

“There’s No Sorry in Roller Derby”: A Feminist Examination of Identity of Women in the Full Contact Sport of Roller Derby

Carolyn E. Storms, University at Buffalo

Introduction

This study of women skaters who participate or have participated as a player in the all female full contact sport of roller derby will focus on a sociohistorical analysis of the sport of roller skating and roller derby spanning from the nineteenth century to the modern incarnation of the sport. This paper will conclude by addressing data obtained through 30 semi-structured interviews with current roller derby skaters and will explore the lingering stereotypes that continue to plague the sport today. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore challenges and issues of identity, such as questions regarding the femininity of women who engage in full contact competitive athletics. The nature of the research question is to discover what changes in identity occur for women who participate in physically aggressive sports such as roller derby. The overall analytical objective of describing variation and explaining relationships by means of individual accounts will help explain group norms and explore the process of identity changes, if any, that the acquisition of overtly aggressive strategies through the learning and engaging in contact athletics, specifically roller derby, leads to in women.

From the early 1880s when Micajah C. Henley of Richmond, Indiana established the first roller skate factory in his barn to the current female owned and operated full contact roller derby leagues of today, roller skating has provided for American women an activity that challenges females to use their bodies instrumentally rather than in response to restrictive standards of femininity (“Roller Skating Industry,” 1885). Roller derby solves a problem of identity by providing women an activity that leads to a new mode of acquiring knowledge of their body. Skaters have a collective identity based on an activity that provides an alternate way of experiencing their own bodies in a highly disciplined way. By providing a role that requires them to develop their bodies in ways that are considered gender atypical, these women become the habitualization of the

feminist consciousness of their time. The activity of roller skating provides women a source of collectivity that has been counter hegemonic in that it contradicts mainstream discourses on women's bodies.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, during the onset of industrialization, it was believed that any form of physical exertion was dangerous to a woman's health and, more importantly, her reproductive abilities. Being that a young woman's reproductive capacities were considered her main purpose for existing at this time, the concept of a female athlete was a contradiction in terms. Athletic women were seen as anomalies at the very best. The characteristics encouraged in athletics have been seen as antagonistic to the feminine characteristics needed for housewifery. Rather than group sports, the domestic attributes of a woman was best taught by the safer means of baby dolls, tea parties, and kitchen play sets (Giordano 1990). There was no need to physically best one's opponent as a housewife. Since women were not encouraged to engage actively in the public sphere there was no need to foster the physical or character traits necessary to compete in the world outside the home.

Social constraints representing the hegemonic gender beliefs of the exclusively male institution of sports found no reason to initially be applied to the new phenomenon of roller skating, an activity that was considered recreational rather than athletic. During the 1890's, there were rinks with hard maple floors in nearly every town and city and roller skating became a social craze. Young Victorian women had a rare glimpse of freedom as they met and socialized with men during these skating events because their chaperones could not keep up with them on skates. A *Chicago Tribune* article published in 1883 described this freedom and temporary liberation that women experienced while skating on the rink. "Most patrons are young folks. Young women generally come here accompanied by their mammas and the latter make up a good portion of the spectators" ("Pounded Masher," 1883). This then allowed for their flirtations with the opposite sex to thrive. In its strictest forms, the custom of a chaperone dictated that an unmarried woman young woman from a good family could not go anywhere alone. These young Victorian women felt a deep sense of freedom as they strapped on eight wheels.

The loophole that rationalized the allowance of this particular form of physical activity for proper ladies was largely due to roller skating's resemblance to the socially sanctioned structure of formal dance (Prakash 1990). As described in a 1885 article in *The Chicago Tribune*, "The etiquette practiced in most of the resorts permits a stranger to address any female skater with an offer of his services as a partner, and out of acquaintances made in that informal manner are understood to arise the principal abuses charged against the rinks in this city" ("Roller Rink Evil," 1885). This attempt at formality and a superficial adherence to etiquette and chivalry allowed roller skating to represent a somewhat unregulated arena of social interaction to women, even though this interaction was often supervised. Interactions during roller skating were for some women the only type of unscripted communication with men that they would ever experience.

Well to do women avidly participated in roller skating because they were, above all, the beneficiaries of the new leisure time. Far from being above roller skating the frail pallid Victorian woman embraced the activity. "At the high end of society, the burgeoning upper classes had considerable leisure time and the wealth to enjoy it. They created exclusive clubs in which they played their own games" (Lunardini 1997: 102). Socialites often had private skating parties such as those held in Newport, Rhode Island. "Mrs. Johnston Nicolas Brown invited the remaining members of the summer colony this afternoon to join her in a roller skating party. The floor is of concrete and the party found the skating space admirable for the fun. An orchestra played for the skaters" ("Newport Roller Skates," 1908).

