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The Power and Joy of Derby: Women's Participation, Empowerment, and Transformation in a Flat-Track Roller Derby Team

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Abstract: In what ways do sports make a difference in the lives of the people who play them? In this paper, we employ a sporting feminist perspective to answer this question and detail how women benefit from the sport of roller derby. Our analyses are structured around the themes of the body (exploring examples of bodily empowerment and reconceptualization); the team (highlighting feminist themes of loyalty and team as family); and the crowd (identifying the ways in which derby is “sold” to the crowd, as well as the ways in which athletes use derby to challenge conceptions of beauty, desirability, and femininity). In the end, this work comments on the multiple examples of feminist expression and positive sporting participation found in derby, including the use of sport to reject notions of weakness and fragility, and a greater willingness to critically assess gender inequities beyond the world of sport.

Keywords: sport, roller derby, female athletes, empowerment

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Introduction

This article uses a sporting feminist perspective to explore the benefits of participation that women say they experience playing flat-track roller derby. Using a variety of ethnographic approaches, we collect women's positive sporting experiences, including themes of physical empowerment and the use of derby to expand conceptions of family and to challenge ideas of beauty, desirability, and femininity. We begin this work with a brief history of derby, followed by a discussion of sporting feminism and derby's emerging place as an object of inquiry in this academic subfield. After this, we describe our method and present the athletes' experiences.

In its current form, women's roller derby is a full-contact team sport played on roller skates and organized as a women-only venue that is celebrated for fostering feminist strategies in resisting masculine definitions of sport and women's supposed social and physical inferiority (Breeze 2010; Finley 2010; Donnelly 2011). However, the derby of today is not the derby of yesteryear. With its origin in the 1930s, derby was initially an endurance race (“Sport: Roller Derby” 1936). By the late 30s, the game evolved into a physical competition between the two teams. In that iteration, derby was coeducational, with women and men playing on each team. Further, the derby of that era was also professional—skaters were paid, and promoters, managers, owners, and others earned money from their involvement. In time, derby was transformed into a full-contact event, which almost always was also a staged spectacle. The outcomes of roller derby matches were determined in advance, and staged fights were regular features for the “entertainment” of the live and/or

television audience (Coppage 1999; Cohen and Barbee 2010). However, by the end of the 70s, with growing overhead costs as well as the declining economic resources of its fan base, teams were unable to support league play, and the sport of derby fell from national prominence and out of the public's consciousness (Kearney 2011).

Contemporary Derby

In 2000, entrepreneur Daniel Eduardo “Devil Dan” Policarpo helped revive the sport. He recruited women to skate in what he envisioned would be a “raucous, rockabilly, circus-like roller derby spectacle” to accompany various music and cultural festivals (Brick 2008). However, after several organizational meetings and a disputed fundraiser, he and the derby athletes parted ways. The women then self-organized as an amateur, women-only game, played on accessible flat surfaces where a track could be laid out with a simple roll of rope and tape (venues have ranged from roller rinks to hockey arenas, sports halls, auditoriums, convention centers, and parking lots). This new incarnation has since attracted the attention of women across the US and, increasingly, the world. In contemporary derby, amateur skaters play a full-contact sport, necessitating (in addition to quad roller skates) the use of helmets, mouth guards, and elbow-, wrist-, and kneepads. Further, skaters wear jerseys that are often printed with their “derby names” and numbers. In this context, derby names are often humorous, involving pseudonyms made up of puns, wordplay, cultural references, or inside jokes among players—though a growing number of skaters are choosing to skate under their real name (Breeze 2013; Paul and Blank 2014).

Game Play and Structure

A roller derby “bout” (game) is composed of two 30-minute halves, during which each team skates five women at a time in shifts (called jams) that last up to two minutes. Athletes skate counterclockwise around an oval track, slightly smaller in circumference than a basketball court. There's one jammer (scorer) per team, per shift, who earns a point each time she laps an opposing skater. After her first, non-scoring pass through the opposing team, the leading jammer also has the strategic option of ending the jam prematurely by tapping her hands to her hips. The other eight players skate in a pack and make judicious use of their bodies (specifically hips and shoulders) to clear space for their jammer and stymie her opposite number. Players are allowed to hit each other, hard, in shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip blocks.¹ Further, with a continuous jostling for position, players' hips, thighs, upper arms, and front torsos are often in constant contact. Although fist fighting and elbowing incur penalties, skaters may move in front of other skaters (“body-” or “booty-blocking”), as well as thrust their bodies against other skaters in hopes of knocking them to the floor (“body-checking”). Finally, all participants in a derby event are volunteers, including the players themselves, the announcers, scorekeepers, and skating referees.

Feminist Approaches to the Study of Sport

Sport in the United States has often been conceptualized as a male preserve—one in which women as athletes remain largely invisible (Cahn 1994; Messner, Duncan and Willms 2006; Cooky and Lavoie 2012; Antunovic and Hardin 2013). This is to say that the institution of sport has welcomed men more enthusiastically than women (Birrell 2000); has promoted the ideology that men are “naturally” built for sport, which makes women “not naturally” built for sport (Whiteside and Hardin 2010); has maintained male privilege with

respect to broadcasting, especially as women's sports tend to be devalued in televised news media (Messner and Cooky 2010; Cooky, Messner and Hextrum 2013; Crouse 2013); and has marginalized, trivialized, and sexualized the female athlete (Kane 2011, 2013). As Sarah Wolter (2013, 3) writes,

The premise of this [line of scholarship] is that sport has historically been considered a masculine endeavor ... [and] when women participate in sport and challenge hegemonic masculinity, they are often met with resistance. Resistance includes tactics such as (1) media coverage that does not cover/underrepresents female participation in sports or minimizes female athletes' accomplishments through language in articles/commentary on games, or (2) labeling female athletes [with] stigmatizing labels.

To this end, a feminist perspective is ultimately necessary to contest the ways by which sport promotes and privileges male dominance. While "sporting feminism" has a long and varied history (Markula 2005), its core grounding orientation is "a critical analysis of the cultural forces that work to produce the ideological practices that influence the relations of sport and gender" (Birrell 1988, 492) and "a commitment to ... the interpretation of sport as a gendered activity" (Birrell 2000, 61).

