



ROLLER DERBY IS CHANGING, BUT IT HASN'T LOST ITS FIERCE COMPETITIVE EDGE.

Inside the Civic Center in Butte, Montana, Butte's Copper City Queens take on Helena's Hel'z Belles. The whistle blows and the jam begins. Packs of players skate backwards and forwards while strategically bumping and shoving each other. Linking arms to form a wall, Mother Earth, KimAKaze, and Short Stop block the path of the opposing team's jammer. She Hates Me jumps the apex, her body catching at least a foot of air in an attempt to break the chain and score. But instead she takes a shoulder check to the gut from Short Stop, falls out of bounds and is quickly recycled backwards several feet. Mother Earth grins with pride.



Roller derby was once famous as an over-the-top theatrical entertainment. Competitors favored fishnet stockings, short skirts, and heavy make-up. In a modern revival, the sport has evolved into a competitive, athletic game played internationally. More than 1,800 leagues compete worldwide. Men's, women's, and junior leagues are gaining popularity, and the sport has become a possible contender for the Olympic games.

★ OFF TO THE RACES

Back in 1935, Helena, Montana, native Leo Seltzer racked his brain for the next big entertainment craze. He was in charge of booking events for the Chicago Coliseum. Scribbling on a restaurant menu, Seltzer drafted an idea that combined the popular trend of dance marathons with roller-skating and women athletes. Seltzer invented the sport Transcontinental Roller Derby.

The game involved teams of two, a man and woman, roller-skating around a banked track in an epic race of endurance. Teams were challenged to skate 4,000 miles, approximately the distance from New York City to San Diego. Players skated for long periods of time. Races could last over 40 days. Teams ate, slept, and *everything* at the venue. Players snoozed on cots in the infield, rotating skating shifts. Doctors and nurses stayed on hand to check

player's vitals and ensure safety.

Transcontinental Roller Derby was wildly popular in Chicago for a few years. Cheaper than a baseball game or a movie, the event offered an opportunity for the working class to escape their troubled daily lives during the Great Depression. Seltzer eventually took the show on the road, transporting his teams to other Midwest cities, such as Minneapolis, Cleveland, and Detroit.

In 1937, Seltzer changed the rules of the game to roll-in more excitement and competition. Instead of the long distance, multi-day race, the redesigned game added a scoring system and physical contact. That version is similar to what we see played across the world today.

★ MEET ME IN THE PENALTY BOX

Modern roller derby takes place on a flat track. Instead of using contemporary roller blades, teams play on quad roller skates. The uniform consists of a helmet, knee and elbow pads, and wrist guards. And if you'd like to keep your pearly whites intact, a mouth guard is wise to wear. The 60-minute match is called a bout and is divided into two 30-minute periods. Each play is broken down into shifts called jams. Teams consist of five players, four in the pack and one jammer. The pack players are blockers that shove, hip check, and freeze out the opposing team's



jammer. Jammers wear a large star on their helmets. They try to pass the opposing team's pack. Blockers use their hips, rears, and shoulders to keep the jammer from passing. Jabbing elbows, tripping players, or passing out of bounds are all ways to earn a 30-second timeout in the penalty box.

Once a jammer has skated her way through the pack the first time, she is ready to score points. When the jammer legally passes a blocker on the opposing team, she scores a point. The jam ends when the lead jammer puts her hands on her hips, signaling to stop the play—or when two minutes have gone by. After a 30-second break, a new jam begins.

“Roller derby is sweat, hard work, and commitment, and requires as much passion as any other sport. We are real athletes trying to give roller derby its due credit as a physically competitive sport, not just a recreational game,” says Jennifer Bagley, aka DamYa Bagley, a member of Helena's Hel'z Belles. Bagley has been playing derby for five years. She's witnessed the recent evolution of the game and says she likes that derby is becoming more structured and competitive. But she admits it can be difficult keeping up with all the rule changes.

Along with the shifting rules, interest in the sport has

waxed and waned over the years. In the past, roller derby has staged bouts with fake punches and theatrical make-up. Players acted out games on the track in scripted fights and flashy costumes. During the late 1980s, in an attempt to reinvigorate interest, a televised game challenged skaters to compete on a figure-eight track around an alligator pit while rock bands performed on the side. The staged theatrics have fallen off the track and been replaced with rules and regulations. Elbow jabs and hair pulling are no longer allowed or encouraged. But some things have stuck, like picking unusual or funny derby names.

