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Roller derby provides CoMo Derby Dames escape from stresses of everyday life

BY TAYLOR VORTHERMS Nov 6, 2012



Blondie Knocks, left, and Dethblok of the CoMo Derby Dames block So Ill Roller Girls jammer AK40 Devin at a roller derby bout Saturday in Jefferson City. The Derby Dames are temporarily holding home bouts at the SK8 Zone in Jefferson City while they look for a new Columbia location.

Amy Bruer

COLUMBIA — The screeching of bare skin sliding across the smooth wooden surface pierces the arena. When the girl tumbles, she takes down nearby skaters on her way to the floor.

Perpetual cheers from the crowd escalate to deafening heights as the jammer shoots out ahead of the pack, extending her legs in graceful lopes. Streaks of sweat line her blue-painted face. Fans scream out her derby name and within the walls of the roller rink, it's the only identity that matters.

A stay-at-home mom by day, Anne Griffin, 34, straps on eight wheels and adopts not just a different name, but an entirely new persona.

"I really like that for six hours a week, I am not a mom, I'm not a teacher, I'm not a wife. I am me again," said Griffin, secretary of the CoMo Derby Dames.

The roller derby team is composed of women ranging from college students to grandmothers and includes professors, doctors, nurses and consultants. As they shed their professional attire and step into spandex shorts and fishnet tights, their daily interactions are disregarded, and mainstream standards of beauty are revised.

No longer restricted to proper conduct, they transform into the hard-hitting CoMo Derby Dames.

"We're not particularly girly girls," said Sarah Wells-Morgan, who is called Plain White Tease as a member of the Derby Dames. "Don't get me wrong, I'll put on a skirt and high heels ... but I'm not especially delicate. I don't think many people here are."

Roller derby's history has generated stereotypes of the women involved in the sport. Theatrical spectacles portrayed on television almost five decades ago gave the perception that players were violent by nature. But the Derby Dames don't all have tattoos and engage in alternative lifestyles.

Women gather from all backgrounds to channel the stresses and frustration of everyday life into an appropriate outlet. Wells-Morgan looks forward to practices, where she can let other dimensions of her personality surface.

"You can be aggressive, you can be mouthy, you can do all those things that you're, quote-unquote, not supposed to do as a girl," Wells-Morgan said.

Griffin, known as Brick James on the rink, appreciates the diversity of her teammates.

"This is a group of girls I wouldn't ordinarily be exposed to," Griffin said. "But one thing we all share in common is roller derby."

Roller derby suits women of any shape, age or athletic ability.

"I know that personally, it has made me feel very comfortable with who I am and my body," said Victoria Woods, known as The Terminator. "I'll have people be like 'I wish I had your butt,' for blocking or whatever."

The sport teaches women to use their bodies strategically instead of conforming to restrictive standards of femininity. Curves are accepted and even envied as an advantage to efficiently block opposing players. Smaller girls can maneuver swiftly through the clusters of skaters and earn points for the teams. Advantages are attributed to every body type, and there are no specific physical characteristics that deem one girl superior. Women learn to embrace the valuable aspects of their physique that benefit their team.

Wells-Morgan enjoys walking around in public after a bout or practice with teammates in her jersey, tights and shorts that identify her as a derby girl.

"You could be 6-foot-3 and 300 pounds, and you're still going to feel like hot stuff because you know what it's like to be that person. You step into that person when you enter the rink," Wells-Morgan said. "It's a totally different persona that you can then carry on for the rest of your life."

Coach Cory Hendrick, who goes by Sugar Whips, said the girls who are insecure about their bodies become comfortable when they enter the rink.

"It embraces parts of you that, when you get out of here, might not be embraced," Hendrick said.

During bouts, the women add flare to their jerseys and protective gear to complement their derby names, allowing them to further engage in their individual alter egos.

Kelsey Johnson, who paints her face blue for bouts and is known as Cyclops on the rink, adorns the back of the shorts she wears while competing with a large eye.

"I think a lot of women in their late 20's and 30's kind of lose their identity, and so it's a time where we can come, and we don't have to talk about housework or our kids," Griffin said. "We can just be us."

Jamie Kleinsorge, who chose the derby name Vanna Wipeout after winning \$114,700 on Wheel of Fortune in 2008, said the rink is an equalizer and an opportunity for women to be someone they're not in everyday life.

"It doesn't matter who you are in the real world or what your name is, what your job is because when you get on the rink, you're a derby girl," Kleinsorge said. "You're part of the team, and that's all that matters."

Supervising editor is Grant Hodder

Taylor Vortherms