Through the activity of roller skating, these Victorian women created for themselves, by means of their privileged social location an opportunity to experience their bodies in a way that had never before been accessible to them. This new knowledge of their bodies led to their empowerment. According to one woman, "Now and again a woman falls but it's delightful fun. If you only know how to fall without really hurting yourself. Of course it requires some practice, and you will probably experience a shock the first few falls. After that it's easy". The same article contains the simple but telling line, "Only the social elect were allowed in the rink" ("Everybody's

Skating in Morristown," 1908).

It is interesting to consider the role of women's clubs at the end of the century as women progressed from the True Woman of the Victorian era to that of the New Woman of the reform and social feminist movements. An 1880 article announced "The Skating Season" for the New York Roller Skating Club and gave specifications for the opening of the season, as well as a list of the included women, all of whom were married: "The annual meetings and entertainments of the Roller Skating Club will commence at Irving Hall on Friday afternoon...The chaperons of young ladies will be admitted without tickets and ladies who skate are particularly requested not to wear flowers" ("The Skating Season," 1880). Women prior to the twentieth century had been excluded from physical activity to keep them oppressed and restricted them from politicizing themselves into active rather than passive members of society by means of disciplining their bodies. These elite social events and social clubs, including those for roller skating, became the foundation of women based reform efforts that would later be known as social feminism. The New Woman valued change in society and valued activity for her body as women shed the Victorian ideals of fashionable suffering for the more active and social lifestyle that was emerging as women began to integrate the public sphere.

Once adopted as a liberating activity of the New Woman, roller skating faced a moral backlash as politicians and clergymen tried to convince those that would listen that roller skating was a threat to both a woman's health and virtue. During the late 1880s there was a string of sensational articles in *The New York Times* chronicling the threat of the roller skating mania. The article titled "Injured at the Roller Skating Rink" tells of the perils that came to a society lady who often engaged in roller skating. "Miss Eva Munn, one of the best known young ladies in the social circles of Yonkers died in the residence of her parents on Nodine Hill late last evening. A few days since while at the roller skating rink she fell and it was alleged, sustained injuries that caused her death" ("Injured at the Roller Skating Rink," 1885). A follow-up article titled "The Deadly Roller Skate" told of the young female factory worker's love of the rink. "Eva Munn and her twin sister Ida were regular attendants of the rink...On Saturday, when

the factory was shut down, she planned to go to the rink again in the evening, but in the afternoon was taken violently ill and died before midnight. She was only 18 years of age" ("Deadly Roller Skate," 1885).

When another young woman died, allegedly from roller skating, an alarm sounded complete with articles such as "The Fatal Roller Skate" in 1885. "She then went with some friends to a refreshment table and while gaily chatting her head suddenly dropped upon her breast and she fell to the floor dead. Paralysis of the heart had resulted from the excitement of the evening's sport. The girl's mother was prostrated by the shock" ("Fatal Roller Skate," 1885). A third death that, this time, claimed a married woman turned the alarm to hysteria, although women continued to skate. The article "Dropped Dead While Skating" covered the death of a woman skater in Newark. "Mrs. Josephine Osburn, a young married woman, while skating in the Newark Roller Rink dropped dead of heart disease last evening" ("Dropped Dead While Skating," 1885).

It was not long after the highly publicized deaths of these prominent young women that religious sources began a damnation of roller skating in a number of sermons that received nationwide attention. In an article titled "Evil Effects of Roller Skating," Methodist Episcopal pastor Reverend John Parker preached of the immorality of roller skating for young women. "I consider the practice physiologically pernicious one. Its effects upon boys is bad enough but upon girls it is much worse. It destroys muscular balance; strains unduly the parts chiefly exercised, locate weakness at vital points, and prepares the way for a great amount of suffering and wretchedness" ("Evil Effects of Roller Skating," 1885).

Besides being considered hazardous to a woman's health, roller skating was also considered a threat to their virtue. In a letter written in March 1885, Jersey City resident, Mr. Eldridge T. Gerry, described what he believed to be the cause of the moral hazard associated with roller skating for young women. "They are taken in charge by a set of plausible good looking and glib-tongued scamps called leaders who are allowed to place their arms about them and their hands upon them with a freedom that is usually reserved by modest women for relations and lovers. It is any wonder that weak

and foolish women fall when we thus throw down the proper barriers of society and purity. I know of several cases of great domestic unhappiness caused by women being infatuated and eventually ruined by these instructors" ("The Morality of Skating," 1885).

