



ROLLER GRRRLS

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RÖRSTRANDSGATAN

 **TOTALLY STOCKHOLM** 10





WHIP IT GOOD

"No gaps!" she shouts at the huddle of girls rolling around the room. "Inside!" she then calls out, the girls shouting the command back. Then "outside!" repeated back at full volume, resounding through the room mixed with the roaring of numerous rolling wheels. It's like an army drill for riot girls, and the outfits here are anything but uniform. It's everything I expected though: lots of pink and punk, tattoos and tatters, nylons and neon, and black balanced by bright colours. Welcome to the wild world of roller derby, where (almost) anything goes and your share of the glory is measured by the size of your bruises.

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Roller derby has seen an international boom in the past decade and is currently the world's fastest-growing female sport. The cradle of this revival is Austin, Texas, where all-female, grassroots leagues sprouted in this American hipster town at the turn of the millennium, creating a new generation of roller derby leagues with a focus on DIY ethics and elements from punk and third-wave feminist aesthetics. The film *Whip It* pushed roller derby even further from its somewhat underground status and over to the ranks of the mainstream, confirming that it was not just a fleeting trend but an established sport that was here to stay.

The roots of roller derby actually go way back and originate in the so-called endurance roller skating races that were organized in the United States as early as the late 19th century. In the 1930s, roller derby started taking on the form we know today as film publicist Leo Seltzer started arranging derby events in Chicago that became a huge attraction, especially as the aggression associated with the sport began to grow. The popularity of roller derby continued to increase over the following years and the sport made its debut on television in the late 1940s, which turned it into a national sensation. Television viewership peaked in the late 1960s, and in the early 1970s the original roller derby league, by this point owned by Leo Seltzer's son, Jerry, was shut down and the sport went into a long slumber, existing on the margins (and then more as

a show than a sport) until its present resurrection.

But now, let us check out exactly what this phenomenon looks like. In short, "bouts" (roller derby term for matches) are played by two teams of five members skating in the same direction around a track. Game play consists of a series of short matchups (or "jams") in which both teams designate a scoring player (or "jammer") who scores points by lapsing members of the rival team. The other four members of the team are

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called "blockers" and their role is to assist their own jammer while hindering the opposing jammer, thus playing both offence and defence simultaneously.

Players most often use a "derby name", which are creative examples of word play with satirical puns and allusions to pop culture (names of bouts and tournaments are also devised in the same style). Costumes, or "boufits", play a big role in the image and culture surrounding roller derby and are often inspired by retro subcultures such as rockabilly, punk, and burlesque. Tattoos are commonly seen and a general riot grrrl attitude is habitually maintained.

Stockholm Roller Derby was founded in 2007 and is the oldest roller derby league in Scandinavia, as well as one of the first leagues to emerge in Europe. The league consists of two teams and is a member of WFTDA (Women's Flat Track Derby Association, the largest governing body for the sport) and last year, several members were selected to play for Team Sweden at the Roller Derby World Cup. Today, the league has around 80 committed members and continues to expand at a steady pace through try-outs and recruitment of "fresh meat".

I dropped by a practice recently to see the girls in action. It was one of the first practices of the season and was extra special for the fact that it was lead by a guest coach from the States who's

a veteran of the sport. SRD trains at an outdoor hockey rink in Gustavsberg and the location is lovely in the evening sun, despite the pre-autumn chill in the air. Cricket-chirps can be heard during the short intervals when the girls stop to listen to the instructions, and then it's just mad rumbling and screeching as they polish those rapid halts.

Jenny Stendahl is a 39-year-old archivist by day, but by night she's "Jender Bender" and one of the founder members of SRD. Starting out as a skater, she's now taken on the role of a referee. "At first I wasn't that impressed with roller derby. I imagined a crowd of middle-aged men panting at girls in skimpy hot pants and fishnet stockings fight-



ing on the track. But when I saw the reality show *Rollergirls* about the Texas league I realized it was an amazing sport. It really flips the gender pancake upside down as strong women dictate the sport and own the track. The name of the sport, roller derby, denotes that it's female skaters playing. When men play it's called 'men's roller derby', not the other way around, as is so usual with most other sports."

