

Reader's Letter - 'The Roller Derby and Me'

By Lora Lee Duncan

When my massage therapist told me she was going out that evening with a group of girls – to the Roller Derby – I couldn't believe my ears. I thought Roller Derby had died along with my adolescence. Boy, was I wrong!

As a little girl growing up in Manhattan, I had no place to learn to ride a bicycle or roller skate. A scooter had to suffice. By the time I was a teenager, my family had moved out of the city and into the suburbs. By then I had lost interest in owning a bicycle. I wanted to learn how to roller skate. The wide, suburban sidewalks called to me and I saw an exciting way to escape from my younger sister and two brothers.

Roller skates were relatively inexpensive back then. They came with a brightly colored strap that could hang over a shoulder or hook onto the handlebars of a bicycle (if you were lucky enough to have a bicycle). They also came with a small, metal "key" that allowed me to attach the skates to the sole of my brown and white saddle shoes. It was considered very "cool" to wear the "skate key" around your neck on a white shoelace. Having roller skates gave a girl all kinds of freedom and a sense of "the possible" in life.

About the time I mastered roller skating (not without a few skinned knees

and one bloody elbow) a new "sport" came on the scene – Roller Derby. Fortunately for me, I had a mother who by today's standard would have been labeled as "cool." She had also learned of this new all-female sport and agreed to take me to see a Roller Derby at the nearby Patterson Armory as a birthday treat.

I remember going into the dusty, noisy armory with my mother to watch a gang of grown women on roller skates chase each other around a tilted oval track they called a rink. It was bright and dusty in the old armory (which had long since outlived its usefulness as a munitions depot during the second world war) and the crowd noise was ear-splitting as the women with colorful names like "Ann Mosity" and "Lay Ya Flat" (and my favorite – "Toughy Brasoon") raced around the rink trying to trip, collide with or in any other way disable the opposing team members. Incidents of "violations" occurred regularly and the crowd urged the skaters to fight whenever there was any opportunity. There was even the occasional fight between a skater and one of the referees.

That was in the 1950s. Roller Derby actually began in 1935 and was first seen on television in 1948. The first televised "games" were held in Madison Square Garden. Roller Derby historians (and there are many!) will tell you that the original Roller Derby was started in

Austin, Texas. Today it is estimated there are 1200 leagues around the world – 135 leagues in the U.S. alone. As of 2010, there were 40 junior teams in the U.S.

In 2009 a movie about Roller Derby, titled "Whip It!," was released. I don't know anyone who has seen it.*

So what was the big attraction of Roller Derby? First, at that time there was no other sport that featured women competitors and it was an "indoor sport." It moved fast and it encouraged crowd noise. It was also relatively easy to understand – one team of women skating around a tilted track and through another team to reach a goal. In reality, as the sport grew, there was also the fact that spectators got a chance to see women fight with each other (and sometimes argue with an offensive male referee)! It was the only legitimate contact sport for women at the time – and there were

the Coliseum in Chicago. Teams of men and women competed in a marathon race that supposedly went across the country. There is no clear evidence that such a race was ever run; however, the concept of roller skating was in the air! In 1937,



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Damon Runyan reported seeing an event in Miami that included a great deal of physical contact as well as skating, and the concept caught on.

In 1948, the first official Roller Derby was held in the 69th Street Armory in New York City and the Roller Derby craze began. Damon Runyan is quoted as saying of the early Roller Derby events, "The most exciting moments are the collisions between the skaters." He described a Roller Derby event as a hockey game with not ice, but held in a roller rink. He said, "Imagine the hockey players replaced by women wearing baggy jerseys, fish net hose and tank tops!" The sport grew during the '40s and '50s, but declined during the early 1970s.

There was a revival of this all-female sport in 2001. Leagues were formed across the nation and the spectators returned. As of this writing, it is estimated that there are leagues in almost every major city in the U.S., including Phoenix, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Boston, Baltimore, Pasadena, Memphis, D.C., Charlotte and San Antonio. A National Roller Derby Hall of Fame has been built in Brooklyn, N.Y., and there is an all-girl Roller Derby Magazine called "Blood and Thunder."

I haven't been to a Roller Derby since my times with my mother. My massage therapist is the only person I know who has been to a Roller Derby recently. I go to the Patterson Armory every so often (in my mind), and I can still see those women racing around the rink, anxious to run an opponent off the track, and I have a clear image of Toughy Brasoon shouting in the face of a ref. I wonder where Toughy is today.

*Editor's Note: Many RINKSIDER readers did see "Whip It!"

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numerous injuries like broken bones and concussions!

As the sport grew in popularity, leagues were formed and "bout names" were assigned to the various events – Nightmare on Hall Street, Season's Beatings (a holiday event) and Skate and Destroy.

The creator of this crazy, female sport is believed to be a man from Montana by the name of Leo A. Seltzer. He was born in Helena, Mont. in 1903 and grew up with a strong interest in unusual entertainment. He owned a string of movie theaters and ran an annual dance marathon that lasted 40 days! In 1935, Seltzer read an article stating that 93 percent of Americans had at some point gone roller skating. Seltzer saw an opportunity to capitalize on this new-found interest and began organizing entertainment events that included roller skating exhibitions and used roller skating as an overall theme.

In that same year, a "Transcontinental Roller Race" was scheduled at

SUPPLIER NEWS

New smartphone Sk8App helps customers find rinks

Kevin Carroll and Tim Hunter, owners of Skate Factory in Vero Beach, Fla., are the masterminds behind a hip, new app, that allows anyone with a smartphone to locate area skating rinks as well as find out pertinent information about the rinks they choose. Sk8App provides: today's skating times, weekly schedules, directions, operator-posted special events and promotions, and more based on what each rink operator inputs.

Sk8App is free to use and can be downloaded on any smartphone from app stores. The SkAapp rink finder uses GPS to give customers a list of rinks nearest them. They then select which rink they want to view, and that rink's information will come up for the user to navigate.

All information is rink operator driven, and rinks can update their content as often as they choose. Content is live as soon as it is entered. Rink operators can go to www.sk8app.com to register their location and insert their information, logos, special events, promotions, website and contact info.

Rinks that do online birthday party reservations can insert a flyer onto the Sk8App and link it straight to their online reservation page in their rinks Web site. Additionally, with Google Analytics, operators can track how many customers are using Sk8App to see their locations and how often.

Carroll and Hunter use the DJs at their rink to promote Sk8App and have QR Codes set up in the rink so kids and parents can just scan the QR code to go straight to the Sk8app in the app store. Carroll indicated that kids think it is "so cool" that the rink has an app now. Other rinks who have already registered include Universal Skating Center in Orlando, River Roll Skate Center in Riverside, Mo., and Turners Skate Palace in Md.

To register your rink, go to www.sk8app.com. In celebration of The RINKSIDER's 60th Anniversary, Carroll and Hunter are offering a special to RINKSIDER readers of \$100/yr. if they register before the end of February, 2013. The cost includes hosting on a company's server. Rinks can also choose a six-month or three-year plan. For costs, or for more information, contact Kevin Carol or Tim Hunter at sk8app.com@gmail.com or 772-794-3373.

