



Truly F. Obvious (center) avoids a "booty block" as Bikini Spider passes on the outside.



During player introductions, a CoMo Derby Dame (Columbia, Mo.) flashes her panties—taunting the hometown Bloomington fans; Bloomington's Flatliners won the bout.

ROLLER DERBY

IS HERE, IT'S REAL, AND IT'S PACKING 'EM IN

By Ron Eid | Photography by Domingo "Ding" Prud'homme



(left) Sagitterorist (in the pivot position's striped helmet) lowers her shoulder against a CoMo blocker. (right) Tijuana Momma shouts encouragement to her team from the sidelines.



"THE ENTIRE SPORTSPLEX... WAS IN A FURY!"



If you haven't yet attended a roller derby bout at the SportsPlex in Bloomington, you don't know what you're missing. This is not your mother's roller derby.

Okay, so today's skaters in our local league, Bleeding Heartland Rollergirls (BHRG), are still wearing short skirts and fishnet stockings, and they're still talking trash. And they still have stage names like Sue Cidal, Sagitterrorist, Knock'r Down, and Badd Mudda Trucka. But don't let the kitsch fool you. Today's roller derby, unlike roller derby of yesteryear, is a bona fide, bone-crushing athletic competition.

Tyler Ferguson (a.k.a. Kaká Caliente), one of the smaller and fleetier skaters, describes an encounter she had last year with an opponent who was "very big, very strong, and very agile for her size." "I was flying around the third turn, feeling pretty good about myself. Then I saw her out of the corner of my eye. I had totally set myself up for her to crush me—and she did. It was perfect. I had the speed, and she had the angle. She dropped her shoulder and sent me sailing."

The competition this year promises to be even tougher. It's BHRG's inaugural season in the Women's Flat-Track Derby Association (WFTDA, commonly pronounced WIF-duh), the governing body of leagues in North America, with affiliates in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. The sport is spreading quickly and derby girls everywhere are gaining rock-star status. Although their celebrity is hard-earned, it is merely a byproduct of a sport they—and their fans—take seriously.

The physical work involved is greater than in most amateur sports—and so is the commitment. To be eligible to play in the Bloomington league, skaters must practice a minimum of seven hours a week and spend several more hours in meetings, scrimmages, and doing promotional and administrative work. "Roller

derby doesn't work unless everyone helps out," says Kelly McBride (a.k.a. Molly McFracture), who co-founded BHRG with Veronica Hites (a.k.a. Truly F. Obvious) in 2006.

"If they can't commit to practice," Hites says, "their chances of getting hurt are greater—and we don't want that. Their chances of hurting others are greater—and we don't want that. And if they can't commit to practice, chances are they won't volunteer for other work."

Such a commitment is no small task, considering many B-town derby girls work full-time as saleswomen, nurses, social workers, lawyers, pharmacists, mothers, and librarians. They range in age from 21 to 43. The regular season is March to October, and yet they train, practice, and participate in clinics year-round. Attrition is high—from job relocation, derby injuries, and retirement. But BHRG's most recent recruiting class more than doubled its roster. (Find the new roster, schedules, and more at bleedingheartlandrollergirls.com.)

McBride, 39, a training manager for Women's Health at Cook Medical, retired from derby last year. But she remains fascinated with it—an attraction that began in childhood. Growing up in the 1970s she idolized derby star Joanie Weston, a.k.a. "The Blonde Bomber." McBride told her mother, "When I grow up I want to be a roller derby girl." On a trip to Seattle in 2005, McBride attended a roller derby bout. What she witnessed, though, was not the same entertainment she loved as a child—campy theater performed by brazen women with intimidating stage names, short skirts, fishnet stockings, and gobs of makeup. This was a sport—played by brazen women with intimidating names, short skirts, fishnet stockings, and gobs of makeup.