"A lot of male leagues have started now but it's not the same. Female roller derby sets the standard, always has and always will I think. Men play the sport totally differently, like rugby on skates where the brilliance of the sport gets lost. Roller derby in its form today is really adjusted to the female anatomy, where skills, tactics, and teamwork is more important than pure muscle power. Of course you have to depend on your muscle power as well, as skating in general demands a lot of muscles! However, they are not used for 'ram skating', but rather for endurance, balance, and swiftness."

Kelly Fried Krave (aka *Crashtest Dolly*) is a 35-year-old writer and a mother of two. Kelly is from the States and moved to Stockholm last year with her Swedish husband. "I was looking for something to anchor me here, where I could meet friends of my own outside the foreign mom community. I'd been aware of derby for a long time and have skater friends in the US. So when I saw a couple of girls skating outside in ripped up tights and quads, I knew there was derby to be found. Minutes later I'd found the SRD website and added the next try-outs to my calendar."

"There were two things that attracted me to the sport: the skating and the contact. I've always loved roller-skating for its own sake and have found that I really love being involved in a contact sport. It's something about using my body in a way that has nothing to do with caretaking. My days are about tiny little people, tiny little fingers and soft little skulls that I have to protect, but in the evenings I can go out there and be powerful, aggressive even. I can lose myself in it and be rewarded for knocking people down. I've spent my whole life being nice and being rewarded for putting other people first so I find it breathtaking to get out there, knock people down, and get cheered for doing it."

"Derby girls tend to be free spirits. That doesn't mean we aren't smart, responsible, and educated, which many of us are, but there is a feeling that the parties and social network are almost as important as the bouts. Almost. There is a lot of hanging out together, a lot of being silly. One thing I find a bit different here to what US-based friends describe is the lack of drama. You hear lots of people making negative comments about all the emotional upheaval and catfight potential in derby teams - 'both derby and drama start with D' sort of stuff. But in general, I find this team very mature and thoughtful and overall supportive of one another. Maybe it's just a cultural thing; Swedes don't go in for the huge emotional displays that Americans do. It's a good thing I think!"

Kim Thörning (aka *Kimizooka*) is a 32-year-old web developer and a rookie with SRD. "I'm addict-

ed to training and exercise of all sorts and had regularly been practicing crossfit and rock climbing. Then a friend told me to try roller derby since she knew I was looking for a change in my life and something that complemented my rock climbing training. As I really love rock climbing I have a very strong upper body but sticks for legs so I wanted to find a fun way to get stronger legs and more endurance. But although it's a great exercise, what I really love about roller derby is the community of fun and the very dedicated people. It's almost like joining a new family! There's also something thrilling about girls engaging in full contact sports because it's awesome and unexpected and then on wheels on top of that!"

Malin Eneström (aka *Misfit Kitteh*) is a 27-year-old web developer who became a part of SRD about a year ago. "Just like many others, I had seen *Whip It* at the Stockholm Film Festival and immediately thought 'I want to do that!' Then I moved to London and forgot about it for a while, but when I was back in Stockholm I looked it up and saw they were having try-outs a few months later. So I bought a pair of skates that I thought were cute (and now I know suck!) and tried to practice on my own all summer because I was afraid I would look like an idiot at the try-outs."

"The appeal in the beginning was learning something completely new and roller derby seemed like something that I, who had never been very athletic, could do as a fun way to exercise. That still holds true, but what you learn once you start playing is



that it's a really intelligent sport, playing offence and defence at the same time, and you never stop learning. After a while you don't even think about the fact that you're on skates or that you're being hit by other people!"

"I think women, or at least derby women, might be a bit braver to try new things and aren't afraid to have fun while competing. Also, the female body suits the game well, where agility and big hips and booty are useful. What I've noticed about the derby community is how everyone takes care of each other

women seem to put more creativity and their personality into it. With men it seems like it's just about the sport in that moment, but with the girls it's like, win or lose every game is celebrated."

Jason moved to Stockholm a couple of years ago with his Swedish wife, who's one of the co-founders of SRD. "In Stockholm you find more people with skating skills going into it. There seems to be a more serious aspect towards practice here, with people working harder at getting better than what you see in the States. The difference between the girls now from a year ago is remarkable, and if you go two years back you wouldn't even recognize them!"

The Royal Swedish Roller Derby

was started last year by a few derby girls (one of whom had co-founded SRD) who felt the time was right for setting up an old-school riot-league that would evolve more around the culture of roller derby and go back to the underground roots of the sport. In fact, the Royals see roller derby as more than just a sport - for them it's a movement, like it was in the early Austin days.

