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They may be CPAs, attorneys and moms by day, but they're butt-kicking derby girls at night.

RUBBER CITY ROLLER GIRLS
◆ R C R G ◆

by Abby Cymerman
photos by Shane Wynn and
Timothy Kane



◆ Attorney Sindi Harrison is in her office preparing a contract, when one of her co-workers jokingly tells her, “Put your skates on, and get it done.”

To Harrison, it’s not just a figure of speech.

Since October 2009, Harrison has been a member of the **Rubber City Rollergirls** league, serving as a team captain and skating under the derby name Sindanator

— a nickname she received at work for her tough comments on other attorneys’ documents.

A former speed skater, 30-year-old Harrison joined the Rollergirls five months after giving birth to her daughter. “I thought it would be a really good way to get back in shape, so I Googled [them],” she says. “I was at a practice the next day, and I haven’t looked back since.”

◆ Hearing the phrase “roller derby” brings to mind different images, depending on your age. People who grew up in the ’30s and ’40s remember it as an endurance sport (57,000 laps!) on a banked track, while those growing up in the ’50s may remember how a new medium called television catapulted roller derby into a national phenomenon. The derby continued to be popular through the ’60s, but by the ’70s, the wheels started coming off

— despite the 1972 kitsch classic “Kansas City Bomber,” starring Raquel Welch. Over the next few decades, promoters tried to resurrect the derby, but it took the new century to revive the sport — fueled mainly by fierce all-girl leagues launching around the country and partly by a renewed interest from Hollywood. (Remember Drew Barrymore’s 2009 film, “Whip It?”)

There are now 300 to 400 leagues worldwide,

with female Derby teams now skating in places like New York, LA, Phoenix, Seattle and, of course, Akron. Teams have 10 players, with five on the track for each jam or play period. The Jammer, or sprint skater, scores points by lapping the other team’s players. But no competitor will let the Jammer pass without a fight. Meanwhile, her teammates — the Blockers — do all they can to help. And play can get plenty aggressive.

One to Watch



Kira Heeley, 23

DAY JOB: associate marketing specialist

KNOWN AS: Maul-ibu Barbie #101. "As a little girl I loved playing with Barbies and still love the color pink. ... The number 101 represents my sponsor, 101 Bottles, out of Kent, which sells beer and wine. The 'ibu' plays with the concept of IBUs (International Bittering Units) in beer."

POSITION: Jammer

INJURIES: zero broken bones; seven stitches in her chin

WHY ROLLER DERBY:

"I started with speed skating at age 4, competing in inline short track speed skating and short track ice speed skating. In college, I picked up jam skating — essentially break dancing, dance and shuffle skating on quad roller skates. The natural next step was roller derby. I absolutely *had* to join a team."

HOW FAST DOES SHE

SKATE: "Like lightning!"

SIGNATURE MOVE: "In jam skating, it's the Y-Kick. For derby, my signature move is The Dodge. If a girl is winding up to hit me, I quickly stop, slow down or cut directions, sending the hitting girl careening out of bounds!"

An amateur, pay-to-play league, the

Rollergirls return March 19 for another season of skating at the John S. Knight Center in downtown Akron. This year, they hope to become sanctioned by the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), which will allow them to keep a championship in their sights.

Tracy Soulsby, 42, a.k.a. Eighty-SixHer, is one of the original seven Rollergirls founders (five of them are still part of the organization). A CPA and small-business owner by day, Soulsby plays on the team and also serves as vice president of communications and business development.

Soulsby first put the wheels in motion as a child, skating at a now-extinct rink on Waterloo Road. "That's what I did for recreation as a kid, all the way up until I was about 16," she says, adding that, "On a lot of levels, [being a part of the team] satisfies some need. Whether it's getting in shape or meeting friends or being involved with growing a business — there are so many facets to it."

But the evolution of the Rollergirls' league was a slow process. After some creative self-promotion (meet-and-greets and skating in parades), word finally spread — and the team now gets emails daily from women who are ready to roll. With that kind of buzz, the team can now be more selective when choosing players.

