Roller derby is an amateur, competitive, contact sport that has experienced a revival within the past 10 years in the United States and abroad. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association notes that there are currently 156 full-member leagues and 58 apprentice leagues worldwide. The sport is heavily dominated by women, although leagues for men and youth exist as well.

 Derby skaters utilize quad roller skates, specially formulated wheels, helmets, mouth guards, and elbow-, wrist-, and kneepads. Today, the vast majority of roller derby is played on oval-shaped flat tracks. During a bout (game), two teams compete for points, and the team with the most points at the end of the game wins. Each bout consists of two 30-minute periods; each period is made up of an indeterminate number of jams (as jams can last anywhere from a few seconds to 2 minutes). At the beginning of a new jam, each team sends out a lineup consisting of one “jammer,” three “blockers,” and a “pivot.” Blockers and pivots from both teams constitute “the pack.” To score points, jammers make an initial pass through the pack and then collect one point for every opposing skater they pass legally during subsequent passes. Blockers hip check and booty block opposing skaters while providing assists in the form of whips and pushes to their own jammer. After two minutes of play or after the lead jammer (the first jammer to break through the pack legally) calls off the jam, a new lineup of skaters are sent onto the track.

Until recently, the sport was most notably associated with over-the-top theatrics and premeditated scripts reminiscent of professional wrestling; such antics were commonly used as marketing ploys for televised roller derbies of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, participants challenge the misconception that bouts are staged or faked by emphasizing derby's legitimacy as a “real” sport, and their own legitimacy as “real” athletes. Skaters highlight how derby incorporates aggressive physical contact, fierce competition, offensive and defensive strategies, strength, and speed. Skaters also talk of the countless hours spent training and conditioning, describe injuries they have both dealt and endured, and trade insider knowledge regarding the merits of various wheels, skate setups, and track surfaces.

Most research on roller derby focuses on the do-it-yourself nature of the sport, the potential for women's gender transgression within the sport, and players' violations of traditional appearance norms. Similar to music subcultures, roller derby leagues are do-it-yourself grassroots organizations run “by the skaters, for the skaters.” League members do more than just skate; they donate their time as board members, captains, trainers, accountants, and committee heads. This collective labor ensures that skaters retain control over their leagues, their organizations, their bodies, and the sport of roller derby itself. In this way, skaters actively create and maintain derby as a female-dominated, nonconventional sport subculture, thereby challenging the exclusion of women from most subcultural spaces.
This commitment to independence has prompted the emergence of underground economies within roller derby communities. Skaters, volunteers, and fans support these underground economies by purchasing skates, gear, clothing, accessories, art, and services (e.g., photography and web design) from "skater owned and operated" businesses. Derby leagues are not managed by large sport corporations, thereby making it easier to resist commercialization. The revenue generated from fund-raisers, the sale of bout tickets, and skaters' monthly dues goes directly toward paying training facility rental fees, advertising and marketing costs, travel stipends for away games, and bout production overheads. Additionally, most leagues are nonprofit and donate portions of their proceeds to local, charitable organizations.

Derby skaters' gender transgression has also been of recent academic interest. Research on women's athletic participation suggests that female athletes have been channeled into sports that reinforce and uphold conventional beliefs about femininity. Sports such as yoga, synchronized swimming, and aerobics comply with gender norms that require women to be slender, graceful, toned (not ripped), stylish, and attractive. Typically, sports that involve bodily contact, aggression, competition, risk of injury and pain, building muscle mass, and profuse sweating, smelliness, or dirtiness have been considered off-limits for women. Roller derby poses a clear challenge to these gendered behavioral expectations as women skate fast, hit hard, perform challenging skating maneuvers, fall down and recover quickly, get sweaty, sustain injuries, and endure elbow- and kneepad “stink.”

Additional research suggests that derby skaters challenge hegemonic gender norms through the adoption of witty, raunchy, provocative, and intimidating pseudonyms (“derby names”), such as Pussy Venom, Zsa Zsa LaGore, Sarah Impalin, Heavy Flo, Ivana Dreihump, Slutnik, and Tuff Tits. Here, overt references to violence, sexuality, and the body allow skaters to parody and mock traditional notions of femininity. Furthermore, skaters engage in “gender maneuvering,” or the disruption of seemingly complementary relations between femininity and masculinity, through the pairing of hypersexualized clothing items with masculinized sporting and fashion accoutrements. At bouts, spectators are confronted by skaters of all sizes outfitted in revealing booty shorts, fishnet stockings, bulky protective padding, and football-style “eye black.” Such pairings may disrupt the sexual objectification that typically occurs when women wear hyperfeminized clothing alone.

Researchers have also been interested in derby skaters' violations of physical appearance norms, namely, those regarding body size and adornment. As an institution, sport has the potential to normalize certain bodies while marginalizing others. Today, the norms that govern sporting bodies privilege young, white, lean, muscular, male bodies. When women do participate in sport, they are subject to a beauty-related exercise culture, which stresses slimness and weight-loss as primary goals. Roller derby destabilizes this normalizing regime by embracing skaters of all shapes, sizes, and weights and by teaching them how to effectively use their bodies (regardless of size and shape) as “weapons” on the track. This emphasis on the utility of skaters' bodies provides women with an alternative exercise discourse, and encourages them to rethink their own embodiment and corporeal potential.

Skaters' adornment practices also pose challenges to hegemonic appearance norms. Some skaters sport offbeat hairstyles and colors, multiple piercings, and large, visible tattoos. Others don clothing and accessories (e.g., vintage cardigans, skinny jeans, and nerd glasses) linked to various music subcultures. In this way, derby is a subcultural niche that attracts modified and alternatively styled women. As with any sporting subculture, new members learn and adopt the attitudes, styles, and practices common among older members. On joining, some previously unmodified skaters begin engaging in
counterhegemonic adornment practices. Roller derby creates space for women to be transgressively embodied in sport.

See also: Female Bodybuilding; Feminist Theory; Professional Wrestling; Punk Subculture; Sport and Deviance

Further Readings


Natalie M. Peluso

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


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