Feminist scholars have explored the complexities of gender relations in sport with regard to (1) sex segregation and women's exclusion from (and oppression in) sport (Scraton and Flintoff 2002; Coakley 2009); (2) ideologies that reinforce ethnocentric and sexist characterizations in sport (McCaughney 1997; Markula 2005); (3) critical investigation of issues such as homophobia, compulsory heterosexuality, and the sexualization of female athletes (Buysse and Embser-Herbert 2004; Fuller 2006; Abdel-Shehid and Kalman-Lamb 2011; Clavio and Eagleman 2011); as well as, more positively, (4) the sources of empowerment and the extent to which women challenge and change existing sporting inequities (Hargreaves 2000); (5) the creation of alternative and primarily women-only sport spaces (Donnelly 2011; MacKay and Dallaire 2013); and (6) the recording of women's everyday experiences in sport, including motivations, meanings, and significance of sport and exercise for women and the impact of their involvement on the construction of their sense of self-identity (Hargreaves 2000; Hardin and Whiteside 2009). Overall, these strands of research have addressed the question of how women's sporting experiences expose the patriarchal bias in sport and have shown how women use sport to create alternatives to traditional masculine power relations.

Feminist Explorations of Roller Derby

One of the emerging venues for the investigation of "sporting feminism" has been roller derby. Feminist researchers have been drawn to this sporting scene for a number of reasons. First, roller derby has generally been understood to represent some sort of challenge to mainstream (i.e., male) sporting establishments. For example, Nancy J. Finley (2010, 360–61) writes:

[Derby is] an alternative sports environment that is described as "women's space" ... and is a scene that provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics through which women exhibit defiance, physical violence, and authority ... all of which can have the effect of destabilizing patriarchy and male dominance [over sporting worlds].

As previously noted, women are often marginalized within sport hierarchies. But derby is a place where female participants are able to create and control the formal structures of access and play. As Travis Beaver (2012, 26) notes,

The rapid growth of women's roller derby—from one league in 2001 to more than 300 today—is a result of grassroots efforts by women ... who [have] decided to create leagues in their own [cities]. The majority of leagues are owned and operated by the participants.... This is significant because sport organizations have historically been controlled by men. Even as female athletic participation rates skyrocketed in the United States since the passage of Title IX, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions within sports organizations. As a sport created by and for women, roller derby is an interesting case because it provides an alternative to male-dominated sport.

Indeed, roller derby not only opens up access to positions of power for women who may lack the professional credentials or experience required to run existing sport organizations—but at the same time, each member has a voice and a say in how her sport is organized. Finally, within this organizational context, women's cooperative efforts in derby sport also provide a symbolic challenge to sexist stereotypes and counter the alleged inability of women to work together (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2013; Donnelly 2014).

The second reason why roller derby has interested feminist scholars is that it has been a site to study how participants challenge women's supposed social and physical inferiority. Researchers have found derby to be a unique venue in which women find liberation from the limitations of traditional femininity and challenge the notion that physical strength, competition, and aggressiveness are unfeminine attributes (Breeze 2010; Carlson 2010; Cotterill 2010; Finley 2010; Peluso 2010; Kearney 2011; Murray 2012; Newsom 2013). To this end, derby is also a place where women accept a form of "physical" and "corporeal" femininity—a degree of agency where they come to understand that their bodies are not just things that house their intellects, or things to be gazed at (McCaughey 1997). It is an understanding that power may be lived and resisted through the body (Grosz 1994). For example, Andrea Eklund and Barbara A. Masberg (2014) find that the environment of roller derby promotes a healthier respect for one's body and an appreciation for the female body as a "tool"—a strong, muscular entity that "got things done."

Third, research into derby indicates the "seriousness" (Breeze 2013) with which participants invest time, money, and bodily risk into playing and growing the sport. The intrinsically physical nature of derby and the often grueling lifestyle required of an athlete solidify the notion that derby is truly a "risk business" (Brinson and Dick 1996, 19). But it is also a love business (Pavlidis 2012). The degree of commitment that participants give to the sport suggests that derby is an especially vital resource in shaping the overall identities of the women who play. Further, for decades women in sport have been marked as the "weaker sex" and their participation in a number of competitive sporting activities has been restricted—while derby challenges the myth that strength, sacrifice, and risk are features found only in male sport. In this way, derby helps to question masculine ideologies that promote said restrictions of broader sport inclusion and play.

Fourth and last, derby also appears to provide a space for women who have previously been resistant to team sports (Mabe 2008; Storms 2010). Indeed, derby provides opportunities for women with diverse body sizes, in particular women with larger builds, to excel. As a sport akin to football or rugby, derby requires bodies both large and small, and overall participation seems to encourage an acceptance of a variety of body sizes and types (Cotterill 2010; Eklund and Masberg 2014). Most women's sports tend to draw interest from people of similar body types, but derby allows for a range of player sizes, from bigger blockers to smaller jammers. As a result, research on derby indicates that players tend to craft healthy athletic identities and positive self-image based more on their bodies' functionality regarding strength and speed than on appraising them in terms of thinness or corpulence (Carlson 2010).

Given the increasing popularity of derby and the growing feminist literature on the sport, we conducted our project to see if our observations mirror or depart from the literature in significant ways. But beyond this, we are simply interested in the stories that derby players tell. As Donna Luff writes, “understanding the specific experiences of differing groups of women as women in all [their] diversity is essential to a feminist project” (1999, 690). Further, a feminist sport perspective argues for, and champions, the everyday experiences of “ordinary women [so that they] might be recognized as hidden heroines of sport” (Hargreaves 2000, 8). Here, we seek to produce knowledge that draws on women’s own understanding of their sporting experiences, and we interpret these experiences in the light of feminist and social scientific conceptions of gendered relationships (Ramazanoglu 1989).

Methodology

This study used multiple methods, including naturalistic observation and in-depth interviews, to study roller derby athletes of a regional midwestern team. All observations and interviews were held in two neighboring midwestern US metropolitan cities from May to November 2013.