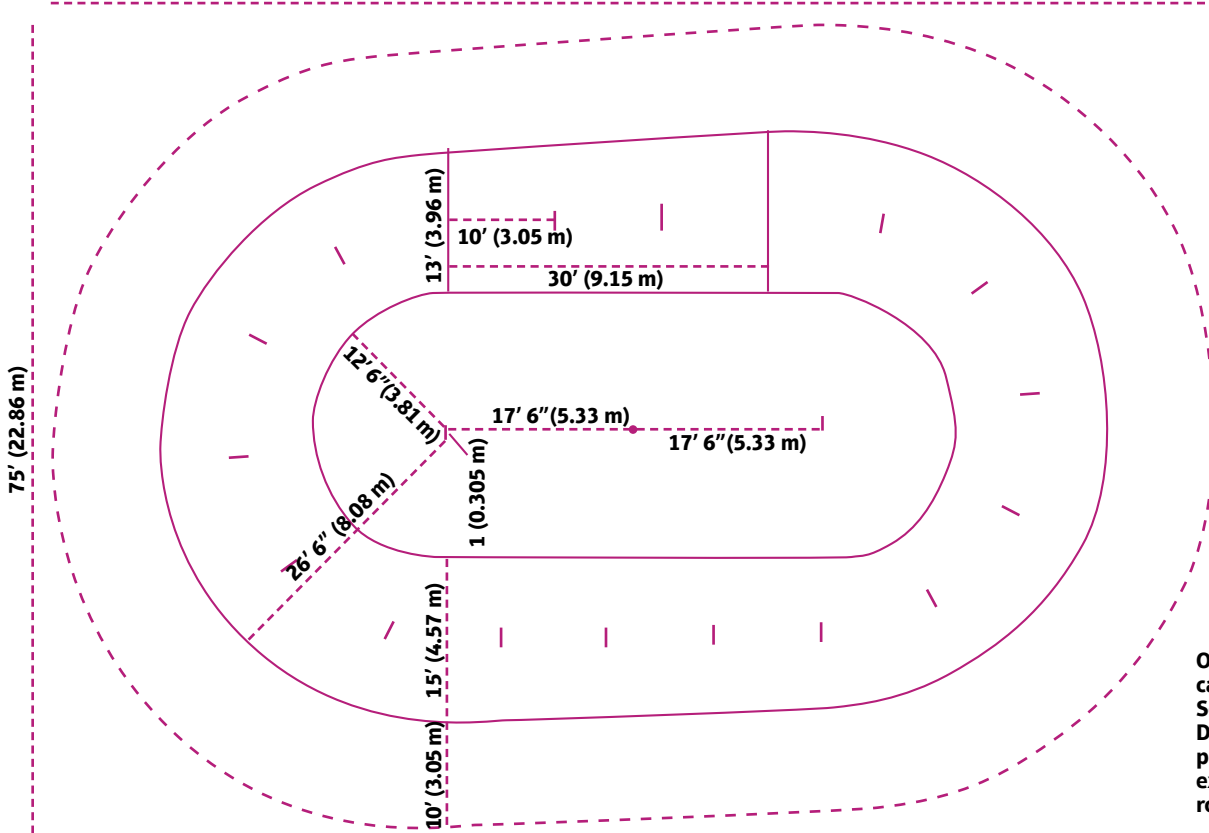
★ RALLY AROUND THE PACK

By day she is an officer of the court, and by night she coaches kids to build speed and balance. Jessi “Jester” Moon started playing derby when she was just 15 years old when her mom dragged her to practice. At first she hated it, but she fell in love with the game when her best friend joined her on the track. Eight years later, she is head coach of Spokane, Washington's Cherry Bomb Brawlers Junior co-ed derby team. “The Bombers were originally all-girls but we put it to a vote with the players to go co-ed because we felt no one should be denied playing this sport,” Jester says.

Fifteen-year-old Melvin “Tribal Terror” Gillespie says that

★ SCIENCE ON THE TRACK

108' (32.92 m)



On a YouTube channel called Roller Derby Science, skater Jayne Doe breaks down physics concepts using examples from the roller derby track.



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when he's not walking, he's skating. He plays for the Cherry Bomb Brawlers and says he loves derby for the adrenaline. "Derby has changed me. It has made me more confident and stronger. It has given me good social skills," he says. Tribal Terror's little sister also plays for the Bombers. Eleven-year-old Mira Gillespie's derby name is MnM. She says derby is exciting and she loves competing with her teammates. Coach Jester believes that players learn camaraderie and teamwork. "That's what I get most out of coaching, is watching all these different players, with such diverse backgrounds, come together and genuinely care for each other because they found roller derby," Jester says.

★ AT THIS STAGE OF THE GAME

Because of roller derby's colorful past, the sport is rediscovering its identity with a balance of culture and competition. Some derby players are hopeful the sport will make it all the way to the Olympics. "Taking derby to an Olympic level would add value to the sport and increase participation. Young girls could discover the option to play," says Kaleena Miller, aka Mother Earth. The 32-year-old has been playing for the Copper City Queens for over a year. She comes to derby with loads of athletic experience under her helmet, including three years of playing professional volleyball in several European countries.

For a game to bring home the gold, the International Olympics Committee (IOC) must first recognize it as a sport. But even after IOC's recognition, the sport still may

not qualify for the Olympic Games. All roller sports have had a difficult time making the cut. Inline skating and rink hockey are recognized but have yet to debut in the Games. The Olympic Charter outlines the rules and regulations for a recognized sport to make it to the event. Men in at least 75 countries and on four continents must play the sport. Women must play the sport in at least 40 countries and on three continents. The gender rule does not bode well for roller derby because it's a predominantly female sport. Either the rules need an update or more men need to lace up skates and head to the track.

★ KEEP CALM AND SKATE ON

No matter where it's headed or where it's been, roller derby is training men, women, and kids to build competitive endurance and athleticism. Leo Seltzer's son Jerry reflects on the wild ride roller derby has taken. He misses the speed and skill earned while playing on a banked track but appreciates the uniqueness of skaters who play on a flat track today. "I have made so many friends and met some of the most interesting people through roller derby," he says. Jerry reminds anyone interested in derby to "never forget it is just a game for whoever skates it to enjoy."

Kristina Lyn Heitkamp is a Montana-based writer, researcher, and environmental journalist. She fondly remembers roller skate night at her elementary school. Heitkamp discovered while researching this article that her derby name would be Story Slinger.