



ELLEN PARNAVELAS

# THE ROLLER DERBY ATHLETE

A SKATER'S GUIDE TO FITNESS, TRAINING, STRATEGY AND NUTRITION

B L O O M S B U R Y

# **The Roller Derby Athlete**

Ellen Parnavelas

B L O O M S B U R Y  
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# Foreword

In 2004 I joined a roller derby league. I didn't know what roller derby was. My team-mates didn't really know what roller derby was. We were a few girls in full protective gear learning to move in skates without falling at the jam skate session in the South Bronx in New York City. We were Gotham Girls Roller Derby and at the time we were one of just a few roller derby leagues to exist in the United States. Today – in 2012 – there are over 1,190 leagues in the US and throughout the world playing roller derby ([www.derbyroster.com](http://www.derbyroster.com)). If you had told me then that my life was about to change forever, I would have said, 'Whatever, I'm just here for a little exercise because I hate the gym and am a poor self-motivator.'

Roller derby has resurged in recent years with a big bang to join the 'alterna-sport' scene. America was a good place for roller derby to thrive. Tattoo shops were found in every city, even children's clothing was printed with skulls and guitars, and skateboarder Tony Hawk and snowboarder Sean White had become household names. Being safely different had become somewhat acceptable. So enter independently minded women looking for an organised group activity that wasn't volleyball at the YMCA. Hell, knitting was back and cool young women were doing it. What a great time to be alive!

To play roller derby in 2004, if you had a pulse and pair of skates, you were in. No experience was needed in either skating or athletics. It wasn't athleticism that brought us together. It did however require extreme dedication, a little blind faith and our good friend, the Internet. What is it that causes a person to just have no fear and decide to play a contact sport on a pair of roller skates of all things? I don't know what it is, but that little bit of 'crazy' is in every woman who plays roller derby.

Next came evolution. 'Back in the day' women chose clever 'derby' names and dressed in fishnet

stockings and short skirts. As the sport grew we figured some things out. Fishnet burns your skin when you fall. It's more comfortable to sweat in a pair of athletic tights. Poorly made 'sexy' skirts ripped, fell apart, and had to go. We learned how to buy roller skates that actually fitted our feet from skater-owned businesses. We learned how to use wheels that worked for the different surfaces we played on instead of just picking our favourite colour. The names stayed, but as evolution dictates, the fittest survived, and we became fitter as we learned to be athletes. Our competitive instincts emerged and with every year we trained harder, faster and more seriously than before.

The first generation had passed, and growing pains began as we began to say goodbye to close team-mates who thought the new competitiveness and stricter athletic direction was not the same as the DIY fun they were strongly connected to. As time went on, we became exponentially more competitive and practice and fitness requirements were raised. We had become the misfits' old high school enemy, the athlete. And WE LOVED IT. I got great satisfaction from working out so hard I could barely walk, and I did it with a group of women who all were as addicted as I was. There is an immense camaraderie and satisfaction earned when you achieve new physical limits together. We feed off one another's energy and drive.

Today, roller derby is the core of my life. I have roller derby practice four days a week, every week including three hours of running, plyometrics and weights in addition to skating. Then there are efforts to get to yoga and speed skating on the other days of the week, body pain permitting. And if you're a roller derby athlete you are in pain daily. You learn to tell the difference between pain from a real injury versus the 'I play a contact sport' pain.



I think about roller derby as if it was a newly invented language, and I learned how to speak it in 2004. I have a lot of roller derby experience. I never skated before I joined a roller derby league, but it's been many years and I'm quite comfortable on wheels now. I get invited to travel to newer leagues and teach them about roller derby while still actively competing as part of a top-ranked international travelling team. Our sport is in a major growth trend where it's crucial that we foster its growth and offer education to newer leagues instead of being instant competitors with these new leagues as they form. So if 2012 is your first year skating, know that there are plenty of skaters who have been around a while and want to help you discover the same love of being an athlete playing roller derby that has kept us here all these years and hopefully for years to come.

**Suzy Hotrod**  
**Gotham Girls Roller Derby**  
**New York, NY**



Suzy Hotrod jamming for Team USA at the Roller Derby World Cup 2011.