Personal Reflexive Statements

We came to this study from a variety of activities and necessities. Dr. Blank, an anthropologist, was teaching Introduction to Cultural Anthropology and had assigned her students a number of cultural investigations and ethnographic reports to complete. In the process of grading these reports, she discovered that several of her students had participated in a local roller derby league. She became intrigued by the ways in which her female students described player rituals and the broader cultural and gendered frameworks of the sport. She had mentioned her students’ reports to her colleague, Dr. Paul, a sociologist. Dr. Paul had recently been asked to develop and teach a course in the sociology of sport. Knowing little about the subfield, he suggested that they do a collaborative project as a way to grow their collective expertise in the field of sport and further explore the unique cultural world of derby from shared anthropological and sociological perspectives. This article is the result of that collaboration.

Naturalistic Observations and Rapport Building

We made our initial entry into the field after gaining permission from the team captain and the rink owner to come to the arena and observe. Observing athletes in practice and game settings provided rich data about the nature of game play, team cohesion, and athlete-fan interactions. Such ethnographic approaches also helped us develop rapport with the team, as they saw us spending considerable time “hanging out” and supporting them in practice and game settings. (We spent seven months with the team at practice and games, for a total of 50 hours of direct observation.) During the first several weeks of observation, our interactions with the team were at arm’s length. We remained fairly unobtrusive and our vocalizations were simple, yet heartfelt, encouraging remarks for their hard work, physical expenditures, and team play. We attempted to craft a supportive presence, for we knew that these initial impressions would be crucial to the success of the research project.

Following these initial periods of hanging out and observing, we strategized that Dr. Blank, a woman, should be the first to approach and initiate contact with the derby athletes (with the belief that her gender would positively influence access and rapport in the field). Here, we were guided by the insightful suggestions

of feminist scholars who have noted the ways in which gender can challenge or facilitate entry (Mazzei and O'Brien 2009). Indeed, research suggests that the alignment of the researcher's gender with that of informants has fairly deterministic effects for gaining access and building rapport (Lofland 1971; Adams 1999). In the end, this seemed to be a successful strategy, as the derby athletes were more open to speaking with Dr. Blank and many saw her as both a confidant and a potential derby recruit.

In-Depth Interviews

In addition to observations, we also conducted in-depth semistructured interviews with approximately a third of the players on the team. Interviewees were recruited through a variety of techniques. First, after rapport had been established by attending practices and derby bouts, we simply reached out to athletes who seemed most receptive to us (selecting persons that greeted us, spoke to us, or acknowledged us in some way). Next, using snowball sampling, we asked these athletes to recommend other players to be interviewed. In some cases, based on these recommendations, we used Facebook to contact athletes and ask if we could interview them at a time and place most convenient to their schedules. All interviews were face to face and lasted between one hour and two and a half hours, with the average interview being approximately one hour and 30 minutes long. All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (in many cases, their derby name) to preserve confidentiality.

In total, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with derby athletes. An additional in-depth interview was held with a rink owner, and multiple informative conversations were held with several non-skating officials and referees. During the time of our study, team membership was approximately 24 individuals. While the team had an active farm system that trained new recruits, none of these individuals were "called up" to the team during our period of observation. Further, the team also lost several players due to attrition and injury during the season. The majority of the women were in their mid-twenties and early thirties—though the full age range of our participants included women in their early twenties to late forties. Beyond this, the women were also fairly homogenous regarding ethnicity and social-class position—all identified as Caucasian and all were from working- or lower-middle-class families. Finally, we also supplemented our hours of observation and interviews with the reading of published materials, online blogs, and Web pages associated with the sport of derby.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. While we did not approach interviews with specific hypotheses, we did employ guiding, open-ended questions. For example, the first author, a sociologist, was interested in themes of organization (rules, structure of game play) and motifs of athletic identity. The second author, an anthropologist, explored interests in how skaters were recruited and enculturated, as well as the sport's cultural organization of gender and bodywork. In conducting the interviews, we sought to prompt the participants to speak from their unique perspective by providing narrative accounts of their experience with the team and in the sport of derby itself. This included asking interviewees how they came to be on the team, what they liked and disliked about being on the team, what was involved in playing the game, and what their overall athletic experiences were like. When participants raised experiences or ideas that might clarify or scrutinize an emerging theme in the ongoing data analysis, the interview explored those further.

Throughout the interviews, we drew heavily from grounded theory research (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998), continually modifying our questions based on field observations and experiences with our interviewees. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed, and we each reviewed the transcripts separately to identify text segments that appeared meaningful in addressing the research questions. After this, we discussed our impressions of the interview data together and worked to gain consensus on text segments containing meaningful content for the creation of a coding system. That is to say, we looked for statements of similar expression and content to be grouped together for eventual coding. Out of this process, we identified the following themes for coding: (1) the body (themes of bodily empowerment and reconceptualization); (2) the team (themes of loyalty and team as family); and (3) the crowd (the ways in which derby was “sold” to the crowd, as well as the ways in which athletes used derby to challenge conceptions of beauty, desirability, and femininity). Using this coding system, the data was then weaved together to highlight key ideas and summarize the shared perspectives of the participants. As themes emerged, we linked various feminist and social scientific theoretical concepts to help explain and analyze the data.

Findings

Before we explore the benefits of participation in the sport of derby, we first describe some of the general characteristics of the athletes. Generally, because of the physical stamina and strength necessary to play roller derby, most skaters are young adults in their early twenties to early thirties (though several women on the team were in their mid- to late forties). Further, due to the general ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the community in which the team plays, the overwhelming majority of athletes are white and working or lower middle class. However, beyond these attributes, skaters are considerably diverse when it comes to sexuality, body type, and political and cultural affiliations. Thus, describing an “average” player is difficult.

Additionally, women’s reasons and motivations for trying out and playing were also diverse. Some women wanted to play because it was a continuation of an athletic identity and a resumed chance for athletic expression. Others played because they were denied the chance to play organized team sports when they were younger. Still others played derby because it provided an opportunity “to get into better physical shape.” And some women with larger physical builds said it was “a place of entry” to a sporting world traditionally denied to them. Outside of these athletic expressions and explanations, other women said they were drawn to derby because they were bored and/or wanted to expand their social network. Regardless of their motivations to play, however, we did discover strong patterns related to the positive elements of their participation in derby—including the joy of physicality, a celebration of teamwork, and the pleasures of performativity. We now turn to a broader examination of these themes.

