

tales from the track

Rollin' and rockin' with the Santa Cruz Derby Girls

By Wallace Baine

In Santa Cruz County, there is no minor-league baseball team, no university football team, no semi-pro soccer team. Many local sports fans do follow the Giants, the Raiders or the Sharks, often with passion. But that fan loyalty is borrowed or shared with all of Northern California. None of those teams belongs to Santa Cruz in any kind of meaningful way.

But if you happen to visit the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium during the Santa Cruz Derby Girls' monthly bouts, you'll see local people doing something largely unfamiliar to them—experiencing the galvanizing kind of hometown pride that only public competition can offer. You'll see them waving the banner for Santa Cruz.

A town as culturally distinctive as Santa Cruz needs something like the Derby Girls, a three-year-old organization that fields two roller derby teams made up entirely of local women. We need the Derby Girls so we can enjoy the uncomplicated pleasure of having a home team to root, root, root for. But we love them because roller derby and Santa Cruz—each with an eccentric, different-drummer self-image—are a match made in nirvana.

Boardwalk Bombshells' jammer Candy Hooligan intent on scoring while at a bout at the Santa Cruz Civic.



A burly member L.A Derby Dolls Sirens draws a bead on Santa Cruz jammer Sheila Princess of Power.

the crowd has a turned an expectant hum into a low-grade roar of white noise. In the booming tones that once were associated with boxing, the announcers goad the crowd into cranking up the volume.

The Derby Girls are brought out one at a time, and each skates a solo lap around the

flat track as a way of introduction. Since roller derby remains an obscure sport to most fans, the Derby Girl bouts include a demonstration of the basic rules, a kind of theatrical walk-through before the action starts.

The basic purpose of roller derby is simple: One skater on each team (known as the jammer) works to skate through and past the skaters from the opposing team with the help of five teammates. The blocker's job is to both assist her jammer in her quest to get to the front of the pack, and to impede the other team's jammer in the same way.

After a few "jams," the crowd gets the hang of the game, and soon, every burst to an opening or key block is greeted with lusty cheers.

"We all get very amped up," said Jessica Pyle, who as "Candy Hooligan" is one of the Girls' most popular jammers. "You have to get into that zone, have a warrior frame of mind."

Off the floor, the Derby Girls organization has evolved into something you don't see in big-time pro sports. Every Derby Girls player also has committee responsibilities to maintain the team, organize the bouts and practices, line up travel arrangements, deal with publicity, and so on. If an NFL football team is organized like a military regiment, then the Derby Girls tend more toward a farm co-op.

"We've sold out every bout," said Kim Luke, aka "Mildred Fierce," a former skater who now serves as one of the Girls' announcers during their matches at the Civic. "At first, we sold out the day of the bout. Then, it was the day before, two days before, a week before. Now, we're selling out 15, 18 days in advance." The most recent bout sold out a month in advance.

So far ESPN is not paying attention, and that's one of roller derby's virtues in a place like Santa Cruz. Here, fans who would otherwise thrill to the spectacle of professional competition are turned off to what the big-time sports world has become. It has evolved into little more than a racket in which unapproachable, mercenary, almost interchangeable multimillionaire athletes wear uniforms bearing the names of cities with which they have the thinnest of connections.

Roller derby is an entirely different world. The Derby Girls are decidedly working class, according to Mildred Fierce.

"These are not unattainable people," she said. "These are your friends and neighbors. These are people you know."

It's merely minutes before the Derby Girls are to take the floor of the Civic, and



Ace Santa Cruz blockers Heather Headlocklear and Liv N. Letdie do their best to stop the Central Coast Derby's jammers.



Photo: Bill Lovejoy

Brawley Parton, #9-5 and Pippi Hard Sock-ing backstage at the Santa Cruz Civic.

What's more, these are not professional athletes, but everyday women—the Girls' roster includes attorney, teachers, librarians, scientists and artists, all of whom skate under cartoony pseudonyms such as "Lulu Lockjaw," "Cleopatra Catastrophe" and "Foxee Firestorm."

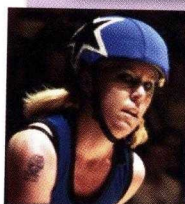
Mildred Fierce said the Derby Girls scene is made up primarily of women in their 30s and 40s who are mature enough to embrace the communal and social aspects of the group, yet still athletic enough to play the game.

"So many people think that women can't work together toward a common goal," said Kim Barrett, aka "Kiki Clash." She's coaching the next generation of Derby Girls, the junior Derby for kids. "Women are used to juggling a lot of different things in our everyday lives, and we can get things done."

In a remarkably short time, the Derby Girls have established a hugely popular cultural phenomenon in Santa Cruz—you can't argue with the quick sell-outs. But the real value may be in what the sport is giving the skaters themselves, despite the time commitments and potential injuries.

"There's a social aspect you can't

What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?



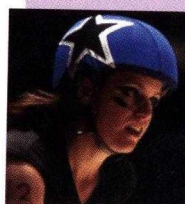
Queen Litigious
(aka Cheri Bell)
Attorney

Lulu Lockjaw
(aka Lindsey Selier)
Insurance agent



Cleopatra Catastrophe
(aka Terra Haddad)
Organic chemist

Barbarian Librarian
(aka Kim Smith)
Librarian



Sheila Princess of Power
(aka Katie Cresswell)
Mathematical Ecologist



escape," said Regan Eymann, who skates under the name "Shamrock N. Roller." "My circle of friends tripled when I joined. I came into it just to play a fun sport, but what I got was a bunch of lifelong friends."

Three years ago, Cynthia Stiger had only the faintest awareness of roller derby. Now, she skates as "CinZilla" with the Derby Girls, her husband serves as a referee, and her 11-year-old daughter has been rechristened "Hanna Slamtana" for the Junior Derby.

"I was looking for something to be involved in," CinZilla said. "I had never met many of these women before, and now some of them are my very best friends in the world."

What forges these friendships, say many of the Derby Girls, is the action on the floor. Roller derby can be a dangerous game and more than a few Girls have been sidelined by significant injuries.

"It's terrifying," said Candy Hooligan. "Every time I drive to a bout, I want to keep on driving. I think 'Why am I doing this?' But something keeps me coming back, and from the beginning game whistle, something kicks it. Then, I'm in it to win it."

If you want to go

Ticket info: www.santacruzderbygirls.org

Photos: Mark Nockleby