

Roller derby's great past comes to the present

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

The National Museum of Roller Skating is a member of an internet group on Yahoo named Roller Derby Times. This group discusses their experiences with roller derby, whether as a player or fan. Most of the members are from the time when roller derby was at its peak, mainly the 1950s and 1960s. While reading the daily posts and occasionally adding my own insight into what collections the museum possesses, I noticed that one member in particular seemed to have the most overall knowledge of roller derby of the past. This man is Marvin Stone.

Marvin began following roller derby in 1949 and was very active through 1962. Although not a derby participant himself, Marvin attended countless derby matches in his native Southern California. Marvin says this was the time "when the athletic skills and professional sportsmanship of the game was at its peak."

In a post written on November 5, 2009, Marvin described the career of one of the great roller derby women of the era. Her name was Mary Lou Palermo. After reading his post, I wanted to share it with everyone. This biography of Palermo is told to remind everyone of the great derby champions of the

past. "Hall of Famer Mary Lou Palermo was a top-tier skater in Roller Derby in the years when it was the fastest growing sport in America. She began her professional skating career in 1945 and continued skating until the late '60s, with time out to start a family. She became an elite skating star for the Chicago Westerners, New York Chiefs, Jersey Jolters and Hollywood Ravens (and probably other Derby and outlaw teams as well) under coaching greats Billy Bogash, Gene Gammon, Russ Baker and Tommy Atkinson. She became one of those "could do everything" stars of the banked track.

"Mary Lou Palermo possessed power, speed and durability. As a jammer she was among the leading women scorers for several years . . . in fact, she was the top scorer for the women for the 1953 season, scoring 755 points (Mary Youpelle was second with 702 points). Even with jamming prowess, in my opinion, it was as an outstanding defensive star that Mary Lou Palermo made her most enduring mark on the history of that period in Roller Derby. She was one tough lady without some of the rough-house tactics of some of her peers . . . but I must add that she skated as a home team star more than she did as a red shirt, and we all know that makes a difference.



Mary Lou Palermo, a.k.a. "LuLu", roller derby jammer circa 1950s.

"She earned many accolades that attested to her status as an elite women's skater in Roller Derby. She (along with Carole Seifert) was voted co-MVP for 1952 by the league's coaches and captains. Fans honored her by electing her to All-Star Teams in 1950, 1951

(second behind Midge Brasuhn for the women), 1952, 1953 (top vote getter for the women), 1954 (second behind Gerry Murray for the Eastern team). She was selected to be women's captain for the American team that skated in France and elsewhere in 1953.

"When writing about Mary Lou Palermo, I should point out a few footnotes to her Roller Derby history. One was her nickname, LuLu; another was her trademark pigtails; another was being one-half of one of the best known women's battles in Roller Derby history as written about in several 1950 programs . . . it was in Louisville (if I remember correctly), it started on the track and finished in the locker room. Mary Youpelle was the other half of the fracas.

"I usually write this kind of thing only for skaters I had the privilege to actually see skate during their Roller Derby careers. I saw the great Mary Lou Palermo many times and I can state without fear of contradiction that she surely deserves her seat in the Roller Derby Hall of Fame."

ROLLER SKATING TRIVIA!?!?
Question: What year did roller derby begin?
The answer appears on page 24 of this issue!

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A good way to do a quick check of your rental fleet is to ask yourself, "Would I want my children to wear them?" Rental skates are never the most attractive part of a skating rink, but they are one of the most important. When people visit a rink for the first time they are likely to use rental skates, and if the skates are in poor shape and do not skate well, then that person may choose not to return. School's about to start back, and now is a good time to look at the old rental rack and see if any need to be replaced or repaired. Are they good enough and safe enough for your children?



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