Theme One: The Body

Subcategory 1A: Physical Empowerment

In the study of sport, feminist scholars have noted how sport and physical activity can be a source of empowerment for women (Shaw 1994; McCaughey 1997; Theberge 2000; van Ingen 2011). For instance, Nancy Theberge (2000) noted that many female athletes found significant enjoyment in hitting and Lone Friis Thing claimed that female athletes’ physically aggressive contact created a feeling of empowerment that involved “both a *sense* of bodily power and liberation and a *sense of release* of everyday stresses” (2001,

284; original emphases). Additionally, Martha McCaughey notes that women have historically been told to experience their bodies as “fragile encumbrances rather than as tools with which to get something done” (1997, 92). Yet, roller derby clearly provides a space in which women feel as though they “get something done” and enjoy a sense of physical empowerment. Consider the following example:

I danced when I was younger, but I never played a contact sport like derby. In derby there’s something about being able to give and take a hit ... having the girls tell you things like “great hit” and “hit me harder” is awesome ... it helps push you and you feel like you are in control of your body.... I’m really good at hitting. It’s something I didn’t know I could do ... to discover that I could hit my teammates to the ground was empowering and liberating. (Ruthless Benedict)

On a theoretical level, feminist researchers have argued that women tend to acquire a distant and self-conscious relation to their body, wherein they believe themselves to be “physically handicapped,” with limited bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality (Young 2005, 42). Here, the “discovered and empowered body” was a theme that emerged after hearing women describe how playing derby enabled them to connect with the power of their bodies and reject notions that females are naturally weak. Indeed, our observations and interviews revealed that their participation in sport, exercise, and physical activity increased their overall physical confidence and competence. In other words, the play of derby, to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, fostered a bodily experience of “I can” instead of “I cannot” (2003, 159).

Subcategory 1B: The Emergence of the Badass

As a linked theme, we also found that this increased sense of body awareness suggested to women that they had become “a badass.” Time and time again, we heard athletes refer to themselves or to their teammates as badasses. But what is a badass, and what is its significance? The academic literature conceptualizing and contextualizing the “badass” is slight and overwhelmingly male-focused (Katz 1988; Bennett and Brookman 2009; Gigengack 2014; Kopak and Sefiha 2014). However, emerging scholarship presents the female badass as a version of femininity that resignifies qualities typically associated with masculinity (Johnson 2014). This redefinition includes, for example, a woman who is confident in her conception of self, who rarely “backs down” and who gets what she wants (Charlebois 2011).

When we asked the derby athletes what it meant to be a “badass,” several responded in terminology that celebrated female assertiveness and self-actualization. Consider the following examples:

Joining this roller derby team and being with them for four years is probably the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done. It has definitely made me more confident ... more of a badass in the sense that it has made me more aggressive, not in an unhealthy way, but if I want something, I’m going to try really, really hard to do it because nobody likes losing. (Seam-Rip-Her)

A badass is one who goes after what they want ... one who doesn’t take no for an answer. Most of my life I did for others and I did what others told me to do. When I was younger, my father didn’t let me play sports and I did what my father said ... then I was “second fiddle” to my husband and my kids ... but now this is for me ... playing derby has made me a badass because it challenges all those expectations of what a women shouldn’t be doing ... now I am more willing to do what I want without the worrying about [social expectations]. (Deck-Her)

Further, a number of derby athletes also used the physical and mental confidence gained through the sport to actively promote feminism and gender fairness and equity broadly. For example:

I know that a lot of women are taught to hate other women so that they can climb over them to get to the top, so if somebody is better than you or prettier than you, more athletic than you, you try to shut them down so you look better.... As their coach, I've used derby to try and change the culture.... I'm a really die-hard liberal women's rights person, and I think roller derby has to be something that empowers women and should not be a place where they come to destroy each other. Absolutely no shit talking [on other women] allowed. (Seam-Rip-Her)

Other athletes used the confidence gained in derby to critically assess gender ideology and gender relations at work. Several players, for instance, said they felt empowered to “call out” sexist coworkers for what they considered inappropriate jokes and behaviors, while others said they used the courage they gained through physical play to “assertively” ask for, and in some cases “demand,” raises and more fair treatment. To be sure, as Jay Coakley reminds us, “empowerment does not occur automatically when a girl or woman plays sport, nor is a sense of empowerment always associated with a desire or an ability to actively promote gender fairness in other spheres of life” (2009, 256). Nonetheless, our research departs from the literature, albeit in small ways, to suggest that sport and physical empowerment lead to broader social empowerment and encourage women to challenge gendered arrangements (Coakley 2009; Woods 2011; Eitzen 2012). For these interviewees, “being badass” was not about women becoming more masculine, but a realization that femininity could include celebration of women's confidence and forcefulness. Here, the derby athletes challenged the hegemonic varieties of femininity that prescribe exhibition of traits such as submissiveness and dependency (Schippers 2007).

Finally, in describing the “ways of the badass,” scholars also note that the badass is one who gains respect and self esteem via their indifference to pain, personal frustration, and trauma (Messerschmidt 2004; Gieseler 2014). For our derby athletes, being badass was also about flaunting and celebrating the inherent danger of the sport by frequently discussing bruises, scars, and fractures. Several of the players reported to us that friends, and in some cases family members, expressed a form of paternalism, arguing that the risk of physical injury and pain was too great for a woman. Derby athletes challenged this paternalism and traditional notions of femininity by emphasizing their ability to resist pain:

I broke my collarbone playing derby [pulls down her shirt to expose her collar bone]. You can see it has calcified and is larger than my other. My doctor said we could do plastic surgery to make me “look pretty.” I asked him if I was ready to play again and I got up and outta there... [rolls up shirt sleeves] These are scars from a broken pad that cut up my arm ... and [pulls up pant legs, revealing bruises that cover her shins] these are bruises from last night. (Young Gun)

We just had one girl who was LOA [leave of absence]; she broke her fibula and her tibia and her ankle at practice.... We were at practice and she fell down, didn't get up. She said, “I heard it snap” ... she drove herself to the hospital. Drove on her broken leg. She had to have surgery ... had plates and screws put in. It's part of roller derby ... she'll be back [smiles]. (Seam-Rip-Her)

In the end, the “wearing” of bruises and scars is part of the world of the badass that celebrates the inherent risk and toughness of derby while simultaneously challenging dated ideals of femininity.