In addition to talent, commitment is also a requirement; they have three two-hour practices a week, at Springfield Lake Roller Rink in Lakemore and Starlite Roller Rink in Atwater. "A lot of people don't realize the amount of work and practice that we put into derby," says Harrison. "It's not a casual thing. It takes a lot of dedication."

Soulsby agrees. "Once you get involved with derby, it does really suck you in and take over your life. If I could make this my living, I would."

Today, the Rubber City Rollergirls' league consists of two teams. The "A" team — made up of skilled, veteran skaters — is called the "A.K. Rowdy Rollers," and the "B" team — the "Rubber City Renegades" — allows newbies to gain experience. Each gameday is a double-header, with the Renegades hitting the track first, followed by the Rowdy Rollers.

Each team plays an opponent with a similar skill set — and the team with the most points wins.

One to Watch



Natalie Collier, 32

DAY JOB: AT&T field technician

KNOWN AS: Nastalie Beating #P40, 'Nasty' for short — “mostly because my hits are intimidating and dramatic. And my sense of humor is a bit risqué. ‘Nastalie’ is a name my friends gave me, and ‘Beating’ refers to the punishment I deal. I chose ‘P40’ after the WWII Curtis P40 Warhawk.”

POSITION: A-Team Captain, Tail Blocker and Jammer

INJURIES: zero broken bones, lots of pulled muscles, fat lips, the occasional black eye — “and lots of broken hearts!”

WHY ROLLER DERBY:

“I love the sense of camaraderie and acceptance. ... After we finish beating up on each other, everyone from both teams can go out for an awesome time.”

SIGNATURE MOVE: “When I play Tail Blocker, I like to leave the inside of the track open and ‘strafe’ the Jammer with a can-opener as she’s coming through. It’s a pretty dramatic hit that involves a 90-degree high-speed turn that sends the opposition hurtling out of bounds. The look on her face right before impact is priceless! Always a crowd pleaser!”

◆ In roller derby, a game is called a **bout**, and a bout is two 30-minute periods. Each 30-minute period is broken into two-minute increments, and each two-minute increment is called a jam.

Five girls from each team are on the track. One girl from each team is the Jammer — the scoring player — and the other four from each team are Blockers, who play offense and defense at the same time. Blockers skate close together in a pack, trying to help their Jammer through the pack while hindering the other team’s Jammer. When the Jammer gets through the pack, she scores one point for every girl on the opposite team that she passes.

Seven referees officiate every Rollergirls bout, with the current WFTDA rule book being 43 pages. The rules, however, are updated once or twice a year, since derby is a continuously evolving sport.

While strategy is a key component, roller derby isn’t for the faint of heart (knee injuries top the list). Team president and one of the team’s founders, Lisa Gaj (a.k.a. Brown Eyed Bomber) says WFTDA rules regulate the degree of contact allowed during a bout and, like hockey, roller derby has a penalty box for players who take their aggressiveness to the extreme.

“People do get hurt though, it just happens,” Gaj says. “I messed up my knee one time because I ran into the wall. Then, I was bouting and got hit the wrong way. My feet flew out from under me, and I landed straight on my tailbone. After that, I bought crash pads — we all call them butt pads. They’re a very good investment!”

A 45-year-old medical coder from Uniontown, Gaj says her family supports — and enjoys — her derby devotion. Her husband was last year’s scorekeeper; her sons get a kick out of seeing



Mom on the track; and her daughters take tickets or hand out programs on gameday. “One of my daughters wants to be a derby girl when she gets older,” she says. “And I’ll encourage it.”

Harrison’s 20-month-old daughter is also no stranger to skates, although hers are made by Fisher-Price. “If she’s old enough to walk, she’s old enough to skate,” she says. “[Toddlers] are closer to the floor, so it doesn’t hurt as bad when they go down.”