McBride's infatuation was renewed. "I was so gunned up," she says, "I had to do this." In Bloomington, she researched the revival of roller derby and recruited Hites to help start a local league. (A league consists of two to five local teams whose best players skate on a traveling all-star team, which competes against the all-star teams of other leagues.) By August 2006, Bloomington had a league of its own—the Bleeding Heartland Rollergirls. This year,

BHRG comprises four teams: Farm Fatales, Slaughter Scouts, Code Blue Assassins, and the all-star Flatliners, which is the league's charter team in WFTDA.

The new roller derby phenomenon is less than eight years old—reincarnated in 2001 as an act in a bizarre "circus" in Austin, Texas. The circus never materialized, but many of the women recruited to skate in it decided to pursue roller derby on their own. In 2004, WFTDA was founded. It transformed roller derby from a novelty entertainment into an authentic sporting event—while keeping the sex appeal and "trash-talkin' attitude."

From that one league in Austin, roller derby has grown to more than 350 leagues. (Some 15,000 skaters have officially registered their derby names.) WFTDA has sanctioned 76 of those leagues, in 37 states. Among them are leagues in Indianapolis and Ft. Wayne; leagues in Lafayette and Evansville are in the process of joining. Quite impressive growth for an organization founded only five years ago. But BHRG's youth—not only as a league but as a sport—has presented challenges.

"Particularly in the first year," McBride says, "this was an organization for people who didn't join organizations."

Many of the women they recruited had never skated, and most had never played a sport, let alone a team sport. Teaching "strivers" (derby wannabes) how to skate was the easy part, Hites says. Far more challenging was "teaching them how to be on a team."

"They'd never been coached," McBride adds. "We'd tell someone, 'You need to get lower,' and she'd say, 'F— you! I don't want to get lower.' They didn't realize we were just trying to help."

There have been notable exceptions. Before roller derby, skaters such as Felanie Charges, Rip'r Snap'r, and Knock'r Down had competed in speed skating, swimming, hockey, or the like. Ferguson, 41, last year's "Crowd Favorite Rookie Jammer," was a two-sport standout. In college she played on the IU women's soccer club (before it gained varsity status) and also discovered ultimate Frisbee. After college, she played semi-pro soccer for the Indiana Blaze and ultimate Frisbee for an Oregon team



(top left) Hell No Kitty lands a solid shoulder blow against CoMo's jammer. (above) CoMo's jammer (white star) meets a "wall" of Flatliners. (left) Party Foul (#80085) stalls CoMo's jammer.



(left) Truly F. Obvious and Sagitterrorist (front) form a wall to block CoMo's pivot (white-striped helmet) who is trying to bust through to make room for CoMo's jammer (white-starred helmet). (right) Boogie Tights is one of BHRG's rookies (a.k.a. strivers and "fresh meat").



(left) Hell No Kitty ices a shoulder after a hard fall at practice. (right) Unicorner holds a sign made by one of her fans.



"ROLLER DERBY IS A PACK SPORT."



that competed twice in the national championships and, in 2006, in the world championships.

Ferguson joined BHRG's Slaughter Scouts in 2007 and says she will never forget "any moment of any bout" of her rookie year, especially her first bout. "The entire SportsPlex was on its feet. The place was in a fury." Her team MVP honor, she says, "is the most special award I've ever received."

McBride says that while "the tomboy factor" attracts a lot of women to roller derby, "we also have some real femmy girls on the team."

"Roller derby makes girls more feminine," Hites says. "I'm not a makeup wearer. There isn't a lot of style to my clothes. But when I dress for a bout, I try to look my best."

While there is a movement within WFTDA to do away with costume makeup and derby names—to promote its image as a legitimate sport rather than to perpetuate its reputation as theater—McBride cites good reasons to keep them, beyond the entertainment value. "It is helpful to remember that the word 'fan' comes from fanatic," she says. "There have been [safety] problems in different parts of the country. Derby names create a wall between the skater and the fanatic that makes the skater safer."

For women who are generally shy or soft-spoken, derby names can create an alter ego, which helps to build their confidence. As Hites says, "Many girls have told me after their first bout, 'This is the best thing that's ever happened to me.'"

