

Roller derby gets a good punking

Steven Wells emerges bloodied and bruised from the all-new, all-female Roller Derby. Then dives back in for some more feminist punk mayhem

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"She drops her elbow on the girl in front of her - they both go down...the jabs start connecting, a dog pile of women in roller skates builds high... I see a broken nose. I see audience members receiving damage by rouge skaters flying out of the ring...elbow drops, punches to ass. Yeah, that's right: punches to the ass. I see a woman's skate connect to the head of her arch-rival. Oooo, that hurt! I see blood...."

Atticus West, popculturejunkies.com

Imagine you could invent a sport from scratch. How about something sexy, anti-corporate, amazingly fast and incredibly violent. A sort of anti-golf. Now imagine that the women who play this sport have names like Ivana S. Pankin, Sybil Disobedience and Gori Amos. And how about tiebreakers settled by a pillow fight between a punk mother in a skimpy sailor costume and a heavy metal librarian in a fluorescent orange porn-fantasy prison mini-dress? And how about - instead of red cards or sin bins - bad girls have to spin a "wheel of shame"? With punishments including being spanked with plastic flyswatters by the entire crowd?

Congratulations, you've just imagined the all-new, all-female, all-punk Roller Derby - possibly the greatest sport ever invented. But first, here's a short history lesson:

The original Roller Derby was a theatrical and violent mix of speed skating and WWE style wrestling that whipped blue-collar American crowds into a bloodthirsty frenzy right up to the mid 1970s.

"Oh God, they were nasty," 64-year-old Judy 'the Polish Ace' Sowinski told the Philadelphia Weekly. "They'd throw rocks. If a player hurt someone on our team, they were ready to kill."

Roller Derby grew out of the endurance skating marathons of the depression and its rules were at least partly devised by Guys and Dolls author Damon Runyon. These were similar to those of American football - with speedy jammers trying to outwit burly blockers. But the highlight was always the ice hockey style mayhem - with both sides hammering seven shades out of each other. On skates.

While Roller Derby was never quite as violent as the James Caan movie Rollerball (there were never any quad bikes with spiked tyres for instance) it was always a far from ladylike activity. So it was cool that Roller Derby was always co-ed. Women comprised half of every Roller Derby team - and were both jammers and blockers (this, it must be remembered, was during a period when women were being systematically driven out of most sports.)

But that's enough history ... because Roller Derby is back. And this time it's totally female - and entirely punk rock.

"Fists will fly, shit will be talked, someone will get a spanking!" gabbles the Phoenix New Times as the French Kiss Army take on their deadly local rivals, the Bruisers.

"Women? Action? Violence?" gasps Girls With Guns magazine as it previews a clash between Arizona's Smash Squad and the Furious Truckstop Waitresses.

Meet Reyna Terror, Joan Threat and Ann Ihilate - the stars of a sport that's been totally revamped for the new millennium. This new Roller Derby is grittier, sexier and just plain punkier than its predecessor. Women with names like Roxy Balboa, Dinah Mite, and Ashley

"Smashley" Adams have taken the anarchic aesthetic of hardcore punk rock and applied it wholesale to a sport that, when you think about it, was just begging for a punking.

Roller Derby teams like the Hell Marys, the Atomic Bomb Squad and the Reservoir Dolls have mushroomed in every corner of the USA. And, in line with punk's DIY principles, the vast majority are "skater-owned".

With its ear-blisteringly loud punk rock soundtrack, Roller Derby is Riot Grrl on roller skates. The sport "encompasses everything I believe in - tough, strong women and feminism, and rock 'n' roll," says Hurricane Lilly of the Seattle-based Rat City Rollergirls. These women don't so much defy stereotypes as ram them down your throat with a plunger. The naughty nurses, lollypop lickin' Lolitas, Catholic schoolgirls, vixenish cheerleaders and sex-starved soccer moms of pornographic fantasy are given a sharp and surreal Westwoodian twist. Anyone going to Roller Derby to sit in the back row and knock one off is going to be sorely disappointed.

And when it comes to the culture wars, the new Roller Derby is totally on the side of the good guys. While conservative bigots in America are frantically trying to get women off the soccer pitch and back into the cheerleading closet, the likes of Anne Phetamean, Donna Matrix and Helen Damnation are telling the bible bashers where to stuff their Victorian notions of femininity. Most of these women are involved in the punk scene, many are politically active, and some are academics and professionals. None are the simpering female eunuchs beloved of conservative ideology.

Roller Derby is part Madonna video, part punk-rock mosh-pit, part soft-core panto and entirely culturally transgressive. Joey Ramone would have loved it. Jerry Falwell would loathe it. George W Bush wouldn't understand it. If feminist punk icons Bikini Kill were a sport - they'd be the new, re-invented, all-girl Roller Derby. And Coldplay would be golf.

In short, the new Roller Derby is a cultural conservative's nightmare (and quite possibly his wet dream too, but let's not go there). So it is perhaps rather surprising that Roller Derby has flourished in America's God-fearing, dinosaur-disbelieving, feminist-hating, conservative heartland.

This has led to some fascinating cultural exchanges. In Texas, for instance, the rollergrrls have got right up the pert nostrils of the local sheetsniffing godbotherers.

"Why do you have to wear such sexy outfits?" whined one tissue-tearing mumbojumbulist. "Why can't you be a little bit more subtle? Why do you have to be sacrilegious? Don't you think you could increase the size of your audience if you weren't so controversial and so trashy?"

Yeah, right - like anybody ever built a bigger audience in America by being less trashy.

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