An interesting article titled "Evils of Roller Skating: The Providence Rinks to be Closed on Accounts of Immorality" tells of a police undercover mission infiltrating roller rinks that was ordered by then Mayor Thomas Doyle and confirmed the perceived moral downfall inspired by roller skating. "The worst that had been said about the existence of immoral influence was confirmed by the official report of the investigation. The officers night after night saw degraded women mingling with young girls as freely as though they were of good character. The officers followed these young girls, saw them go into saloons where liquors were sold, and later followed them and their male escorts to houses" ("Evils of Roller Skating," 1885).

The patriarchal beliefs of the nineteenth century that restricted the activity of women's bodies by warning of exercise's deleterious effect on women's reproductive health were soon abandoned. By the twentieth century, physical activity was being turned to as a remedy to a new threat to women's reproductive health. This emerging threat was women's higher education. The belief was that physical activity was now necessary for educated women because learning destroyed the nervous and reproductive systems by drawing a women's blood to her brain, therefore ruining her for her ultimate role of motherhood. "It was feared for instance, that college would produce generations of invalids who would never marry or who would have no children or only puny sickly children; while immigrant women would raise healthy hordes" (Lunardini 1996:176). The entrance of women in competitive sports parallels women's entrance into higher education.

The history of Vassar College illustrates the role of roller skating in supposedly safeguarding women from the predicted mental deterioration and reproductive barrenness that many believed would accompany college education for women in the early twentieth century. Even while experiencing temporary moral condemnation, women in higher education were being encouraged to exercise their bodies via roller skating. For example the article, "Those Terrible Rinks," describes Vassar girls' parents

interceding to end attempts by the college to prohibit the girls from skating. "At Vassar College there is just now a lively breeze resulting from a conflict between the members of the faculty and the young lady pupils as to their attendance at skating rinks and the extent of mashing that a Vassar student may properly indulge in. In several instances where pupils were forbidden to skate on rollers in public, the parents have written to the college authorities asking that their daughters may be allowed to skate in moderation" ("Those Terrible Rinks," 1885).

During the first decade of the twentieth century, roller skating was such a strong pull for young women that being banned from attending the rink was grounds for deserting her parents home. This was the case of Oreille Decker, a young woman of eighteen. Her mother was quoted as saying, "I think my girl had become so infatuated with roller skating that she preferred to leave home then forego the pleasure when her father forbade her going to the rink any longer" ("Roller Skates Lure A Girl," 1907).

By 1907, young roller skaters had broken out of the restrictions set for them and girls began to race ("Skating Races at the Lenox Roller Rink," 1907; "Girls Roller Skating Race," 1907). The allowance and later endorsement of girls' roller skating races was in part due to women's clubs of the social elite. This eventually led to roller skating being sanctioned as an activity suitable for all developing young women. This approval was granted by such women's groups as The Girls Branch of the Public School Athletic League who by 1913, was sponsoring 212 schools' athletic clubs for girls and boasted 17,000 girl members ("Girls are Learning to be Real Athletes," 1913). Once encouraged as healthy exercise for young women, including school girls, groups of young girls were organized by the Board of Education Playground Committee into teams geographically by playground and divided into age brackets of under 10 and under the age of 12. The young girl skaters would often compete in events that included a dash, a couple's race, and a relay race. "Mozart playground, yesterday won first place in the girls' roller skating tournament held in Grant Park near Soldiers Field. Five hundred and twenty-eight youngsters competed in the various events" ("Meet Draws a Field of 528 Girls," 1934, p.A7).

By the time women were permitted to compete in roller derby marathons, three

all male races had taken place. The first mixed gender race was a partner race to approximately 2,000 miles. Although this was considered the debut of female skaters, the women who participated in the race were already well trained speed skaters who had been racing in organized, highly competitive races for nearly twenty years. These women athletes were not only competitive, but shocked and astonished the crowds at the race with their skill and previously unforeseen athleticism. As covered by *The Chicago Tribune*, "The Tribune yesterday rushed into the big hall to see who was leading in the mythical dash from San Diego, California to New York and we think the leader is the blonde in the cerise tights and a right pretty little gal she is, too" (Burns 1935, p.17). The breakout star of early roller derby was a woman named Ivy King whose accomplishments were chronicled in the article, "Girl Sets New Half Mile Record in Roller Derby." "Ivy King a Canadian speed skater, broke her own record for the half mile on roller skates last night in the Transcontinental Roller Derby at the Coliseum...Miss King also holds the quarter mile, half mile, and one mile records" ("Girl Sets New Record," 1936, p.37).