Or maybe a job doesn't permit someone to use her real name at derby functions. "My last position was not cool with that," McBride says. "They didn't want their organization to be linked with derby." (Now, though, her derby jersey is framed and hanging on her office wall.)

There have been challenges at all levels of roller derby that don't happen in established sports. "None of this existed nine years ago," McBride points out. "It has all had to evolve."

Some of the challenges are basic: How do you design a practice? What drills do you do? What kind of plays do you run? Hites, 40, says BHRG and other new leagues overcome such obstacles with significant cooperation from more established leagues.

"Girls in one league will travel to other leagues

to hold skills camps, clinics, and strategy discussions," McBride says. "If a new league needs a playbook, another league will loan them theirs."

When asked if intense rivalries have sprung up between the Flatliners and other WFTDA leagues (such as those in Indy, Cincinnati, or Louisville), she says, "It's more fun to talk about the sisterhood between leagues than the rivalries."

WFTDA continues to evolve. As with most sports, it modifies its rules to make the game more competitive, more understandable for the fans, and less subjective for referees when calling fouls. Many roller derby rules address safety, as in how skaters are allowed to hit each other. "Basically, we can't hit anybody below the knee, on the back, or above the neck," McBride says. "Pushing off with the hands, forearms, or elbows is a foul. But you can hit somebody with the thighs, upper arms, and shoulders."

One aspect of roller derby that hasn't needed to evolve, at least in Bloomington, is the fan base. The crowds have grown (sellouts of 1,000 people are expected at SportsPlex this year), but from the beginning, Ferguson says, "Our fans have been the most diverse and best cross-section of Bloomington.... Old, young, hip, and square—everyone enjoys what we do."

"We get hipsters, NASCAR fans, kids, grandmothers," McBride adds. "For some bouts, it's like a who's who of Bloomington. You look up and see that business owner over there, that organizer over there, there's that politician...."

"My favorite fans are five years old," Hites says. "The ones who look up at you with those big eyes and ask for your autograph."

Just as important as the fans, some might argue, is the army of local volunteers who make derby possible. Besides all the work performed by the skaters themselves, BHRG relies on others for nearly every aspect of operation on and off the track: taking tickets, working the door, selling merchandise, bout production, graphics, marketing, video and photo production, website maintenance, and promotion; they are statisticians, penalty trackers, penalty clock operators, referees, and announcers. About 30 male volunteers have been honored with derby names (e.g., Sir Loin and Haggis) and are

collectively known as the Meat Department.

All the work comes together at the bouts. The actual derby track is about the size of a basketball court, but Ferguson says that needs to be extended to make room "for referees and flying bodies."

Each team puts five skaters on the track: a jammer and four blockers. Jammers are the only ones who score points, and they do so by lapping the opposing team's skaters. But, McBride says, "Roller derby is a pack sport. Teamwork wins more games than standout players do." Each position in the pack has specific tasks that require various skills and strategies: "pivot" blockers hold the coveted inside line of the track; "sweepers" (the rear-most blockers) communicate with their teammates ahead while dealing with the action behind; other blockers form walls and constantly gauge whether to hit an opponent or just stall her. In essence, a blocker's job is to keep the opposing team's jammer from passing and to create room for her own jammer to advance. This dual role of playing offense and defense at the same time is unusual in sports. But it is the unusual aspects that make derby so popular.

One reason Ferguson is so gung ho for derby is that she has played sports all her life, and women's sports have always taken a back seat to the men's. "There was soccer, and there was girl's soccer," she says. "There was basketball, and there was women's basketball." Not so with derby. While there are a few men's roller derby leagues, she says, "We own it.... On our jerseys it says 'Roller Derby,' on the men's jerseys it says 'Men's Roller Derby.'"

In a possibly unintentional but not-too-subtle message, the halftime entertainment at WFTDA's national championships last year was a scrimmage between two men's teams.

"Derby rocks," McBride says. "And rolls," adds Hites. ✨