Subcategory 1C: Bodily Reconceptualization

Finally, derby players were also prone to cite the sport as legitimatizing their physique (or elements of their physique) as an effective tool necessary to excel in derby. In particular, the rear end is one of the most widely discussed body parts in the sport. As Jennifer Carlson (2010, 434–35) writes,

In derby, the booty is a weapon and an entire move—the booty block—highlights the use of one’s butt to block an opponent.... Skaters talk about their rear ends in a myriad of ways: how useful they can be when they are big (e.g., “I need a bigger ass to block her”), how fast they can move (e.g., “Move your ass in front of her!”), how well they block (e.g., “Look at that booty block!”), and how soft they are when skaters fall (e.g., “It’s okay [I’m not injured], I just landed on my ass”).

When our interviewees discussed the size and appearance of their bodies, they usually expressed increased satisfaction. For example, Seam-Rip-Her commented:

I’m really tall on my skates and I’m really good at getting my butt in the way of jammers. [Derby can help you] make yourself feel better about your body—it’s strategically better for you to have a bigger butt in roller derby. I used to have an eating disorder when I was a teenager, and I’ve always hated my body until playing roller derby; [now] having a big ass is a wonderful thing. And being really healthy and having extra muscles and having a bit of extra weight on you is really good as a blocker. I feel in control of my body now.

Likewise, several other skaters offered:

I think derby has helped with my body image. I’ve always had a lot of lower body strength—you know, the “thunder thighs” thing. But believe me, I use them now [laughing]. Those babies come in handy. They are good weapons. (Scarlet O’Scare Ya)

Derby has changed me in different ways. I’ve always had self-esteem issues and this culminated in a bit of an eating disorder and derby really helped with that ... it’s been a self-esteem boost ... you get to put on tight tights regardless of your body type, and you can go out there and look awesome and you feel awesome and you play awesome ... playing derby makes me feel better about my body.... (Ruthless Benedict)

Research indicates that women have a tendency to engage in negative commentary about their weight and the shape of their own bodies. In particular, research has found that women are most concerned with the size of their thighs, buttocks, and hips: the areas primarily associated with weight gain (Moore 1988; Monteath and McCabe 1997; Thomsen, Bower, and Barnes 2004). Further, the frequency with which women engage in negative body talk is positively correlated with body dissatisfaction and eating-disordered behavior (Salk and Engeln-Maddox 2011). In this context, the play of derby, if nothing else, helped to disrupt the cycle of negative body talk and bodily dissatisfaction. Derby seems to provide an alternative system of body evaluation based on how bodies move and perform rather than simply on how they look, thereby allowing skaters to experience their bodies in ways that reach beyond the forms of passive embodiment encouraged by traditional cultural norms.

Theme Two: The Team

Subcategory 2A: The Team as a Loyalty Cooperative

Virtually every player interviewed voiced a strong appreciation for teamwork as developed through derby. Interestingly, players tended to express value for the team less in terms of their win-loss record and more in terms of the team’s ability to operate as a loyalty cooperative. As Andrew M. Guest (2007) notes, the assumed meaning of teamwork is one of competitiveness and the desire for productive dominance. Yet, although this traditional notion of teamwork connotes some group affiliation, it is important to realize that “this popular model does not necessarily require teammates to have any personal affection” for each other (Guest 2007, 358–59).

In our observations, the derby players challenged this traditional notion of teamwork by highlighting their affection for one another and by fostering values of connectedness, sharing, and support. As feminist sport scholars have long observed (Davion 1987; Messner 1992; Lenskyj 1994; Vecsey 2010; Antunovic and Hardin 2013), women often counter the dominant model of competitive sports as exclusionary and harshly oppositional by creating spaces where competition and cooperation are compatible, and where people are “encouraged to be partners and opponents at the same time” (Davion 1987, 57). Consider the following example that embodies this idea:

I got mad at [name suppressed] for hitting me in the face and giving me a black eye.... She’s still fairly rocky on her skates, and when she starts to lose her balance and feels like she’s going to fall, she throws her arms out.... I told her to watch her fricking arms and keep them in ... the problem is she’s very sensitive, and I hurt her feelings ... she posted some [self-doubting] comments on her Facebook page ... but the girls on the team responded by leaving a voluminous amount of positive comments on her wall ... and the next time I saw her at practice I told her that I was upset with her but that I also had lots of love for her, I told her: you just need to work on your areas of weakness. (Deck-Her)

Indeed, through our observations and interviews we came to conclude that one of the most important aspects of the team dynamic was the power of teaching and mentorship. “Here we teach each other and motivate each other,” said Seam-Rip-Her. “We try to build loyalty and cooperation through teaching. [In this way,] if one person sees a girl mentoring another, the idea is that this will spread through the team and the process will be repeated” (Seam-Rip-Her). This was evident in the practice sessions we observed, where more experienced team members guided newer players in helpful techniques.

Subcategory 2B: The Team as a Source of Friendship and Resource Collective

Additionally, derby athletes say they also value the team because of the friendship, social bonding, and collective sharing of resources (both emotional and economic) that are encouraged among the players. For example:

I came out of work one night to find that my car had been broken into.... The thieves stole my backpack, which had all of my skating gear—skates, pads, etc. It was heartbreaking. I’m sure they just tossed my skates—which pisses me off, considering how much blood and sweat I put into those things.... I came to practice and asked if any of the girls could chip in a dollar to help buy new gear.... They had heard about the robbery and came together to buy me entirely new equipment.... I was blown away. I mean this sport is expensive. It’s a hobby sport, which means you have to buy your own gear, pay a team membership fee, and have multiple forms of insurance ... they spent a ton on me.... I cried, we all hugged and cried ... it was beautiful how the love poured out of them. (Lady Ricochet)

As Susan K. Cahn states, “women’s sport was [historically] an activity that encouraged both physical and emotional intensity among women” (1994, 201). In this way, derby is no different. As a sporting venue, it is attractive to women in part because it nurtures the development of friendships and relationships, the importance of which should not be understated. As Rebecca G. Adams, a sociologist and expert on friendship networks, puts it, “friendship often has a bigger impact on our psychological well-being than family relationships” (quoted in Parker-Pope 2009).