By 1941, women professional skaters were not only dominating the roller derby track but young girls were also winning races in driveways, sidewalks, and playgrounds across the country. This is described in *The New York Times'* article titled "Girls Win Derby from Avenue A Lads: Annual Anything on Wheels" with the subtitle, "Races definitely go to the Weaker (?) Sex." Roller skating began to be such a source empowerment for girls that they began to regularly dominate neighborhood skating competitions. The article describes one such race. "The upsets were terrific...Only one of the defeated lads would make a statement. Said 10 year old Thomas McKenna, 'I don't feel so good'. He was referring to the first place taken by Rose Marie Celentano, his junior by one year. Joe's cronies wouldn't mention a word. They just scowled" ("Girls Win Derby from Avenue A Lads," 1941).

The manufacture of roller skates ceased between 1941 and 1945 and roller derby paused as the crowds dwindled and many of the skaters enlisted in the war. Interestingly enough, there were many women roller skaters that were involved in the war effort. During World War II, Douglas Aircraft hired roller skating messenger girls to

deliver interdepartmental mail at their aircraft manufacturing plant in El Segundo, California. A narrative of the time by Nat Bodian tells the story of a woman roller skater as she left for war. "On that November 16th night of 1942 as I skated on the New Dreamland rink floor, about to go off to war the following morning, I couldn't help but wonder whether I would ever be on those skates again, what with the uncertainty of war" (www.newark.nj.com). The entrance of women into the military and at home into the industrial workforce during the war provided further evidence that the boundaries regarding women's athletics were unfounded.

By the end of World War II, the new version of the sport of roller derby made its debut. What had been missing the last time the sport was in New York was the violence. The premiere of the violent version of roller derby occurred after Leo Seltzer, a marathon race promoter, witnessed the response of the crowd to a spontaneous fistfight that had broken out among the skaters of a 1938 marathon race. "Seltzer promoted these events all over the country, but after the first time around, the novelty wore off and attendance sank. One night in Miami, one of the skaters lost his temper and slugged an opponent. The audience went wild. Seltzer picked up on this and incorporated the violent element into the game. Roller Derby, as we know it, was born" (Berler 1971, p.B13). Seltzer then claimed the invention of roller derby as his own and took his new product on the road.

Shortly following the debut of television in the American home, roller derby spread like wildfire across the country. After its premiere on ABC, the women of roller derby were broadcast to the public three times a week. From its onset, fans and reporters alike acknowledged that it was the female skaters who made roller derby worth watching. "Actually it is the girls who save roller derby from being a bore. Such worthies as Mary Lou Palermo, Annis 'Red' Jensen, Mary Ciafano, Monta Jean Schall, Gerorgiana Kemp, Gertie Schall, and the aforementioned 'Toughie' Brasuhn have the temperament and dash to keep the crowds awake. Hair pulling, fist fights, gestures, and plain yells of anguish are in their bag of tricks" (Gould 1949).

It is interesting to consider the presence of televised female roller derby skaters during the iconic time of the Modern Bride of the post World War II era. The socializing

function of athletics on those involved in either a primary participatory or secondary observatory manner in the general areas of play, games, and sports has become a major theme of the sociology of sports. With the advancement of technology, the role of sports in society has changed from a participatory, recreational activity to a commodified spectator event, guided by the tenets of commercialism and entertainment. Often for the sake of marketing to a mainstream audience, the political nature of sport was often replaced by an emphasis on mass marketing and efforts to minimize the gender and racial inequalities that characterize popular athletics (Frey and Etzen 1991).

Gender represents a powerful normative system that both evaluates and controls the behavior of men and women. Socially constructed conceptualizations of behavior are intricately tied to societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity. During the 1950s, the former wartime feminine ideal was personified by the muscles of Rosie the Riveter. After the war, the image of the ideal woman gave way to the plush, intoned body of Marilyn Monroe, a female that evoked the required fertility and isolated composure of a homemaker and mother.

Women became essential economic resources, able to be exploited to insure that unpaid family work in the home was accomplished. Men were free to pursue property and ensure the passage of wealth to members of his family. The subordinate economic domestic roles placed on the "weaker" sex in the typical, private, patrilinear family restricted women's physicality and competitiveness in athletic activities by defining them as characteristics only required of those in the public sphere.

Those women who did not adhere to these standards were seen as social anomalies, as was the case with the visibly athletic women of roller derby. Stigmatization, social control as it preserves the traditional gender system, is often the societal response to female athletes who through their physicality demonstrate what were considered atypical gender characteristics and embodied athletic rather than traditionally feminine aesthetic (Blinde and Taub 1992:522). Take, for example, the profile of female skater, Gerry Murray, and what was perceived as proper behavior of a woman. "Gerry Murray, a curvesome woman pushing 40 with the gentility of a

waterfront bouncer...She scored 6 points and to the delight of 2,230 partisans displayed marked bad manners" (Talese 1958). A woman's powerful athletic performance was seen as at odds with her subordinate position in the domestic sphere.