# Introduction

- Roller derby has been popular since the 1930s, but since 2001, it has experienced a major revival to become a very popular contemporary sport, with new leagues appearing all over the world at a rapid rate. Since 2001, roller derby has become a serious sport played by highly skilled and disciplined athletes. As the game itself has developed, the rules and strategy have evolved, as have the fitness and training practices of the skaters, taking the sport to a new level of athleticism.

Roller derby is popular for so many reasons. Not only does it help those that play it improve their general all-round fitness and increase their strength and stamina, it is a great way to combat stress caused by the frustrations of everyday life. It is also a fun and sociable way to exercise while meeting new people by participating in a team sport. Every roller derby league is a highly supportive community made up of a diverse and interesting range of individuals.

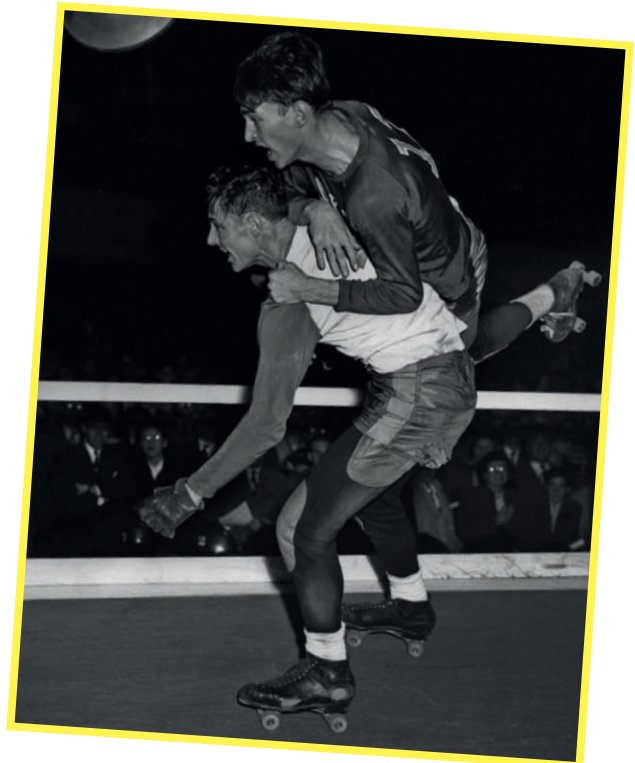
As a non-traditional team sport, it has attracted many people who have never previously played sports as well as experienced athletes. It is inclusive of people from a wide variety of sports backgrounds, from ice hockey and speed skating to netball, rugby, running, gymnastics and martial arts, as well as many first-time athletes.

Roller derby can be enjoyed by a wide range of individuals, as there are now men's and junior leagues, as well as recreational leagues for those who don't want to play at a highly competitive level.