Subcategory 2C: The Team as a Family Construct

A number of other players described the team as a relationship that was like “family.” For example, Young Gun said, “My teammates are like my sisters ... it means knowing that we have each other’s backs no matter what.” Indeed, players talked explicitly about how the team allowed them to grow their extended family. For example, several of the athletes constructed a family (both symbolically and in reality) through the formation of intense relationships with other players, whom they invited to be their “derby wife.” Generally, these relationships are not romantic or sexual in nature, but are defined as close friendships. As Seam-Rip-Her stated:

When you start playing derby, it kind of takes over your life, so you spend a lot of your waking hours at practice or trying to get sponsors or doing your league responsibilities, so you kind of never see your significant other. What you call your husband or wife or girlfriend/boyfriend is your derby widow—because they lost you to roller derby. Because you spend so much time doing roller derby, you take on a new spouse, a derby spouse. You’re not actually sexually active with them. They are kind of your best friend in roller derby; they are the one that you’re closest with on your team.

Sometimes derby wives are close friends before joining the team, while others meet through the sport. Regardless of how they originate, these relationships are very important to the participants and may not be entered into lightly. Seam-Rip-Her continued:

[My husband] knows about my roller derby wife. He understands that she was in my life before him. She and I got married last year at Rollercon [an annual convention held in Las Vegas for members of the roller derby community], but we were derby-engaged for maybe a year before that.... It means that it’s a commitment ... she’s there for me and I for her. We are very protective of each other.

Deck-Her told a similar story regarding friendship and loyalty. She explained:

Initially, I was against the idea of derby marriages because I felt it promoted a stereotype of derby girls—that we were all homosexual ... but after meeting my friend and becoming close I’m totally in favor of the idea—I mean, heck yeah! I’m all in on the idea of derby marriages. I told her boyfriend that I would be married to her long before you will be.... She and I are kindred spirits.

Some athletes who do not have such a tight bond with another athlete lament this fact and search out a teammate with whom they can experience this mode of close friendship. On this note, one of our interviewees stated:

I was very jealous when one of the girls asked Little-Bit to marry her before I could. I wanted to be the first to marry Little-Bit, and I was so upset when I heard she “got engaged.” But I did eventually ask [Little-Bit] to marry me and so we are now in a derby triangle—a relationship where three girls are derby-married to each other. (Young Gun)

Finally, derby athlete Little-Bit said that she became an active member of one of her derby wives’ (Young Gun’s) biological family. She said that she would actively “hang out” with Young Gun’s parents and her grandmother, participating in various family celebrations and rituals. She told us:

I became really close to Young Gun’s family. I moved to [their hometown] because they talked me into moving there.... And I became part of their family.... Both of my grandmothers have passed, but I call Young Gun’s grandmother “grandma.” Gun’s mom and grandma come to all of the bouts and cheer us on.... They’re just amazing women that I enjoy having in my life.

In the end, although our interviewees were dedicated to becoming successful athletes and valued competitiveness and aggression, the majority also appreciated the supportive nature of the team and the

sense of community (and, in some cases, family) many were able to build with their teammates. Thus, our derby athletes offer a model of sport in which competition and cooperation are compatible, and where aggression and play are mirrored with offerings of friendship and support.

Theme Three: (Selling to) the Crowd

Subcategory 3A: Selling Derby, Selling Beauty

As previously noted, today's derby athletes are part of do-it-yourself organizations. This means that they must identify venues in which to play, raise their own funds, sell their own tickets, recruit fans, and stir excitement among onlookers. But in order to accomplish this, athletes often find that selling derby also means "dolling it up." As research indicates, female athletes are often looked at as sex objects, whether they want to be seen that way or not, and are typically and unfortunately judged more by their appearance than by their athletic performance (Eitzen 2012; Weber and Carini 2013; Crouse 2013). Consider the following examples cited by Janet S. Fink to illustrate "the constant barrage of (hyper)sexualization of female athletes and women's sport" (2012, 52):

The International Volleyball Federation recently required that female athletes wear bikini uniforms (i.e., the uniforms could not exceed 6 centimeters in width at the hip)... The Badminton World Federation (BWF) instituted a rule that women must wear skirts, and an American Deputy President of the BWF defended the rule by claiming, "We just want them to look feminine and have a nice presentation so women will be more popular".... There is no evidence of similar fashion shows for the unveiling of new men's sport leagues, or even new uniforms for existing men's leagues!

Indeed, the interplay of sexuality and athleticism that underpins women's sport in general is also evident in roller derby and can be observed through the development of a visual language where derby is promoted in a pinup-girl aesthetic, and where skaters' fashions, uniforms, and makeup have been historically exaggeratedly campy, theatrical, sexy, and burlesque. In our observations (especially in pre-bout preparations), women initially exist in a space where they act (and are perceived) more like derby "pinup girls"—where traditional notions of femininity are "on display" and the girls "perform" gender for the gaze of the audience. As a skating-rink owner expresses,

Dressing sexy, I think, is the reality and effort of having to "put butts in the seats" ... emphasizing this sexy femininity is a technique to get people out to see "hot chicks" beat on each other ... but the hope is that they stay because they see that these girls are real athletes. (Miss Tina)

Players also note this use and play on sexuality:

Come see hot chicks beat each other up ... yup, it's a marketing tool. (Scarlet O'Scare Ya)

Your sexuality is not something you think about while playing. But before a bout you are thinking about "your look" and what you plan to show off—like your tattoos or other aspects of your body.... (Ruthless Benedict)

Yet, through the nature of game play, the skaters also challenge these traditional notions of what women's bodies should look like. To this end, while several athletes acknowledge using traditional sexuality and the feminine ideal to sell tickets, they also acknowledge using the venue of derby to promote a more expansive definition of beauty. In this sense, derby provides a space to "show off" different types of bodies: older adult bodies, tattooed bodies, larger bodies, and transgendered bodies (derby is open to those who are male-to-female transitioned), thus challenging and expanding cultural norms and standards of beauty. For example:

Regardless of your body type, for bigger girls or smaller girls, derby can really be a self-esteem boost ... you get to put on tight tights and booty shorts and you can feel sexy ... and you get go out there and show off to the crowd. This is an awesome thing ... you look awesome, feel awesome, and you play awesome. (Ruthless Benedict)

As an older woman, I like that I can put on tights and a tutu and feel sexy.... I think derby is great because it allows for a diverse set of women and body types, and I get to skate in front of an audience and show them that I am still active, powerful ... and yes, alluring [laughs]. (Deck-Her)

As noted here, a number of derby athletes feel it necessary to increase interest in their sport by “selling sex”—and scholars have routinely critiqued these practices, contending that the sexualization of women athletes serves only to reinforce patriarchal supremacy and disempower women. Yet, as our research suggests, the sexual performances and presentations of female derby athletes are not often viewed as disempowering. In fact, our derby athletes suggested that they both accommodated and manipulated cultural norms of beauty to achieve empowerment. The women we observed admitted to using their sexuality and the “gaze” of the audience to empower positive self-conceptualizations, as well as to promote alternative femininities as objects of desire. In this way, derby bouts exist as forums that push spectators to rethink what it means to be a sporting woman, a sexual woman, and a desirable woman.