The Conflict and later Socialist perspectives of feminism, influenced heavily by Marx and Engels, suggested that the social oppression faced by women was not the result of biology, which was considered by Marx to be static, but by oppressive social structures that shaped our day to day activities and interactions. These social structures are changeable and can be examined as shifting according to the economic demands of the time. The rise of American women in sports such as roller skating parallels the rise of different waves of feminist theory that have been inspired by changes in the economy and advancements in the modes of production. This is described by sociologists of sports as a sports ideology. "A sports ideology, like all ideologies, conceals the real structure of productive and social relations under capitalism" (Bombey 1996: 2). The role of women in the economy defines the desirable physical standards of femininity of the time and dictates the permitted level of socially acceptable physical activity for each gender.

In Marxist feminist thought, the domestic unpaid labor that women provide made women economically dependent, ultimately, possessions of their husbands. This is especially true in the period immediately following World War II for women in the United States where any activity beyond the home was considered unnecessary and the only competitiveness required of women was to win the race to find a proper breadwinner.

The liberal feminist perspective, like the Marxist feminist perspective, views the societal position of women as not only different but also holding an unequal and undervalued status in society. The opportunities to access resources and the ability to achieve status and engage in activities, such as athletics for women, is limited in comparison to men. Even if the ideology of the sport allowed equal points and equal playing time, one area where the women of roller derby did not completely compete was equal pay for equal work. This is chronicled by an article describing the wage discrepancies of the early 1970s. "In one way they are equal: The women skate the

same amount of time, four 12 minute periods per game, as the men Chiefs do, and the points scored by both squads are combined against those of the opposing team's. But in the nitty, gritty department of salaries, the men are usually paid from \$10,000 to \$15,000 more per player" (Klemesrud 1972, p.90). The liberal feminist standpoint contends that differences between men and women are rooted in varying levels of opportunities and societal constraints, rather than innate traits or biologically determined superiority.

The equality of derby during that period was questioned by many sources, as it continues to be now. One article wrote of Leo Seltzer, "His female skaters and Sport Illustrated have both question his motives, however. 'Joanie is a top-drawer in roller derby', said a male teammate, 'But she gets paid less than Charlie O'Connell, her superstar male counterpart'. Seltzer, however, sticks to his original contention. 'There's no difference between what the men are paid and what the women are paid'. Sherry Erin shrugs her shoulders over a controversy; she loves the derby too much to leave it. 'I guess he's just not liberated yet', she said" (Colander 1973, p.S-A1).

By the 1970s, accusations of fraudulence in Roller Derby arose from the emergence of a new organization called Roller Games, a more scripted and sensationalized version of the sport. According to Joan Weston, "People come up to me and say, 'Hey, I saw Roller Derby on TV and one of those girls got knocked out with a baseball bat. That doesn't happen in our league. That's a different organization, out of L.A. They call themselves Roller Games. We are the Roller Derby and we've copyrighted the name'. Joanie who never skated until she saw Roller Derby on TV says, 'Our team gets paid to win, not to throw game" (Berle 1971, p.B13). By 1973, not long after the premiere of Roller Games, Jerry Seltzer, Leo Seltzer's son, sold the rights of the Roller Derby to his Roller Games competitor Bill Griffith, Sr., the owner of the Los Angeles Thunderbirds, and his partner Jerry Hill (Arsenal 2008). The new and more theatrical version of the sport was off the air by 1975.

Roller derby essentially lay dormant, except for a few failed minor attempts at resurgence until it was resurrected by a group of women known as the Bad Girl Good Woman Productions in 2001 (Hall 2005, p.30). The founders of the next wave of roller

derby, the Texas Rollergirls, largely arose from the punk inspired Riot Grrrl Movement of Austin, Texas. The women's Riot Grrrl punk scene reflected one of the many feminisms of the numerous Third Wave Difference Feminisms. These women did not seek entrance into male domains but reflected a subcultural, antiauthoritarian, anti-hierarchical consciousness, suspicious of pre-existing male dominated institutions. Nancy 'Iron Maiden' Haggerty, one of the original She-E-Os and founding captain of original TXRD team the Hellcats, puts the matter more plainly. "Punk rock girls didn't have a sport. You could watch guys play sports or maybe get into a softball game. But then roller derby came along, and it was something that was all ours" (Corcoran 2008, p.J01). The Riot Grrrl movement in Third Wave feminisms that would determine the direction of flat track roller derby was largely based on its efforts to create female space rather than attempting to enter pre-existing male institutions based on its non-hierarchical philosophy and DIY "do it yourself" ethics.