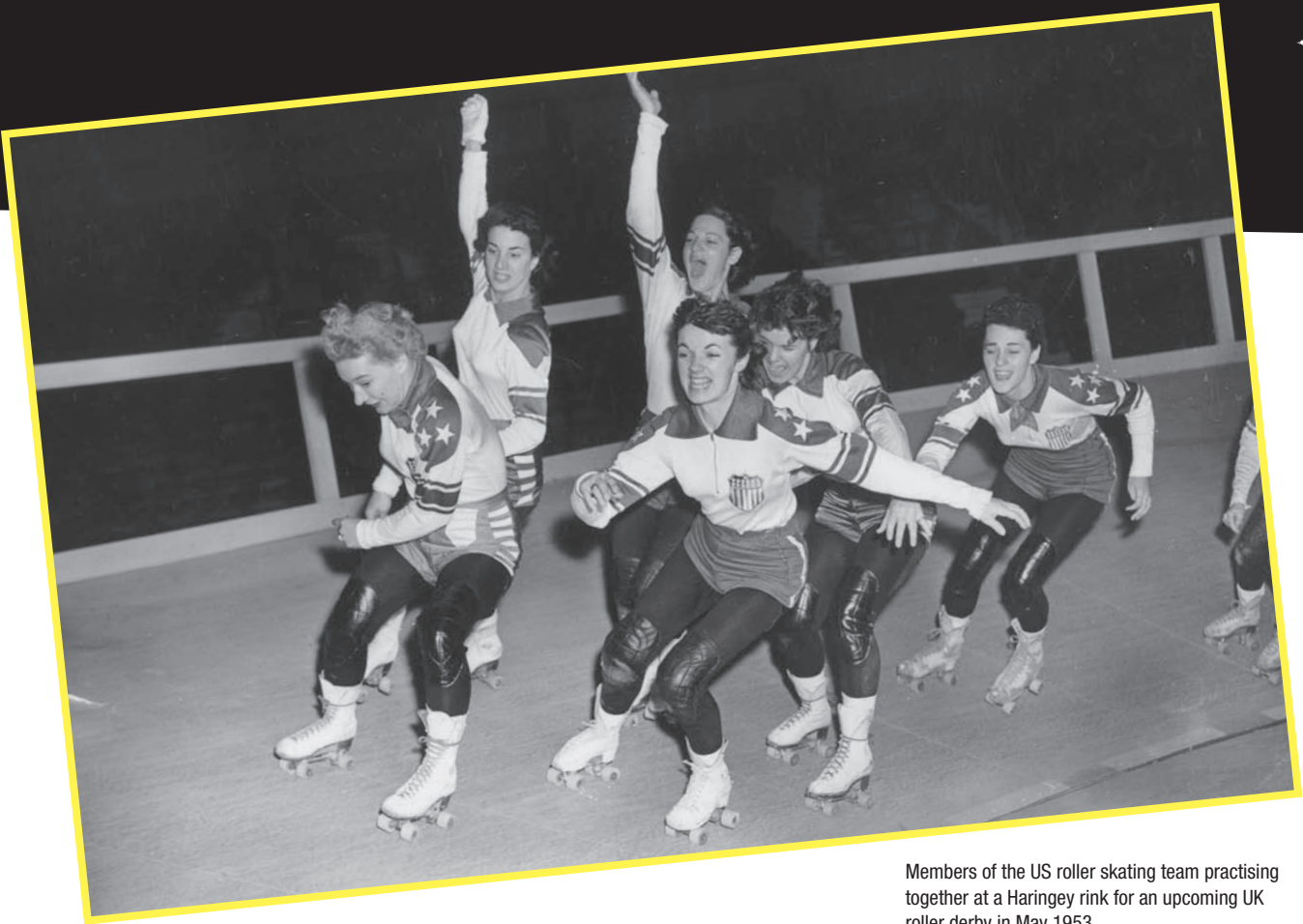
Safety should always come first and roller derby is a demanding physical sport, so if you have any doubts about your health, it is advisable to check your health with your doctor before beginning to play.

## A little bit of roller derby history

- Roller derby first appeared in the 1930s as a sport for men and women based on the roller skating endurance races that had been growing in popularity since their origins in the 19th century.
- Roller derby has had many incarnations over the years and the rules are constantly evolving.
- In the 1970s, 80s and 90s, roller derby was shown on late night television in the US where sensationalist violence prevailed.



Male roller derby players in New York in 1931.



Members of the US roller skating team practising together at a Haringey rink for an upcoming UK roller derby in May 1953.

- Roller derby is now a legitimate competitive contact sport with a comprehensive set of rules to protect the safety of the players.
- There is no ball or stick involved in the game of roller derby.
- Roller derby has been undergoing a resurgence in popular culture, with numerous films, books and websites dedicated to the sport. It is also getting more and more coverage in the mainstream media.
- Men can and do play roller derby – there are even co-ed teams and leagues.
- Roller derby is not only played in the United States, there are now leagues all over the world.

This book is designed to focus on some basic principles that will help every roller derby skater. It explores the fitness elements involved in playing and training for roller derby. It shows you how to use on-skates agility training, plyometrics, core training, interval training and cross-training, all designed for building the muscles and enhancing the skills that power the roller derby athlete.

Knowing your sport and playing it well comes primarily from practice. However, knowing the basics of roller derby strategy will equip you with the tools you need to learn the game and be an effective player. This book explains some of the fundamentals of strategy as the game is played today, providing a great platform for the skater to build on.

A fundamental aspect of playing great roller derby is to know how to take care of your body and prepare it for playing a fast and furious contact sport on roller



skates. This book looks at the potential risks involved in playing the sport and how to prepare your body for dealing with them, including stretching, preventing injuries and recovering from strenuous training.

In order to perform well as an athlete, the body must have the nutrition it requires. This book will help

you understand what your body needs as fuel to play roller derby. It explains how your body produces energy and which sources of fuel the body uses to play roller derby, with advice on eating before, during and after training.



