (Seltzer and Coppage 7). (Seltzer also took the forward-thinking step of registering “Roller Derby” for trademark protection.) The derby contest consisted of 25 coed teams who “would alternate with each other to skate nearly 12 hours a day, with every player having to log a certain number of miles” (Seltzer and Coppage 7). Audiences would crowd in to watch from 1:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. The skaters also often performed vaudeville-style tricks and skits in between stints on the track. Seltzer housed and fed the skaters over the course of that month, in required separate male and female quarters, even for married couples. The provided food and shelter itself might have made it an attractive gig in the Depression era. The skaters were also paid \$25 a week for what turned out to be a seven-week run (Coppage 5). but the three prizes, \$1000, \$500, and \$250, were significant amounts (Seltzer and Coppage 7). The goal was 4000 miles or 57,000 laps (Coppage 4).

The winners, declared on September 22nd, were Clarice Martin (1915-1972), age 20, and Bernie McKay. McKay, who had lied about his age, was only 16. A photograph survives of the victors, but little is known about them, perhaps because, at the time, there was no sense of the occasion as a historic one for a burgeoning sport. Clarice Audrey Martin came from an Italian-French immigrant family, and her mother died when she was a teenager. Her father and uncle (who lived with her) both listed their professions as “Skating-rink labourer.” Clarice’s father was, in fact, himself a record-setting roller-

³⁴ Jerry Seltzer and Keith Coppage. *Bay Area Roller Derby*. Arcadia Publishing, 2012, p. 7. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.

skater. In 1915, Fred Avedano Martin (1892-1959) is said to have set the record for the most miles skated in 24 hours: 304.³⁵ He is also said to have held sprinting roller-skating records. Previous histories of roller derby have not noticed this fact—that the female winner of the first official roller derby was herself the daughter of a roller-skating record-holder and likely raised in the sport.

Clarice’s father and uncle are, by the 1930 census, described as assistant managers in an “Amusement,” otherwise unspecified.³⁶ That seems likely to have been a roller rink, because Fred Martin, after his daughter’s victory, went on to become a leader in the world of roller skating. He “operated the Arena Gardens in Detroit from 1935 until the building was torn down in 1953 to make way for the Edsel Ford Expressway” (*Find A Grave*). He also “was one of the 17 founders in 1937 of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association . . . [once] the largest group of roller skaters in the world. He was its secretary until 1952 when he became its president for one year. Since then he had served the association as promotional counsel.” His son and business partner took over his leadership roles, at the rink and nationally. As for his daughter Clarice, she went on to become a teacher in Michigan, married an electrician, and had four children.³⁷ She does not seem to have continued competitive skating.

But if these young people in the first Transcontinental Roller Derby left with prizes and short-lived notoriety, then Leo Seltzer took away a winning formula for an event that people seemed to go wild over. Seltzer knew how to please a crowd, and he would soon brand himself “Originator and

³⁵ *Find A Grave*, database and images (<https://www.findagrave.com> : accessed 10 March 2019), memorial page for Fred Avedano Martin (27 Feb 1892–2 Jan 1959), Find A Grave Memorial no. [182339490](#), citing Oak Woods Cemetery, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois, USA ; Maintained by Anita (contributor [46622338](#)).

³⁶ Year: 1920; Census Place: *Chicago Ward 7, Cook (Chicago), Illinois*; Roll: *T625_315*; Page: *2A*; Enumeration District: *397*; Year: 1930; Census Place: *Chicago, Cook, Illinois*; Page: *3B*; Enumeration District: *0360*; FHL microfilm: *2340163*

³⁷ Clarice Martin married Tyrus Geruch on 16 February 1937 in Detroit, Michigan. Michigan Department of Community Health, Division of Vital Records and Health Statistics; Lansing, MI, USA; *Michigan, Marriage Records, 1867-1952*; Film: *284*; Film Description: *Wayne*.

