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The derby girls

PUNK-ROCK PERSONALITIES REVIVE RETRO SKATING SPORT

By Kimra McPherson
Mercury News

At Bay Area Derby Girls roller derby bouts, you don't just see the hits. You hear them.

There's the crack of plastic wrist guards and elbow pads scraping together, the scritch of kneepads against the floor, the whirl of wheels spinning in the air when a skater crashes belly-down onto the rink. Sometimes there's a scream from the rinkside crowd when a derby girl careens skate-first into a spectator's beer cup.

"It's not about breaking fingernails," said Andrea Bozeman of San Francisco, who skates as Iva Vendetta. "It's about breaking teeth."

Long-dead roller derby is back -- this time with all-female teams and a decidedly punk-rock edge. Instead of the professional, promoter-driven sport that created a national frenzy with the rise of television in the 1960s, today's derby is a grass-roots enterprise where skaters trade in their day jobs for short skirts, ripped fishnet tights and saucy alter egos. Since 2001, the revival has sparked 50 leagues across the country, a skater-organized national tournament and an A&E reality show.

The Bay Area league, which formed in 2004 and started its first competitive season in January, claims 60 skaters from San Jose to Sebastopol. The league recently doubled from two teams to four, and the new teams -- the Alcatraz Escapees and the Treasure Island Gold Diggers -- will battle one another for the first time Saturday at the Dry Ice roller hockey arena, 210 Hegenberger Loop, Oakland. Leagues have also formed in Sacramento, Chico and Southern California, and at least one is in the works for the South Bay, with organizer Jess Raymundo recruiting several dozen potential skaters and scouting for warehouse space.

"We're in that age of fun and fearless females," said Raymundo, a 26-year-old Hollister resident. "Way back when, this was a man's staged sport, and we girls are going to do it and we're going to do it right and we're going to skate hard."

The original roller derby, invented by Leo Seltzer in the 1930s in Chicago, was originally an endurance sport. But most who remember it know the campy, co-ed, full-contact version popularized by Seltzer's son, Jerry, who moved derby's headquarters to the Bay Area in the late 1950s. Speedy skaters known as jammers would whirl around a tilted, or "banked," track, trying to score points by breaking through a pack of blockers bent on thwarting them with body checks. A television phenomenon, derby bouts drew huge crowds before fading out in the early '70s. Spin-off sports sprang up over the years, but none of them stuck until now.

Today's derby has many of the same rules, but it's fundamentally a do-it-yourself enterprise. Skaters "own" their leagues by paying dues to cover rink rental fees and other expenses. Many have eschewed banked tracks in favor of flat tracks, which are cheaper to set up and require less space. The Bay Area Derby Girls seek out local businesses to advertise at their events and have sponsorship deals with sportswear company Pony and the low-brow beer brand Pabst Blue Ribbon. The most recent bout, on April Fool's Day in Oakland, drew a sell-out crowd of 1,300 spectators who paid \$12 a pop for rinkside seats.

Many of the skaters say derby provides an outlet for grown-up punk rockers who aren't quite ready to give up mosh pits and skateboards for office cubicles and minivans. The skaters are mothers, business owners and professionals, but roller derby -- with its

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pigtails and kitschy names and rough-girl aesthetic -- has become a way to channel the taboo parts of their personalities. Many cite old-time derby bad girl Ann Calvello, of the polka-dotted hair and the devil-may-care attitude, as an inspiration. Before her death from cancer in March, Calvello told the Mercury News she was proud to see her philosophy -- "we work hard, we train hard, I'm dressing like this, and watch out" -- spread to the new generation.

"I've embraced my foul side," said Bozeman, 24, whose Iva Vendetta claims "home-wreckin'" as her favorite pastime in her league bio. "I think that's why everyone becomes so obsessed with it. It's whatever you've been repressing about yourself that you suddenly get to be."

Take *Fighty Irish*. By day, she's Vanessa Williams, 34, an Oakland student and waitress. On the rink, she's a hard-charging hooligan.

"Fighty just likes to go out. She likes to drink a lot of beer, she will arm wrestle guys at bars, and she will wear her skates wherever she pleases," Williams said. "And she drives too fast."

Melissa Chamberlain, who skates as Miss Moxxie, said her husband has started to notice her derby persona showing up in their daily life.

"I was never the girl who went out and wrestled her friends at the bar," said Chamberlain, 29, of San Francisco. "But I'm becoming that person."

But hang around the skaters long enough and the softer side of roller derby comes out. It's a haven for women, they say, using words like "supportive environment" and "camaraderie" and "unity." "We see each other more than we see lots of our family," Bozeman said. "It's really intimate."

Other skaters echo her words: It's not just getting dressed up in little skirts and taking sassy names. It's finding a place where all the facets of their personalities can come out and play.

"There's a gym really near my work, and I walked past and the doors were open and there were all these women in there doing step aerobics in their spandex outfits to some sped-up Black Eyed Peas song and they all had these looks on their faces like they were just so bored out of their minds," Chamberlain said. "And at that minute, all I could think was, 'Thank God for roller derby.'"

For more on the local roller derby league, visit www.bayareaderbygirls.com. Contact Kimra McPherson at kmcperson@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5928.

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