Subcategory 3B: Selling Derby, Selling Athleticism

Finally, we also find that derby players actively attempt to “flip the script” and ultimately seek to sell derby through sheer athleticism and the joy of sporting competition. Stated in another manner, the players transitioned from being sexy ladies (and perhaps sex objects) to derby women athletes who use aggression, strength, and explicit demonstrations of power to hook fans. Several athletes commented on this process:

Once the game begins, you don't think about or care about looking sexy anymore ... you're only thinking about strategy and the game itself. (Ruthless Benedict)

Yes, initially I want to look hot for my husband and for the crowd ... but once the game begins, dressing sexy is also a functional byproduct of needing to be sleek and not get caught on things ... you work your ass off out there.... I mean when you get done, you look like ass, your makeup is just all over your face, and you smell god-awful. Someone said that after a bout you smell like Satan's jockstrap. It smells so bad. So I don't feel very sexy during a bout ... but I do feel like an athlete. (Seam-Rip-Her)

I don't think about it [looking sexy for the crowd] when the bout has started. I mean if I see a girl who looks hot in her outfit, I think “heyyy girl,” but then I still hit her as hard as I can [laughs].... I try to win over the crowd with my hard hits, my [athleticism], and the way I interact with the crowd [by encouraging them] to cheer for good play. (Lady Ricochet)

As noted in the previous section, the selling of sex is often seen as a necessary evil for female athletes (Kane, LaVoi, and Fink 2013). This, however, has been termed the “Faustian bargain” by sportswriter Robert Lipsyte (1999). Specifically, he identifies the selling of sport via sex as a foolhardy venture where fans come to desire sex appeal, not athletic competence in women. Indeed, a number of cultural critics suggest that the best way to attract fans is through the promotion of athleticism and the inherent drama of sport itself. For instance, sportswriter Kirk Johnson (1998) observes that selling sport through sex appeal becomes, in the end, a flawed and unsustainable way to build a fan base; the more athletic way to “sell” sport is to emphasize that it is mean, ugly, complicated, and occasionally brutal. Though Johnson's observations

are a bit hyperbolic, his point is that fans value skill and game play over sex appeal. Further, as Mary Jo Kane, Nicole M. LaVoi, and Janet S. Fink note, research demonstrates that the approach of selling women's sport through sex is not only ineffective but counterproductive: "Female fans—the core demographic for women's sports and those most likely to purchase the products female athletes endorse—react negatively to hypersexualized images of sportswomen" (2013, 292). Instead, a more effective strategy in the recruitment of women is the highlighting of images that promote athleticism and mastery of sport.

In response to these findings, we note that our participants do use sex appeal to sell interest in their game—and, to this end, some feel they need to use sex to sell tickets and some outright enjoy the promotion of their sexuality. But we also note that our participants' comments echo the observations cited above; they ultimately feel that their physical play, the brilliance of technique, and the drama of competition will be what keeps spectators in their seats and coming back for more.

Subcategory 3C: Selling Derby: Finding Connections between Beauty and Athleticism

In our attempt to make sense of—and find connections between—the three subcategories of our third theme, we adapt Jane M. Ussher's (1997) work on female sexuality, female cultural scripts, and social interaction. Specifically, we use Ussher's work to posit the following: Our derby athletes (and female athletes generally) must actively negotiate various "scripts" in order to do both sport and femininity. These scripts, as defined by Ussher, include "doing girl," "resisting girl," and "subverting femininity." In "doing girl," Ussher describes a cultural script where a woman acknowledges the images and bodywork of idealized femininity and performs them to various degrees in order to be acknowledged and legitimated by larger power structures (in this case, male sporting fans). To this end, we noted how derby players "do girl" by using pinup visuals, through body tattoos, sexy costumes, and theatrics, to market and grow their sport and "put butts in the seats."

Yet skaters also "resist girl." In describing this script, Ussher suggests that women combat the confining notions of not only what a girl's body should look like but also what a girl can do with her body. As noted in the above section on expanding beauty, we find that women use derby to create a more diverse and inclusive set of beauty standards, and use the venue of the bout to sell these expansive ideals to the audience. Further, women also "resist girl" by showing off what their bodies can do and by using their bodies to express athleticism, strength, and risk without the need to adopt masculine accoutrements in order to be considered legitimate holders of power.

Lastly, Ussher writes that "subverting femininity" is the knowing play with gender as a performance, twisting and parodying traditional scripts of femininity in a public display in order to critique these cultural norms. While our observations suggested that this was not a core script adopted by most players, some did nonetheless attempt to "subvert femininity" through the exaggerated use of traditional feminine markers such as blush, eyeliner, and lipstick—or, as some of our interviewees described it, their "war paint." In this way, roller derby could be read as a parody of exploited sexuality, in which adopting a practice outside of its usual context can show the instability and constructedness of the norm being parodied (Butler 1990). For instance, as Jennifer Carlson writes in her study of female roller derby athletes,

hyperbole becomes a technique with which to engage [these] norms to indicate their flimsiness.... By presenting a raw exaggerated femininity through name, dress and appearance, they question the emphasized femininity that requires them to be passively and physically weak without actually eschewing femininity as a whole. (2010, 430, 433)