Managing Director, Transcontinental Roller Derby.” His dreams grew with the sport. He decided to take it on the road, with weeks-long stints in cities in the Midwest, at first, and then beyond. In each new city, traveling by bus, the skaters would take to the streets to hand out discount tickets, which were also distributed at Sears stores (7). One of the things he thought from the first was that “women spectators—heretofore an untapped market for sports—held the key to Derby’s future” (Coppage 7). Women made up a little more than half of the audience from the first (Coppage 8).

At this point, roller derby was still an endurance competition, but it was also a spectacle. The showmanship aspects had been built into the event. The race evolved into a troupe divided into two ten-person squads of five men and five women, the black team and the white team, and “duo scores were added up for a team total” (Coppage 7). Stealing laps became popular, as were on-track races. Derby began to feature new “stars,” including Ivy King, “a champion speed skater considered the first start of the Roller Derby” who was “a bespectacled crowd pleaser” (Seltzer and Coppage 7). Later, Seltzer would find “heartthrob” Wes Aaronson, who went with derby to Los Angeles, where he “was linked with trilling film start Jeanette Macdonald” (Seltzer and Coppage 7). The connections between roller derby and Hollywood would later become significant and deep.

But perhaps the most interesting early roller derby skaters were a mother-son team, Josephine “Ma” Bogash and Billy Bogash. The Bogashes became crowd favorites. “Ma” would yell at, and start a shoving match with, anyone who harmed her son on the track (Seltzer and Coppage 8). She herself had a winning backstory. She was said to have been a 39-year-old diabetic, ordered by her doctor to lose weight. She took up skating on a dare from her husband (Coppage 7). Seltzer is said to have been banking on the fact that “women embraced performers like Ma Bogash because they felt sorry for them” (Coppage 8). Even if this might miss the full range of emotions involved from the audience for the

players, it does seem to be the case that female audience members also admired and identified with Ma and other skaters.

The way the history of roller derby is often told next is that Seltzer had a conversation with his friend, the writer Damon Runyon, responsible for vintage baseball stories and the stories that would lead to *Guys and Dolls*. It's said that Runyon, after seeing derby in Miami in 1937, suggested that there really ought to be physical contact between the players. Runyon and Seltzer, then, allegedly brainstormed out a set of rules that would be used for years thereafter. Full-contact roller derby—derby that was about more than distance and spectacle—was born.

This story seems at least in part apocryphal, or perhaps it is just more complicated than this. Skater Joe Laurey claims to be the one who introduced physical contact into the sport. According to Laurey, one night in Louisville in 1936, tired of all of the jockeying for position among skaters on the track, he “threw a couple of guys over the railing” (Coppage 8). For this, he was fined \$25 and disqualified, but the people loved it. Laurey claimed “to be the one who first injected the bash-and-crash aspect to Roller Derby that would both beguile and bedevil the Derby to the end of its run” (Coppage 8).

The newspapers, many of which couldn't be bothered to cover roller derby on the sports page, began instead to carry coverage of its personalities and its fights. Here is one such story, from 1937, printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

A fist fight beyond 'locked doors' enlivened last night's chapter of the roller skating derby in the Auditorium when, in the heat of the contest, two skaters forgot themselves and mixed their sports. The exchange of blows came during 'open house,' a period of furious jamming, and ended with Wes Aronson, former Illinois football player, planting a haymaker on the jaw of Eddie Rager from Cincinnati and a member of the Black squad. Both players were fined five dollars. The girls, too, had a little squabble, but it was only a

battle of words. Grace Freid and Ivy King of the Whites being sent to the penalty box for conduct unbecoming a roller skater. Soon after, Catherine Carney of Pittsburgh and Hazel Roop of Columbus square off with real punches and hair pulls. (Coppage 13)

As roller derby historian Keith Coppage points out, a “focus on peripheral action set a pattern for all newspaper coverage” (13). “Show” was used in most articles, and every aspect of the event was described except the game itself (Coppage 13). In Oakland, a journalist described it as “one grand melée,” with elements of “football, fighting, wrestling, speed and endurance skating, and the constant noise of a thousand workers drilling rivets into the steel ribs of a ten story madhouse” (Seltzer and Coppage 8-9). Some cities were more receptive to roller derby than others. Runyon tried to help Seltzer introduce it to New York, but it was a flop there, and a great deal of money was lost (Coppage 13). National exposure for the sport was proving challenging.