The perspective of Third Wave feminisms focuses on cooperation and community rather than competition (Jarrett 1975). The effect of the women's movement has been to adopt traditional sports as instrumentality rather than masculinity training. Feminist scholars of athletics are now calling for a new conception of sport in which the elements of traditional men's and women's sport are theoretically synthesized. "Because of the past emphasis on the masculine-instrumental elements of sport, it is hypothesized that a temporal focus on the feminine-expressive elements is necessary to the occurrence of a synthesis" (Holland and Oglesby 1979:80). This is true of the modern wave of roller derby. According to one skater, "From the very beginning, the skaters embraced the attitude that we realize that we're dressing in skimpy outfits and playing up the sexiness, but we're in charge of that and we're comfortable with it. We exploit ideas about women that aren't exactly P.C...We wear these costumes because we look good in them. This is feminist-based, and it's never about exploitation" (Corcoran 2008, p.J01). Hot pants, fishnets, miniskirts and midriffs are all par for the course.

The approach of difference feminisms embraced by Third Wave feminists is hesitant of fully joining pre-existing masculine structures proposing that women's

difference from men will lead to new types of social structures (Harvard Law Review 110: 1628). The tenets of the Riot Grrrl Manifesto, written by Kathleen Hanna, illustrates the difference between Second and Third Wave feminisms and the negotiating techniques in response to perceived boundaries. "BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own moanings...BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-hierarchical ways of being AND making music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations...BECAUSE we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't" (Hanna n.d., no. 2).

The Mission Statement of the Flat Track Derby Association reflects these beliefs. "Founded in 2004, the WFTDA promotes and fosters the sport of women's flat track derby by facilitating the development of athletic ability, sportswomanship, and goodwill among member leagues. The governing philosophy is 'by the skaters, for the skaters.' Women skaters are primary owners, managers, and operators of each member league and of the association. Operational tasks include setting standards for rules, seasons, safety, and determining guidelines for the national and international athletic competitions of member leagues. All member leagues have a voice in the decision making process, and agree to comply with the governing body's policies" (<http://www.wftda.com/about/>).

Coercive sex segregation in sports is based on three false assumptions that still plague women's physical development and efforts for full equality today. These, namely, are female inferiority compared to males, the inferiority of females competing with males, and the need to protect females from injury in competition with males (McDonough and Pappano 2008:7). Even during the first desegregated roller derby event, the threat of injury was not something women shied away from. In an article covering Seltzer's 1936 race, which is not referred to as a derby in the article but rather a race, the reporters praised the resilience of the women skaters. "Katherine Caine, teamed with Billy Lyons, Omaha, is receiving applause due to her gameness in skating with several fractured fingers and a bruised arm. Katherine was caught in a spill several nights ago" ("Roller Skater in 900 mile," 1936). In 1948, the article "Roller

Derby Bruises and All, Opens Tonight" tells of the injuries faced by female skaters. "And on the feminine side, Tiny Midge (Toughie) Brasuhn of St. Paul, captain of the New York Girls has broken an ankle, lost three front teeth, and suffered four concussions in her brief career" (Cromie 1948, p.C5).

Most of the current roller derby skaters that I have interviewed also experienced major injuries. Three examples of this are: "Sprained ankle, broken finger, and bi-weekly appointments to the chiropractor, lower back," "I have had everything from a lost fingernail, to a crushed knee cap, to broken ribs," and "Well, I've had my fingers run over; I've had the wind knocked out of me pretty hard, but nothing season ending." Furthermore, there is a certain amount of expected injuries and the women are prepared for the risk.

When asked, "What is the risk of injury in roller derby?" the answers indicated that the skaters were aware of the possible physical repercussions to their participation in the sport. "I'd say it's moderately high risk of injury, more so if you lack experience. I think more of them happen during practice than they do in bouts. I think a lot of the major ones have happened as a result of being hit, more often than not," "Everything from a broken finger to paralysis. I would definitely say knee falls to torn meniscuses are the main injury," and "I would say high. I would say 70%, 80%, 90% of the people get hurt. I would say you're gonna get hurt, it's just a varying level of how hurt you get."

