

# San Francisco's Midnight Rollers spread the gospel of outdoor 'roll – ligion'

By *Connie Evener*

Every Friday the Midnight Rollers ripple through the streets of San Francisco, entrancing tourists as they roll by like a herd of wildebeest on a TV nature show. Miles, founder and executive director of the California Outdoor Rollersports Association (CORA) is what you might call the guru-in-chief of the roller skating scene in the San Francisco Bay Area.

You might also say that it took an earthquake – literally – to start the Midnight Rollers Friday Night Skates. The skate patrol was out scouting around one night after their weekly meeting. It was 1989, just after the Loma-Prieta earthquake did some major damage to the Embarcadero Freeway. “We came by, saw the road closed signs and skated up on it,” recalled Miles. “We had a great time skating on an empty freeway with a big hill and no cars.”

Over the next couple of years, the freeway route became more and more popular with skaters, and not just from the Bay area, but from all over the country. Then the city began tearing down the Embarcadero Freeway in 1991 and the Midnight Rollers had to change their venue.

Pushing a stroller with a sound system that he calls his “porta-party,” Miles

presides over the 12-mile route that has evolved since then: looping from the Ferry Building Plaza to Fisherman’s Wharf and Pier 39, through the Broadway Tunnel, China Town, Union Square, a maze of alley ways and side streets dubbed the “Concrete Canyons,” around a statue in front of The Hills Brothers Coffee Building known as the “coffee god,” and back.

The popularity – and official acceptance – of outdoor skating in the San Francisco area owes much to the group now known as the Golden Gate Skate Patrol. Back in the day (1979), and well before the birth of the Midnight Rollers, “there were 20,000 roller skaters coming to Golden Gate Park every Sunday,” said Miles. With that many people coming into one neighborhood, plus 35 or so vendor trucks parked and renting out skates, there were problems. So the city’s parks and recreation department started a move to ban skating in the parks.

But a group of skating enthusiasts, including Miles, formed the volunteer skate patrol, whose members are trained in CPR, and took on the responsibility of assisting skaters and troubleshooting conflicts. “We did our job and they didn’t ban skating,” Miles said. “And we convinced rec and parks to build us an outdoor skating area (Skatin’ Place) at 6th Avenue and Kennedy Drive (in Golden Gate Park),

which is where we’ve been hanging out for 30-some years now.”

The Midnight Rollers Friday Night Skate has attracted its share of media attention, and, consequently, skaters from all over the world. “Back in 1993,” said Miles, “we had a group from Paris come and skate. They went back home and created the world’s largest Friday Night Skate.” (Check out Pari Rollers on YouTube to see videos of this street skate, which attracts up to 35,000 participants.) Here in the U.S., Friday night street skates have emerged in New York City, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, and Salt Lake City.

Miles calls skating his “roll – ligion,” now that he presides over the “holy rollers,” who skate at the Church of 8 Wheels, a vacant church converted into a roller rink.

When Miles spoke with The Rink-sider, he’d just returned from Burning Man, the annual “expression of art, technology and survival” for free thinkers and artists in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. At Burning Man, everything that is brought in for the week has to be hauled back out and the area restored to its pre-event condition. Everyone is encouraged to share their enthusiasms, and Miles has been doing just that since 1999, by hauling in the wood and other materials to build a temporary 50 X 150 foot outdoor skating rink, as well as 150 pairs of skates, lights and sound system.



*The midnight rollers light up the night in San Francisco.*

He doesn’t see outdoor skating as a threat to indoor rinks at all. On the contrary, “The outdoor fuels the indoor,” he said. Anything that promotes the benefits of roller skating, on inlines or quads, indoors or outdoors, will encourage more people to discover the joy of moving around with wheels on their feet.

For more information, see the California Outdoor Rollersports Association website at [www.cora.org](http://www.cora.org) or contact David Miles at [Sk8GodFather@cora.org](mailto:Sk8GodFather@cora.org).

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