

Cincinnati's roller derby expands to include junior girls' and men's teams

By *Connie Evener*

Girls find their 'sports calling'

Kathleen Kissing (aka "Panterrorize"), team captain of the Cincinnati Black Sheep women's roller derby team for four years, has two daughters, now nine and 11. So when Kissing retired as a player, she was destined to coach the Cincinnati Junior Rollergirls.

Junior leagues are popping up all over the country. As of late last year The Junior Roller Derby Association (JRDA) had 13 member leagues.

"Roller derby is empowering for girls," said Kissing. "The girls (aged 8 to seventeen) are getting to know each other, and they're playing an aggressive sport for the first time." Parents, she said, frequently tell her their daughters had never shown an interest in sports – until they began to skate and discovered roller derby as their sports calling. And many of those parents, some of whom are current or former players themselves, have been extremely supportive.

Kissing and her league meet once a week, but she encourages them to skate as often as possible. The team, she said, is a mixed bag. "Some are what you would call the rink rats, they're always at a session. They can jam skate already – they're really good. Others are new to skating," she said.

The formal practice sessions consist of a lot of "stop, drop, and roll," slides, races, and scrimmaging (with players divided based on age and size), but no hard hitting or blocking. "Their favorite part of practice is the last third when we scrimmage," said Kissing, who hopes to line up some formal scrimmages and bouts with other junior leagues soon.

"Having all of the pads and the helmet in the fall drills helps because the players take more risk in learning their crossovers, and they're skating faster because they've learned how to fall and know they can rely on the pads. So they're increasing their skating levels really quickly," said Kissing.

The juniors meet at The Skatin' Place in Cincinnati. "It's a clean, safe environment," said Kissing, "and the

owner, Brian Liette, has been very helpful with me in getting it off the ground." Liette, who co-owns the rink with his father Ron Liette, current president of the Roller Skating Association International, has also been a big help advising the girls and helping them with adjustments when they buy new skates.

Kissing was 41 when she started roller derby, but she had an advantage. "I'd been a speed skater for years. I won nationals as a kid in speed skating, so I



Cincinnati Junior Rollergirls' member and daughter of coach Kathleen Kissing practices the fall drill. (Photo by Jason Bechtel)

had that skating skill set to begin with, where a lot of the other girls did not."

When today's juniors turn 18, she said, they'll already be good skaters with strong roller derby skills. "The junior teams will be feeder teams for the WFTDA leagues of the future. The athleticism of the sport will dramatically increase and that'll make the sport a lot more competitive."

Men's roller derby gets a boost

Although he was a rink rat as a kid, Steve Haldeman (aka "Quad Almighty") hadn't skated in nearly 20 years when he went to his first roller derby event in 2006. "I've always loved roller skating," said Haldeman. "That was the main reason I decided to be a referee, so I could roller skate."

Since then, Haldeman's moved on to coaching and playing "long distance" with Baltimore's Harm City Homicide. He and Mark Weber tried several times to start up a men's league in Cincinnati, but their efforts fizzled – until the sum-

mer of 2011, when the Cincinnati Battering Rams hit the floor running.

"Right now men's derby is brand new but it's really jumped in the last year or so. The Men's Roller Derby Association (MRDA) is modeled after the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). Men's derby is just starting to get its real legs under it," explained Haldeman. As of late last year, MRDA had 18 member leagues, with another 19 leagues waiting in the wings for approval. The men's leagues, like the women's leagues, are skater owned and operated.

Men's roller derby is a brand new sport, so there are no veterans to step up and take the lead. "Almost all of our guys are pretty new to skating, so most of them are learning to roller skate while they're learning to play roller derby," said Haldeman. "The first time they practiced, I was thinking it was going to be a long time before we'd be ready to show them roller derby because they needed to learn to stand up on skates first."

But the Battering Rams have become real troopers. "A lot of these guys are skating three or four times a

week. I'm pretty astounded by how quickly they've progressed. When we started to scrimmage in practice, they caught on great," said Haldeman. "The roller girls (Cincinnati's Black Sheep and Silent Lambs) are helping us out on just about everything. They let us use their practice space and a lot of them will come and help the guys out, give them pointers, and play with them. They've been really great."

So, roller derby has diversified from women to junior girls, and now men. What about boys? "I don't know of any junior men's leagues yet – but I don't think it can be very far off in the future," said Haldeman.

It's probably inevitable that junior and men's derby leagues will follow the same pattern that women's leagues have over the past ten years. When WFTDA reached 100 leagues, they put out a poster with all their league logos on it, said Haldeman. "I remember that being a big deal – wow there's 100 leagues now! And it's continued to grow exponentially every year. These days every city you drive through that has a downtown, and a skating rink pretty much has a roller derby league."

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