Far from withdrawing from this risk of injury, many skaters celebrate their derby related injuries. Many leagues feature Hall of Maim or the like, shrines of their league members' injuries. Many skaters show off or take pictures of their bruises. It is almost as if these women are saying, I played hard enough to get this. It is a temporary inscription on their physical body as a testament to something women are not thought to be capable of by mainstream society. Proof that the sport they play is real. For example, a twenty nine year old teacher explains, "I find myself constantly having to explain that we are really hitting each other. It's really tough. So I tell them to feel free to strap on some skates and I'll see you at the rink."

In a hyperreal, media-saturated culture, power is exercised through the means

of representation. Those who have the greatest access to the media have the ability to frame what counts as real and significant (McDonald and Andrews 2001: 21). Claims of fraudulence were exacerbated by a *The New York Times* article on Raquel Welch who starred in a film on roller derby titled *Kansas City Bomber*. In the article she states, "It's all set up, as everyone knows. It's too bad it couldn't be more of a legitimate sport. The skaters have great athletic ability." To add insult to injury, the author of the article wrote, "Traditionally, Roller Derby or the Roller Games as its sometimes known is a fascinating fraud. It has no esthetic allure" (Anderson 1972).

If faking the fierce and sometimes violent contact of the sport was a policy of the organization, no one told the female skaters. "Because of derby's crowd-pleasing theatrics, and what appears to be phony violence and feigned injuries in the part of the skaters, many sports fans do not take it seriously. 'If we're faking, why do so many of us wind up in the hospital?', protested Carolyn Moreland, a 20 year old pigtailed blonde from Sacramento who wholesome good looks won her the title of Miss Roller Derby in 1970. Miss Moreland said she was once in the hospital for a sprained back; Miss O'Brien for a broken ankle and surgery on a hip; and Miss Dunne for 'smashing all the bones in my tailbone'" (Klemesrud 1972, p.90).

This legacy of fraudulent and staged play continues to be experienced as a mechanism of minimizing the very real physical force and resulting injuries that could and are expected to result from a full contact sport played while skating on wheels and with the purpose of knocking certain opposing team's skaters off the track. Still, despite the obvious risk and sheer athleticism required, many current skaters are faced with the belief that the sport is fake and/or staged. These are allegations that would never be made of a man's sport.

This is made clear in the skaters' responses to the question of whether there were any preconceived notions regarding the sport of roller derby and whether the respondent felt those were true or not. For example, "Yes, I think that initially, a lot of people in part, because of the roller derby of fifty years ago or forty years ago, seemed or was more staged and the initial response I get is, 'Is it real?' And no, I don't think that it's fake, but I understand why a lot of people feel that way." Another skater

stated, "Yeah, I think people have the old sport from the 70s in mind, so bringing it back as a more serious sport has been a challenge." A third skater expressed, "Oh, absolutely. Definitely people that haven't experienced a bout think that it's still the 1970s WWF kind of rollerblade version of it. I think that they see pictures but they don't realize that it's real, and when they come to a bout they think, 'Oh, you're really doing this.' So I would definitely think there are still preconceived notions still out there." A fourth skater explained, "If you see a bout you know it's real. I guess maybe before seeing a bout, people might think it's fake. Once they see it though, they know it's not."

The modern incarnation of derby is emerging following a period of the most notable social and political advancements ever known to women. For the first time, control of the means of production in roller derby is finally in the hands of the women who, for over a century, have made the sport great. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association is currently divided in four regional divisions of play and boasts 63 nationally competitive, all female, full contact roller derby member leagues. When I began my research on roller derby in April 2007, there were 7,927 female skaters whose names had been registered in the International Roller Girls' Master Roster, a database meant to prevent the duplication of skating monikers known as derby names. According the Rollergirls' Master Roster, as of February 2009, less than two years later, the number of active skaters has more than doubled to 15,907 (International Roller Girls' Master Roster 4/15/07; 2/25/09).

By providing women an activity that leads to new modes of acquiring knowledge of their bodies, roller skating and roller derby have been a source of female identity resistant to the restrictive standards of hegemonic male culture. By providing an alternate way of experiencing their bodies in gender atypical, highly disciplined way, roller skating has been a manifestation of the evolution of feminism in America. The inextinguishable desire and almost innate love of the simple movement of propelling oneself on eight wheels has endured through moral condemnations, wars, economic highs, and crippling depressions. The current roller derby movement is the modern incarnation of a continuously evolving tradition of the liberation of American women