One to Watch

Dawn Gifford Jones

DAY JOB: owns a home child-care center

KNOWN AS: Punisher Pixie #3. "Everybody calls me Pixie. I'm little and quick, darting around the floor. The Punisher part is from the movie, 'The Punisher' — 'The guilty will be punished.' As for #3, I have three [children]."

POSITION: Blocker. "Yeah, I am little, but I can still be everywhere the opposing Jammer wants to be. I'm not afraid to hit someone twice my size. One time I was asked, 'Did anyone ever tell you that you're not big?'"

INJURIES: zero broken bones — "just some dislocated ribs, and shoulder and knee injuries."

WHY ROLLER DERBY: "All day I have fun with the [kids], waiting patiently for them to catch up, catch on and catch a clue. Roller derby is my chance for big girl fun — pushing my body to the limit, as fast and as hard as I can go!"

SIGNATURE MOVE: "I'm told that my 'uppercut' shoulder checks are quite ... memorable. My signature looks like a bruise."

One to Watch



DAY JOB: "You might call it unemployment — I call it funemployment. Also, I'm a full-time student at Kent State."

KNOWN AS: Krakatoa, AK-47. "Krakatoa was a huge volcano that exploded in the 19th century and basically blew itself out of the ocean. Also, it's just a fun word to say. As for AK-47, it fits with my initials."

POSITION: Jammer and Blocker

INJURIES: "I had some epic bruises when I first started but so far, I've stayed intact."

WHY ROLLER DERBY: "Why not?! There are a million reasons to play and almost no reasons not to."

HOW FAST DOES SHE SKATE: "Faster than the other Jammer."

SIGNATURE MOVE: "The 'get off the ground as fast as possible' move."

Allison Kluge, 21

DAY JOB: residence director at KSU; full-time doctoral student

KNOWN AS: Jackie O'Sassin #4 — based partly on her nickname, Jackie Onassis. As for O'Sassin, "it just made sense! I'm small but solid, and don't take a lot from other people. And I've been known to have a quick tongue and a big bark."

POSITION: All, plus A-Team Co-Captain. "But I really enjoy hitting, especially as a Tail because I like to linger in the back and put the pressure on their Jammer without dealing with any pack riff-raff going on. I like one-on-one action and giving the action just as much as others enjoy watching it."

INJURIES: None yet. "Fingers crossed."

WHY ROLLER DERBY: "Derby is the perfect sport — it blends beauty and brawn! And Rubber City Rollergirls ... focuses on giving back to the community and makes me proud to be part of it."

SIGNATURE MOVE: "I love water-falling — where a teammate blocks an opponent and stands her up just long enough for me to come in and blindside her. I also love a good can-opener!"

Jackie Haramis, 28



Besides nicknames, it's not uncommon for derby girls to don fishnet tights and punk-rock costumes, while also flaunting kick-ass attitudes and tattoos.

"I've had a lot of co-workers come out and watch bouts, and they said I had this different persona. I think they wouldn't expect me to do something like that," says Harrison. "I don't realize until I watch the tape afterwards how excited I get and how much I yell."

Last year, the Rollergirls had a 5-5 record, with an average attendance of 800 people. "We keep our prices affordable so families can come,"

Soulsby says. "We encourage people to stick around at the end, and the kids like to get our autographs. It's really odd to see the range of people who attend our events."

Before each bout, Soulsby says she often looks around at all the people in attendance and thinks, "Look at what we've created." "Three years ago, this wasn't even here," she says. "That's my favorite part: knowing that we created something from nothing. For me, it's a labor of love."

For Gaj, the relationships she's formed with her roller derby comrades are unlike any oth-

ers. "You can knock somebody down, and they get up and tell you, 'Hey, that was a good hit.' Where else can you do that?"

/ Writer Abby Cymerman is the assistant editor of akronlife. If she joined the team, her derby name would most definitely be Abby Normal. (Thanks, Mel Brooks.) You can reach her at acymerman@bakermidiagroup.com

Comments?

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