In 1937, when national exposure came, it was for the wrong reasons, as a result of a tragedy



(Coppage 13). The private bus carrying almost the entirety of the roller derby operation, primarily its skaters, was traveling from St. Louis to Cincinnati, when it blew out its front tire while crossing a bridge near Salem, IL. The bus crashed and exploded into flames, killing 22 people (Coppage 13). It was declared the “one of the nation’s worst bus tragedies.”³⁸ Most of the bodies, the papers reported, were burned beyond

³⁸ “20 Killed in Bus Wreck; 3 Hurt are in Hospital Here,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 25 March 1937, p. 3A. Subsequent references cited parenthetically in the text.

recognition. The driver of the bus survived, but his wife of two weeks did not. Another male skater survived, but his fiancée did not. Both dietician Erma Caldwell and her four-year-old daughter were killed. Another of the dead was Joe Kleats, “said to be the holder of the quarter-mile skating record” (“20 Killed”).

As one newspaper account put it, “many of the persons killed had been members of the troupe since it was started two years ago” and “the contestants here had practically lived together during that time.” The use of “troupe” and “contestants” is consistent with other coverage, likening the skaters to a game show and a carnival, although one paper did call them “professional.” The story notes that “derbies have been presented in thirteen cities” and “Cincinnati was to have been the fourteenth.”³⁹ Seltzer brought in substitute skaters via train and the competition there went on as scheduled. Eventually, the number 1 was retired from roller derby, in honor of those who died in the crash (Coppage 13). It is a tradition that continues to this day in most leagues.

During the war, there were difficulties keeping roller derby going. A “race with women only was attempted” but did not take off. (Seltzer and Coppage 9). But when the television market took off, the sport took off, and its continued play seemed secure. ABC Television carried it, and at the height of its popularity in this era, it had as many as six teams. Still, this was a family operation. Leo Seltzer rightly considered himself the sport’s impresario, although there were other partners, sponsors, and concerns. Leo’s son Jerry Seltzer enjoys telling stories about the ways in which his father was shaken down by the mob in Chicago. As big as it was all becoming, it was, of course, “somewhat risky for the Seltzer family to carry the more than 100 skaters in their National Roller Derby League” (Seltzer and Coppage 9).

³⁹ “Survivor of Illinois Bus Crash Gasps Out Account of Tragedy,” *The St. Louis Star and Times*, 24 March 1937, p. 1.

The 1940s and 1950s saw a new set of stars emerge, including Midge “Toughie” Brashun, whose style, charisma, and big personality helped derby finally make it in New York City. The most famous female skater of the day was Gerry Murray, who was the good girl to “Toughie’s” bad girl, a contrast that would continue to drive the fan base of the sport. Another notable skater from this era was Jeannie Porter, known as “the Indian girl,” who was the subject of a pseudo-documentary, *Roller Derby Girl* (1949). It was a short, shown prior to theatre features, which purported to be a behind-the-scenes treatment of Porter’s joining roller derby. There were also husband-and-wife skating teams, like Carl “Moose” Payne and Monta Jean Payne (Seltzer and Coppage 9). The Atkinson family—brothers Buddy and Tommy, Buddy’s wife Bobbi Johnstone, son Buddy, Jr., and into the next generation—became known as the first family of roller derby (Seltzer and Coppage 21). Even Ma Bogash was still skating on occasion.

One of the most important and longest-competing skaters to emerge in the mid-twentieth-century, Ann Calvello, deserves a book of her own, and, in fact, has been the subject of a documentary about her career and her life, *Demon of the Derby* (2001). She was the bad girl to Joan “Joanie” Weston, a tall blonde “Southern California girl” with a “radiant smile” that seemed to go against the derby tough-girl image (Seltzer and Coppage 82). Weston would become a long-time fan favorite, and she was a go-to person for the Seltzers when it came to dealing with the media. This hurt her with the other skaters, who saw her as too much of a “company girl” (Seltzer and Coppage 84). They also did not respect her as a skater. She could do the moves and “sell it,” in a sport that wasn’t “genuine,” but the other skaters felt she was not a skater and didn’t have their proficiency (Seltzer and Coppage 85).