through roller skating. There is an intangible and indescribable element of the act of lacing up skates and turning endless rotations around a wooden floor that has liberated and empowered the spirit of American women since shortly after the Civil War and continues among the all female, full contact skaters of today.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Dave.
1972, July 30. "A Batchy, Sweaty, Funky Life."
The New York Times.
- Arsenal, Mark.
2008, July 13. "The Rise and Fall of Roller Derby." *Rhode Island News*.
- Berle, Ron.
1971, October 29. "Jam Joanie Jam."
The Chicago Tribune, p.B13.
- Blind, E., D. Taub, and L. Han.
1994. "Sport as a Site for Women's Group and Social Empowerment." *Sociology of Sport Journal*. 11. 51-9.
- Burns, Edward.
1935, December 28. "Gal in Cerise Tights Leads Roller Derby, It's Rumored." *The Chicago Tribune*, p.17.
- Colander, Pat.
1973, December 15. "They Roll thru Life Banking on Violence." *The Chicago Tribune*.
- Corcoran, Michael.
2008, June 1. "How They Roll."
The Austin American-Statesman, p.J01.
- Cromie, Robert.
1948, June 10. "Roller Derby, Bruises and All, Opens Tonight."
The Chicago Tribune, p.C5.
- "Everyone Skates in Morristown Now." 1908, April 5.
The New York Times.
- "The Deadly Roller Skate."
1885, January 26.
The New York Times.
- "Dropped Dead While Skating."
1885, March 29.
The New York Times.
- "Evil Effects of Roller Skating."
1885, February 4.
The New York Times.
- "Evils of Roller Skating."
1885, December 5.
The New York Times.
- "The Fatal Roller Skate."
1885, February 12.
The New York Times.
- Frey, James H.; D. Stanley Eitzen.
1991. "Sport and Society."
Annual Review of Sociology. 17. 503-522.
- Giordano, Peggy C.
1994. "Relationships in Adolescence."
Annual Review of Sociology. 29. Summer: 257-281.
- "Girl Roller Skaters Form Club."
1921, April 1921.
The New York Times.
- "Girl Sets New ½ Mile Record in Roller Derby."
1936, October 30.
The Chicago Tribune, p.37.
- "Girls are Learning to be Real Athletes." 1913, February 6.
The New York Times.
- "Girls Roller Skating Race."
1907, June 11.
The New York Times.

- The New York Times.*
- "Girls Win Derby from Ave. AA Lads." 1941, August 15.
The New York Times.
- Gould, Jack.
1949, June 5. "The Roller Derby: Is it Television, Sport, or Narcotic."
The New York Times.
- Hall, T.K.
2007, July 7. "Belles on Wheels." *The Austin American-Statesman*, p.30.
- Hanna, Kathleen.
"Riot Grrrl Manifesto".
Bikini Kill, Olympia, Wash., n.d., no. 2.
- Harvard Law Review: Title IX
Harvard Law Review 110: 1628.
- Holland, Judith R. and Carole Oglesby 1979.
"Women in Sport: The Synthesis Begins." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 445, 80-90.
- Jarrett, Elizabeth H.
1975. "Feminist Issues in Sport." *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 6, 145-164.
- "Injured at the Roller Skating Rink."
1885, January 25.
The New York Times.
- Klemesrud, Judy.
1972, February 4. "Roller Derby Women have Ups and Downs."
New York Times, p.90.
- Lunardini, Christine.
1997. *What Every American should know about Women's History*. Adams Media, Massachusetts.
- McDonough Eileen; Laura Pappano (2008).
Playing With the Boys.
Oxford University Press.
- "The Morality of Skating Rinks."
1885, March 21.
The New York Times.
- "Newport Roller Skates."
1908, October 25.
The New York Times.
- "Playground Roller Skating Meet Draws a Field of 528 Girls."
1934, May 6.
The Chicago Tribune, p.A7.
- "A Pounded Masher."
1883, November 22.
The Chicago Tribune.
- Prakash, Padma.
1990, April 28. "Women and Sports: Extending Limits to Physical Expression." *Economic and Political Weekly*.
- "The Roller Rink Evil."
1885, April 19.
The New York Times.
- "Roller Skaters in 900th Mile at Coliseum."
1936, January 5.
The Chicago Tribune.
- "The Roller Skating Industry."
1885, March 18.
The New York Times.
- "Roller Skates Lure A Girl."
1907, November 16.
The Chicago Tribune.
- "Skating Races at the Lenox Roller Rink."
1907, April 17.
The New York Times.
- "The Skating Season."
1880, February 11.
The New York Times.
- Talese, Gay.
1958, October 10. "It's A Wonderful Whirl to Gerry."
The New York Times.
- "Those Terrible Rinks."
1885, March 11.
The New York Times.
- Women's Flat Track Derby Association:

<http://www.wftda.com/about/>.

Virtual Newark:
www.newark.nj.com.

International Roller Girls' Master Roster
<http://www.twoevils.org/rollergirls/>