Atomatrix jamming for Oly Rollers' Cosa Nostra Donnas at the WFTDA Championships 2011.

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



## Chapter One: The game

Explains the fundamentals of how the sport is played, the different positions and how the game works. Introduces the different roller derby organisations, the various tournaments and competitions, gives a brief background to the history of roller derby and a summary of the people who are involved in playing the sport.

## Chapter Two: Strategy

Introduces the evolution of strategy with an article by veteran skater and international roller derby coach, Bonnie D. Stoir. Explains the differences between offence and defence and some of the other basic principles that the game is based on.

## Chapter Three: Fitness

Defines the different aspects that make up complete physical fitness and explores how each of these are used in playing roller derby, including cardiovascular fitness, muscular endurance, muscular strength, agility, speed, flexibility, balance and proprioception. Sets out the principles of which muscle groups are used and what demands are placed on the body in order to play the sport.

## Chapter Four: Training

Focuses on different types of training that will be beneficial for athletes training specifically for playing roller derby. Includes on-skates agility exercises with international roller derby coach Kamikaze Kitten, advice on interval training, practical exercises for strengthening core muscles, resistance and plyometric exercises and the benefits of cross-training using a range of other sports.

## Chapter Five: Looking after your body

Covers how to prepare the body for playing a physically demanding contact sport and maintain it in terms of preventing injury, stretching, joint care and recovery. Also explains some of the most common injuries that occur in playing roller derby with exercises to strengthen areas of weakness and help prevent them from happening.

## Chapter Six: Nutrition

Explores how an athlete requires the right diet to play at peak performance. Includes information on how best to fuel the body for playing roller derby and what to eat before, during and after training, as well as giving practical nutritional information for vegetarian and vegan athletes.

All the chapters feature interviews with skaters from all over the world who share their experiences and their practices as roller derby athletes – including direct quotes, practical advice, personal anecdotes and photos.

Tracy 'Disco' Akers skating for Team USA at the Roller Derby World Cup 2011.





# The game



## WHAT IS ROLLER DERBY?

Roller derby is a fast and furious contact sport played on roller skates. The sport has been present in various forms throughout the 20th century, but since 2001 it has experienced a major revival and become extremely popular. Now possibly 'the world's fastest growing sport', roller derby has become a truly global phenomenon with over 1,190 leagues now in existence throughout Europe, Asia, Australasia and the Americas. New leagues are forming all the time and it is not uncommon for crowds at games to reach several thousand spectators.

The speed at which the sport has developed is quite astounding as the current revival started in 2001 in Texas with just one league and yet over 1,190 leagues have formed since 2003. During this brief period, roller derby has changed and developed a lot and it is now regarded as a serious sport played by athletes. The rules of the game have evolved and become increasingly more established, and several organisations have been formed to regulate the sport and its practices.



Suzy Hotrod on the jammer line for Team USA at the Roller Derby World Cup 2011.