During this era, Seltzer’s problems with ABC and television contracts led to derby’s collapse in New York and a move back to Los Angeles as a base of operations. Seltzer felt that ABC had overexposed the sport, putting it on air constantly, as it was contractually allowed to do, over Seltzer’s

objections (Seltzer and Coppage 25). Derby's ability to capitalize on television, but its inability to sustain the audience over time, would repeatedly cause the sport, and the Seltzer family's ability to turn a profit, problems in this era. Indeed, that was the case across the twentieth century. Just as roller skating went in and out of popularity, seemingly without warning, roller derby, too, seemed to go from a popular sensation, to a shoulder-shrug sport, and then back again, at the drop of a hat. Adding to the challenge, the fans did not always seem entirely clear on the rules. One enormous sign from 1949 tried to help them out: "How to Keep Score. A jam occurs when one or more skaters break away from the pack. A point is gained after circling the track and passing a member of the opposing team" (Seltzer and Coppage 23).

Roller derby did attract a number of die-hard fans, however, almost from the first. It seems to have attracted its skaters that way as well. It was said that, during this era, Midwestern mothers feared hearing the phrase, "I'm going off to join the Roller Derby" as much or more as the line about the circus. Whether that was true or not, fans did get excited about roller derby. In part, perhaps, it was a matter of access. As Seltzer and Coppage note, "Roller derby fans have always been able to walk right up to the track and talk to the skaters, sometimes in the middle of the game" (46). A security guard might then escort them back to their seats. Fans seemed to get especially excited about derby "color" or "theatrical conflicts, personalities, and/or fisticuffs" (Seltzer and Coppage 46). There were also moments when fans stormed the track. It frightened the skaters, but it can't have upset the organizers. When it was being taped for television, it "gave the impression that the game was really something to see in person" (Seltzer and Coppage 47).

The games were not, in this era, precisely "fixed," in that there was no script to follow. But the players knew what kind of contact was allowable (and what was not) and which kinds of wins and losses would be needed at which point in the "story" of the game and its competition. There were "unwritten

rules” about hitting another player’s “sensitive areas” (Seltzer and Coppage 59). If you look at publicity photos from this period and thereafter, they inevitably are aerial shots reporting the sizes of the crowds, not the scores. And there were crowds. It was common to sell out Madison Square Garden, when the derby traveled there, and crowds in the tens of thousands were expected during derby’s many heydays. In one famous bout in 1972, which also deserves its own book-length treatment, White Sox (now Comiskey) park was sold out for roller derby.

Stars were bankable commodities for Seltzer’s derby. One of the biggest crowd-pleasing players was Charlie O’Connell, and his attitudes and behaviors had an impact on the game. He was notoriously at odds with the Seltzers over whether or not there should be a women’s game. In this era, women and men took turns competing on the track, although they did warm-ups together. As Seltzer and Coppage put it, “Women-on-women mayhem was accepted, while violence (usually threatened) from men against women would provoke a near-riotous response, with O’Connell in the middle of it all” (79). O’Connell’s chivalry did not extend to wanting women to have a future in the sport. O’Connell wanted the game to be more “legitimate” and felt that becoming an all-male sport would help that happen.

O’Connell’s position as a star led him to dictate many of his own terms, even if he couldn’t dictate that one, removing women from competition. As Seltzer and Coppage write, O’Connell, “as befitting his reign . . . could not be bothered with warm-ups, preferring to make a grand entrance during the first period, upstaging the girls’ race” (61). The star system in derby also stipulated that there would be three per squad. The top skater was coach or captain. The second skater was a key backup skater, and the third star was the top jammer. O’Connell is believed by some to be the best skater to play roller derby or perhaps just the most serious and fierce about his game. He was “the most dreaded of all skaters” (Seltzer and Coppage 73). He also singlehandedly managed to keep other players from rising up

the ranks, by pulling rank himself with the Seltzers, something he used his own bankability to leverage (Seltzer and Coppage 75).