Obviously, the meaning of roller derby players' eroticized presentations is dependent on the viewer's interpretation and reception context. Yet, because these displays combine "both patriarchal and feminist forms of female spectacle" (Kearney 2011, 286), some will view derby as a celebration of feminine sexuality, strength, and power, and/or as a mocking of gendered expectations, while others will see the sport as sensual exploitation and as a way to engage the traditional male gaze (Cohen 2008). Thus, derby skaters (like female athletes in general) might feel pressure to exploit sexuality as one of the forms of power available to sell their sport. Here, roller derby athletes exist in a space where they have to blend and engage multiple identities, ranging from traditional feminine markers of fashion and sexuality to markers of fierce athletic competition. If nothing else, derby reminds us that there are complex and often contradictory norms surrounding gender and athleticism, and that female athletes face unique challenges and contradictions in sport.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the opening of this paper we asked in what ways sport makes a difference in the lives of the people who play it. We then employed a sporting feminist perspective to answer this question and detail how women benefit from the sport of roller derby. Our analysis suggests that the sport does in fact positively impact the lives of the women playing it. Here, we find that playing derby provided women with experiences that empowered and transformed them in multiple ways. Further, we also said we wanted to conduct our project to see if our observations mirrored or departed from the literature in significant ways. But we noted, too, that regardless of our findings, we would simply relate the stories and experiences of everyday women in sport. To reiterate the writing of Jennifer Hargreaves, this work was a sporting feminist undertaking "to highlight and champion the everyday experiences of ordinary women [so that they] might be recognized as hidden heroines of sport" (2000, 8).

So what did we find? We note that many of our observations match much of the previous academic work on derby. Specifically, derby is a powerful venue for discovering the joys of physical strength, sacrifice, and risk.² In this way, it helps to challenge the idea that physicality is exclusively a male value, found only in male sport. Further, as argued here and elsewhere (see Finley 2010), derby becomes a venue that combats the negative and disempowering effects of enculturation into patriarchal systems—systems that promote the physical inferiority of the female body (Blood 2005). Our observations suggest that the majority of the derby athletes felt empowered by the opportunities for strong physical contact and derived pleasure from such physical expressions. Indeed, derby is a sport that allows women to gain bodily empowerment through "a positive redefinition of the body and the feeling wherein one is less alienated and insecure in her body and in her bodily world relation" (Liimakka 2011, 442).

However, as noted in this article, our research does depart from the literature to suggest that sport and physical empowerment influenced a number of the women on the team to critically assess gender ideology and gender relations beyond the world of sport. For some, derby became a platform to address gender inequities and gendered harassment at work. Our observations counter, if only in small ways, research that claims that a woman's physical empowerment does not lead to broader social empowerment and the challenging of gendered arrangements at large. As a linked theme, we also found that this increased body awareness suggested to women that they had become a "badass"—a self-assertive, confident woman. Of the badass, Carly Gieseler writes that "traditional women's sports hide labor, violence, and competitiveness to reify the woman's body as naturally graceful and beautiful," while "derby skaters reclaim their bodies"

(2014, 772). Along the same lines, Mariah Burton Nelson notes that “if in that process female bodies look unladylike, if they become bruised or bloody or simply unattractive, that seems irrelevant” (1994, x–xi).

Moving away from the body to our observations of teamwork, we note that our work also mirrors previous findings on female sporting spaces. Here, we found that athletes opted for venues where competition and cooperation were compatible, and where people were encouraged to be partners and opponents at the same time. This too is important to emphasize, as the derby athletes counter the prevailing and culturally embedded stereotypes that women can’t work together and that there are no viable alternatives to traditional notions of masculine conceptions of teamwork.

Finally, our last section identified the ways by which derby athletes challenged and expanded normative cultural standards of femininity and beauty. Here we noted how derby provides a space to “show off” and celebrate different types of bodies: older adult bodies, tattooed bodies, larger bodies, and transgendered bodies. However, this being said, because derby is celebratory of the body, some will view it as a celebration of feminine sexuality, strength, and power, while others will see the sport as sensual exploitation and a way to engage the traditional male gaze. Regardless of these divergent views, derby reminds us that women’s sports are still underappreciated in their celebration of pure athleticism, and derby skaters (like female athletes in general) might feel pressure to exploit sexuality as one of the forms of power available to recruit and hold fans.

In conclusion, our findings extend, highlight, and give confirmation to the unique space of derby in the worlds of sport and gendered relations. Derby gives both players and audience members the opportunity to experience women’s performances of physical skill and athletic violence, while concurrently forcing reflection on male dominance over sport and patriarchal ideologies of what women’s bodies can do and should look like. As Gieseler writes, “In a society that values women for what they are not, derby allows women to be all that they are in a very complex, transcendent way. On the track, women are made visible in all of their athletic, strong, corporeal glory” (2014, 772). This is why derby continues to be both a source of female empowerment and a compelling object of academic study.

While it is encouraging to see women participating in a physically demanding sport that challenges social conceptions and conventions, it must be remembered that female athletes still face unique challenges to participation in sport. The continued efforts to limit opportunities for sportswomen remain a contested terrain, and we wonder how much time will pass before this is no longer the case. Thus, future research should continue to detail women’s experiences in sport, including both the joys and challenges of athletic performance. Further, future work must also continue to explore and share the athletic sites and sporting activities that empower women to be competitive, confident, strong, and outspoken. In the end, we thank the athletes for their participation, for the enjoyment of athleticism brought in witnessed competitions, and for their knowing and unknowing efforts to transform society through sport.

Notes

1. See the “Rules” section of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association’s site (www.wftda.com/rules) for the most up-to-date official rules of women’s flat-track roller derby.

2. While our work focused on the joys and benefits of participation, additional research could highlight areas of conflict and the constraints on derby athletes’ participation in the sport. For example, future research should exam-

ine obstacles of play, such as injuries, or time and monetary constraints. Other possible venues might include family stresses experienced as a result of play. Because of the time commitment necessary in derby, we heard occasional casual references about players' significant others expressing displeasure with their partner's dedication to the team. Indeed, several interviewees suggested that we interview their "derby widows" (the husbands/wives or boy/girlfriends), who were "lost" to them during the playing season, for their perspectives and the challenges experienced due to the presence of derby in their lives. Finally, at a broader level, because derby is also an alternative venue for women's sport, we call for more inquiry into other alternative athletic sites that detail an authentic understanding of women's experiences, including both the joys and the challenges that exist in athletic performance.

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