Despite being a new league, the Royals already have around the same number of members as SRD and their teams are rapidly growing. Though not an international league yet (their "bouts" are called "matches" for example), this is currently in the works and the Royals are building up a travel team, with their first bout scheduled for November in Finland. So far the league has consisted of a few domestic teams that play one another and each has a sassier name than the next: Brass Knuckle Harlots, Cougar Sluts, Rottin Rollers, Slayer Sisters.

Visiting the girls' practice facilities at Gullmarsplan, I become massively impressed by their level of skill after such a short time of rolling together. And no less impressive are their eye-catching and outrageous outfits. It's hipster chicks on wheels, wheels in all shades of colour, which create a pleasing effect

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no matter what league or country you're from. When there's a bout somewhere the home league will house the opposing team if they can't afford hotels, and when a skater, for whatever reason, visits a city she is welcome to practice with the local league. We call this 'derby love'."

As the girls are being trained by a visiting coach, SRD coach Jason Holder (aka Sloppy Boggins) sits on the sidelines tonight, quietly mending his backpack with a needle and yellow thread. Jason hails from Toronto and is a sculptor by profession. Deciding to relocate to Austin for its thriving art scene, he found out that roller derby was very integrated with the art and music culture in the Texan city and through this he got involved with the sport. "My grandfather was a big fan back in the early days and I used to watch it with him. You fall in love with it, you really do. Roller derby is such a DIY sport and



as the girls form a line and skate together conga style around the gym. I start getting dizzy as they complete one lap after another with coach Anna shouting "Faster! Faster!" She's firm but nice; every time someone falls she rolls up to them to make sure they're okay. "We might not be as technically good at skating as SRD, but we're getting there," she tells me.

Anna Enqvist Larsson (aka Lady Lovely Blocks) is a 27-year-old hairstylist and masseuse. She's been skating since 2008 and used to be a member of SRD before co-founding the Royals. She's currently the Royal's trainer and she's also one of the coolest chicks I've met: dirty blond with big tattoos on her forearms and decked out all in black, with the exception of her lime-green wheels. She's pure rock' n' roll.

"I love this sport. When I'm playing I forget everything else. Roller derby has it all and playing offence and defence simultaneously is demanding both physically and mentally. You have to use your body fully, and at the same time have full control of what happens around you. I also love the community. Wherever you go in the world there's a derby team with their arms open. After matches you go out and party with the opposing team and hug, laugh, and compare bruises (called derby kisses within the community). The bigger the bruise the better, and if it's a really good one it must be signed. I've earned so many great friends through this sport that it's hard to put into words. I simply love it. This is my life more than my hobby."

Lene Resch Braekken (aka Quaddess O'Payne) is a

33-year-old school counsellor. "A few years back I started going to Stockholm Roller Derby bouts and that's how I got hooked. Finally I bought a pair of quads (the kind of roller skates used in derby) and started skating with a friend, and earlier this year I went through the Royal's try-out and officially became a roller girl."

"What appeals to me the most about roller derby is the energy, the speed, the aggression, and the opportunity to take on a personality that's not always a part of your everyday life. I like the idea of women being offensive, claiming their space, being loud, and not saying sorry all the time. But although the sport may be aggressive, 'the fight' is concentrated to the match and when you get off the court the aggression is replaced by friendship. This unity amongst derby girls is another fantastic thing about roller derby."

"In derby, all body shapes are okay. You can be a great player no matter what your length, weight, or the size of your ass. And I think roller derby appeals to women who at some point don't feel totally comfortable in the traditional female role. In derby you're allowed to dress up in small shorts and fishnets and be aggressive. You're allowed to be provocative and act in ways that women aren't expected to normally act in our society."

"And the 'competition' amongst girls that you always hear about is non-existent in roller derby. Maybe because it's female oriented we don't need to compete; instead we work together. To me derby is like the perfect combination of sports and feminism." ■



Events:

SRD try-outs will be held on September 9 and 16 at their training spot, the Ekvallen outdoor hockey-rink in Gustavsberg.

Next Royal SRD match is on September 29, location is still being decided at this point.

Next SRD home bout is on October 13 in Solnahallen.

Web:

Stockholm Roller Derby:
rollerderby.se

The Royal Swedish Roller Derby:
theroyalsrd.se