Roller derby’s romances were also the stuff of legend. Ann Calvello had an ill-fated romance with Charlie O’Connell, after which she asked to be traded (Seltzer and Coppage 69). O’Connell and Mike Gammon were on-track rivals who ended up each of them marrying the other’s ex-wife. O’Connell married star Judi McGuire, and Gammon married the little-known skater Vicki Cooper (Seltzer and Coppage 72). Leo Seltzer’s son, Jerry Seltzer, also reports on the significant number of gay, lesbian, and bisexual players in derby. By the 1960s, when Jerry took over the reins of the sport from his



father, some teams were majority gay and lesbian. As Jerry puts it, “Again we [in the sport of roller derby] are different. . . . The Pioneers, was about 80 percent gay, men and women. In the ’60s, that was a little different from the other sports. It was also 30 to 40 percent black, which was also different from other sports.”⁴⁰ The most openly gay skater in this period was Ronnie Robinson, the son of boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. Ronnie Robinson had a very successful career in derby, having started out playing for a brief time under the surname “Smith.”

The subject of race and roller derby is also worthy of

more extensive treatment than it will receive in this paper, and my research into these matters is ongoing. We have already seen that derby used similar Native American stereotyping and caricaturing found in other American sports, although one Canadian player, Jean Porter, claimed descent from the Oneida and Mohawk. Derby does seem to have been somewhat ahead of the curve in terms of racial

⁴⁰ Seltzer, Jerry. Interview. By Devoney Looser. 20 March 2018. Telephone Interview.

integration. Robinson is said to have been the third African-American skater in roller derby, having joined the league in 1958. Before Robinson, African-American derby players included George Copeland and Darlene Anderson.⁴¹ Anderson has been called “the first African American female in team sports” (Seltzer and Coppage 89). This may depend on how you define team and sport and certainly only refers to integrated sports. Rival roller derby organizations to Seltzer’s may have had earlier integration.

Age was also an interesting factor in roller derby. There was no retirement age. The Seltzers used the Roller Derby Hall of Fame induction as a subtle (or not-so-subtle)s way to try encourage a player to get the hint that it was time to retire (Seltzer and Coppage 97). Star skaters often competed for decades. The

Bogashes were by no means the only parent-child skaters in the sport’s history. Annis Jensen skated



with her daughter Barbara Baker, sometimes on different teams. Baker once said, after the two competed against each other, “I’ve skated with my mother a few times; I’ve skated against her a few times. . . She broke my nose once. . . isn’t she wonderful? She wanted her points” (Seltzer and Coppage 96).

The parent-child tradition in derby extended to its founder-owner and son, as we have seen. Leo Seltzer turned over the operations of roller derby to his son, Jerry Seltzer, in 1958. Jerry ran roller derby until 1973, when it financially collapsed, for many reasons. Seltzer blames several things. One was an “embarrassing” two-day player strike (Seltzer and Coppage 112). Seltzer declares “The spectacle of 50 picketing skaters rolling around the Kaiser Center somewhat pathetic” and the skater demands “humiliating for all concerned” (Seltzer and Coppage 112). The strike is difficult for Seltzer to describe. He takes

⁴¹ Jason Lewis, “Darlene Anderson Broke Roller Derby Color Barrier in 1958,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 20 January 2011. <https://lasentinel.net/darlene-anderson-broke-roller-derby-color-barrier-in-1958.html>

great pains to point out that both he and his father had incorporated profit-sharing for players into roller derby and that they were a pioneering organization for having done so. As he says, “We had set up profit sharing. Players who didn’t even believe it got anywhere from 5K to 60K.”⁴² These amounts were disbursed when Jerry shut down roller derby in 1973.

But perhaps more critical to the shutdown were not the labor disputes, which resolved, but the national gas shortages (players were reimbursed for gas to travel to away bouts), and one catastrophic failure of electronic ticketing in New York. That experience would lead Seltzer to start BASS tickets, a successful electronic ticketing company in the Bay Area, after he left derby behind. Of course, Seltzer never really left derby behind. He keeps a prolific blog of his memoirs, which he calls (as he also jokingly calls himself) “Roller Derby Jesus,” as he is the son of the creator of roller derby, Leo Seltzer. Jerry takes special pleasure in this joke, as he is Jewish.

