

Museum remembers the first year of Roller Derby

By James Vannurden, Director and Curator, National Museum of Roller Skating

The original game of roller derby played by very different rules and had a different objective than today's sport. The Transcontinental Roller Derby, so named because the distance skated of 3,000 miles equaled that of the distance between San Diego and New York City, began as an endurance race. Rules allowed little contact, and skaters used proper technique and pacing their speed to skate as long as possible.

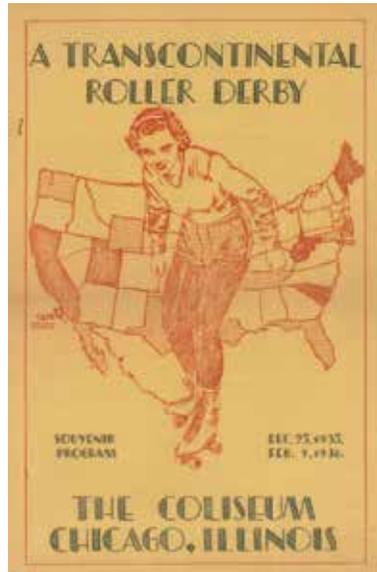
Leo Seltzer formed roller derby in 1935 to attract skating enthusiasts with a new spectator sport based on roller skating. His concept was quite simple: teams competed to see which one could skate the distance of 3,000 miles the fastest. Teams of two circled a banked oval track for 12 hours per day; one skater from each team needed to be on the track at all times. At the end of each day a large, 90-foot electric scoreboard kept track of each team's progress. These races lasted over a month.

This new sport guaranteed both men and women would compete against each other on the same floor under the same rules, which helped garner a large female following. But because of the mixed genders, newspapers dubbed it more of a spectacle than a sport.



Skaters who participated in the first Transcontinental Roller Derby.

The Transcontinental Roller Derby launched its first competition on August 13, 1935. Hosted by the Chicago Coliseum, some twenty thousand spectators arrived to witness history. A total of twenty-five teams entered this first derby. Each team, comprised of one man and one woman, began the grueling race at 12:00 noon. A daily number of miles skated per day by each team was needed to retain eligibility. The team which covered the 3,000 mile distance first won.



A cover from the souvenir program for the first Transcontinental Roller Derby exhibition in 1935/1936.

Many obstacles arose over the course of this month-long derby. Most teams were disqualified due to injuries or exhaustion. Many skaters needed hospital visits after nasty falls, forcing his/her teammate to continue skating for hours to remain qualified. For those teammates not skating, the center of the rink provided cots for rest.

After a month of skating, derby

crowned a winner. Of the twenty-five teams that began the race, only nine teams crossed the finish line. With a time of 439 hours, 12 minutes and 39 seconds the team of Clarice Martin and Bernie McKay won the first roller derby competition. The team coming in second finished with a time of 493 hours, 25 minutes, and 10 seconds, completing the race more than two full days later.

Similar subsequent matches continued over the course of the next couple of years. Damon Ranyon, a sportswriter friend of Seltzer, suggested increasing the level of contact between the skaters. Skaters began using great force in removing opponents from their paths. This then evolved into the modern rules of roller derby.

We must remember the roots of derby for starting us on the path to a great sport. Endurance and great skating still make up a large part of derby. With participation ever growing, roller derby members owe their sport to those individuals who met the challenge of the first Transcontinental Roller Derby.

Visit the museum at:
48th and South Streets,
Lincoln, Nebraska
Museum hours: Mon.-Fri., 9-5
Admission: FREE!
www.rollerskatingmuseum.com

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