

Philly Girls Get...

# The Roller Derby Bug!

By David Block



**T**Some sports can't stay dead and buried and Roller Derby is one key example. This sport, which had fallen into the depths of obscurity, underwent a resurrection in '05 as all-women's leagues formed across the United States. The Roller Girls Association currently includes 18 leagues in the country, with 65 teams in 13 states. Philadelphia was not immune from the Roller Derby bug. Without sponsors or investors, a group of dedicated women from the Delaware Valley formed The Philadelphia Roller Girls League.

"We wanted to have our own league, so we made it happen," said Philadelphia Roller Girl skater Melanee Galoardi, who skates under the pseudonym of DARTH HATER.

"We wanted to have total control and

make our own decisions," added Kristina Morgan (Ivana Rock).

In discussing the game's current popularity, Galoardi said, "Roller Derby is a great outlet for women who want to play an aggressive sport. There's something appealing about seeing a strong woman playing a sport on roller skates, it draws a lot of attention."

Michelle Cobb, who goes by the moniker of Violet Temper, and who had competed in soccer and track, prefers Roller Derby because it's full contact. "Roller Derby has more of a visceral release because you can slam into someone," said Cobb. "I like its fast pace. I'm also a better skater than runner."

Today's women of Roller Derby are quite independent, just like their predecessors were back in 1935, when the sport was first established.

In 1937, Roller Derby creator/promoter Leo Seltzer and sports writer Damon Runyon changed the game from a 3000-mile endurance race around the rink between couples, to a physical game, in which two teams five men and five women played against each other for eight, 12-minute periods. Men and women skated alternate periods.

The two offensive players, the jammers, scored points by passing opposing skaters, while two blockers tried to stop them. The pivot had the option of blocking or jamming.

"Tennis was the only other sport I remember where women could compete and make money," said Billy Bogash, now 88, who was a Roller Derby skater from the first days in 1935 to 1958. "If a woman wanted to be a professional athlete, Roller Derby was one of their few choices." He said that in the '30s

and '40s, if men skaters earned as much as 10 dollars a week, women were always paid the same.

As Loretta Behrens, who competed from 1950-1959, put it: "It was unheard of for a woman to be aggressive and physical in the 50's. I was always a tomboy so the Roller Derby was perfect for me." If Behrens' statement is inspiring, the same cannot be said for Roller Derby's demise from sport to sideshow in the 1960's.

"Roller Derby began to go downhill when it became similar to professional wrestling," said Erwin Miller, another former skater (1966-1973). "That was never meant to happen. In professional wrestling story lines are expected. The professional wrestling promoters admit that it's entertainment. RollerGames (an offshoot of Roller Derby) became a cheap imitation (of professional wrestling). When you show a cheap imitation of something, who's going to want to watch it?"

Since the 1970s, Roller Derby has folded and resurfaced numerous times. Today, the sport is on the rise again.

Melane Galoardi said that today's women leagues are 100 percent legit. Yet, like professional wrestling, all of today's skaters use stage names, unlike before when Roller Derby players rarely used pseudonyms. Galoardi said that these

fictional names would not make people equate the sport to professional wrestling.

"It's fun to use these names," said Galoardi. "It's a new persona for us to take on. We become different people and leave our work, husbands and kids behind." She added that the game has made her and the other girls in the league quite fit. "We do all types of suicide drills and sprints on skates."

There are other ways that this league differs from the Roller Derby of old. The women are not making money competing. "Everything we make goes back into the league," said Galoardi.

Although many of the Philadelphia Roller Girls are from the city, they are currently practicing and competing at the Millennium Skate World in Camden, N.J., because the staff there, unlike other facilities, expressed great interest in working with the league. To learn about upcoming games log onto [www.phillyrollergirls.com](http://www.phillyrollergirls.com).

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David is passionate about educating the public and raising awareness about the challenges, abilities and accomplishments of blind and other disabled athletes. He promotes this in part by teaching Goalball, the international team sport for blind athletes, to sighted people. He is an inspiration to disabled youth in sharing ways he and others have overcome adversity. He has produced several documentaries, which illuminate the talents, strengths, and challenges of the blind athlete, the injured hero, and the forgotten veteran.