It seems almost unthinkable that derby would have shut down in the early 1970s. It was, after all, a moment when roller derby was at its height in popular culture. As Seltzer and Coppage put it, “The original Roller Derby’s zenith is considered to be 1971” (104). Derby was being televised in syndication on 110 networks. In-person attendance for the Bay Area Bombers (now the home team) was stable. Perhaps this time, however, it was a different kind of media saturation that made things newly problematic. It might almost seem that there was too much derby to go around and that the public got sick of it, in much the same way that disco (and disco roller skating) came and went.

But derby went out even before disco. Very little would have predicted this finish to the Seltzer operation. Jerry Seltzer was involved in a documentary film, *Derby* (1971), that gained critical acclaim, featuring many of his league’s skaters. The book, *A Very Simple Game: The Story of Roller Derby*

⁴² Seltzer, Jerry. Interview. By Devoney Looser. 20 July 2018.

(1971), by Herb Michelson, which Seltzer helped to publish, sold well. The same year, Frank Deford's *Five Strides on the Banked Track* (1971) was published, consisting of an expanded version of his 1969 treatment of the sport in *Sports Illustrated*. The following year, the film *Kansas City Bomber* (1972), starring Raquel Welch, was released. It inspired B-movie king Roger Corman to follow with his *Unholy Rollers* (1972). Seltzer, too, was going to have his hands in a Hollywood film. It was to be called *Jam* and would have starred, incredibly, "Mama" Cass Elliot of the *Mamas & the Papas* fame. Things had gotten far enough along that Seltzer and Elliot did a press conference together (Coppage and Seltzer 109). It was not to be. Seltzer's derby shut down in 1973. Elliot died in 1974. By the time the science fiction sports movie *Rollerball* (1975) was made, the sport of roller derby, like the movie itself, seemed to have jumped the shark, temporarily, once again.

The number of times that roller derby folded and came back—and the number of rival leagues that formed, even while the Seltzers were still active, especially under the leadership of Los Angeles-based businessman Bill Griffith—is dizzying. This is especially true in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Griffith's *Rollergames* (1989) now seems a special low point, with its bizarre figure-8 track, "Wall of Death," "Jet Jump," and pit of live alligators. Seltzer worked to produce *Roller Derby: The Musical* (1985). The television show *Rollerjam* (1997-98) moved the sport to in-line skates and an approach even more similar to professional wrestling. Many other attempted revivals failed to gain funding or traction in this period.

Even the famous 2001 DIY rebirth of women's roller derby had its brush with a would-be male impresario, "Devil Dan" (Daniel Eduardo Policarpo), whose vision for the rebirth of roller derby involved "a crazy circus with these clowns unfortunately stabbing each other, these bears on fire on these unicycles." It came to a crashing end when the group of women-skaters he recruited, calling

themselves the She.E.O.s, wrested power and creative control away from him.⁴³ She founded Bad Girl Good Woman Productions. April Ritzenthaler acknowledges “Devil Dan”’s role in the formation of modern roller derby with a poem, that was printed in a *New York Times* story about the origins of the sport’s rebirth:

“Devil Dan was a man, a man with a plan,” her poem began. After a long series of couplets, she concluded:

No trouble to us, nevermore, not today

But I’m thankful for Dan

and his vision so bright

He stacked wood for the fire

but we girls made it light.

All of this history—these larger-than-life, sometimes bizarre, and frequently inspiring athletes and stories—paved the way. It made possible the by-the-skater-for-the-skater moment that the sport of roller derby continues to live on in, in large part, today, twenty years later. Whatever roller derby’s future will be, come 2036, it seems almost certain that the sport will be neither physically or visually boring, nor culturally or politically safe. It never has been before.

⁴³ Michael Brick, “The Dude of Roller Derby and His Vision,” *New York Times*, 17 December 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/18/sports/othersports/18devildan.html>

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