## PLAYING ROLLER DERBY

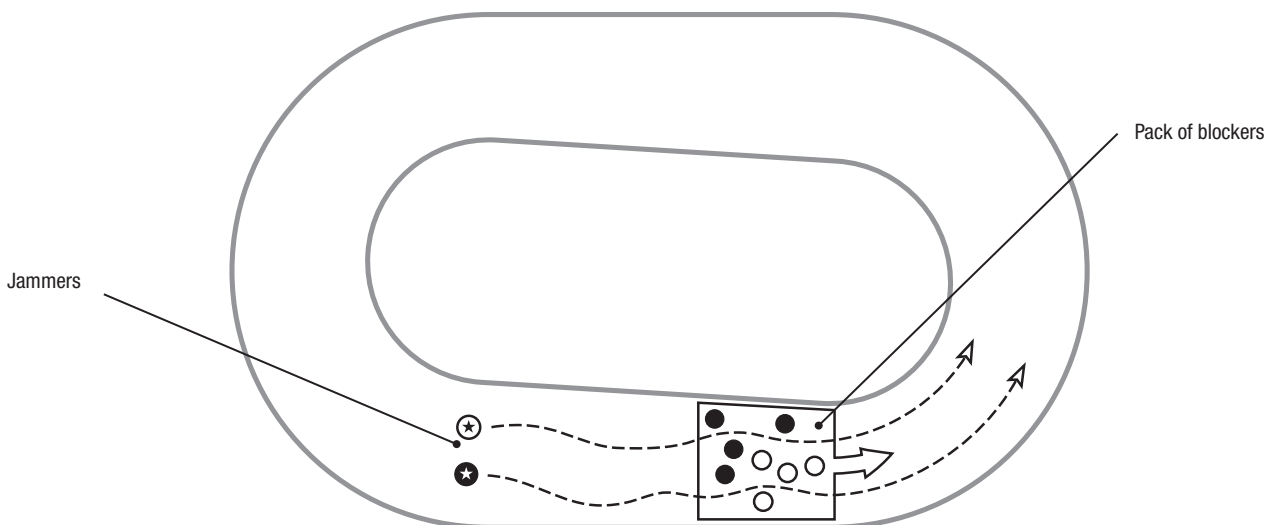
Roller derby is played on an oval-shaped track by two teams of five players. In each team, four of the players are 'blockers' and one is the 'jammer'. The blockers from both teams skate around the track together, forming a 'pack', with the two jammers starting behind them. The jammer is a skater whose job it is to race through the pack and lap the players on the opposing team, scoring points for passing the opposing players. The blockers in the pack try to stop the opposing jammer from getting through the pack while also trying to help their own jammer through by blocking the opposing blockers.

The jammers race through the pack once, at which time no points are scored but the jammer that gets through the pack first is awarded a 'lead jammer status', giving her the advantage of being able to 'call off' the jam. The jammers score a point for every opposing blocker they pass from their second lap onwards, as long as they pass each player in bounds and without getting any penalties.

The jammers may continue to race and score points for up to two minutes, or until the 'lead jammer' calls off the jam. The jammer scores four points each time she gets through the pack and passes all four opposing blockers. She can score an

additional point per pass if she laps the opposing jammer as well.

Roller derby games are known as 'bouts' and are made up of two 30-minute periods with a half-time break. Each period is made up of 'jams' of up to two minutes. There is no limit to the number of jams that can take place in each period but the period ends after 30 minutes when the last jam reaches its natural conclusion. When the lead jammer calls off the jam or the two-minute period ends, play stops and the officials calculate the score. The team with the most points at the end of the game wins.





## THE TRACK

Roller derby can be played on either a flat or a banked track with different leagues favouring one or the other. Historically, it was played more often on a banked track as this added to the speed, the drama and the spectacle of the game. In recent years, flat tracks have been favoured as they are both more convenient and accessible.

Most leagues today play roller derby on a flat track measured according to the official WFTDA measurements that can be found at <http://wftda.com/rules>. Banked tracks also have a standardised set of dimensions, and these were adapted to create the flat track measurements at the beginning of the current roller derby revival in 2001. Flat track roller derby can be played on any clean, flat surface including polished wood, concrete or indoor sports court floors. The track must be clearly demarcated by a raised boundary that is clearly visible to all skaters and referees.

### Penalties

Penalties are signalled and enforced by the referees as they occur during a bout. A penalty is given to a skater during gameplay for breaking the rules or committing a foul and involves the individual being excluded from the game for a specific period of time, leaving her team in a position of disadvantage.



### Penalty box

In every bout there is a designated 'penalty box' set up for skaters who are sent off for penalties. This is a seated area outside of the track. Skaters must enter the penalty box by skating in an anticlockwise direction and must re-enter the track behind all the other skaters in the pack once the penalty time has been served.

### Rules

Roller derby is played according to a vast set of complicated rules, which are slightly varied for play on flat or banked tracks. The rules are designed to make the sport as safe as possible for the players while maintaining its 'contact' element. Some of the essential rules can be summarised as follows:

- Blocking is legal but there are restrictions on how it can be executed – players cannot grab, pull or trip one another, for example.
- Falling deliberately in front of another skater is prohibited.
- There are comprehensive rules defining 'blocking zones', meaning the parts of the body used by the skater performing a block, for example, no use of fully extended arms for blocking.
- There are comprehensive rules defining 'target zones' for blocking, meaning the parts of the body

The penalty box is a designated seated area outside of the track where skaters who have been sent off for penalties must remain until their penalty time has been served.



a skater can initiate contact with when executing a block, for example, no blocking to the back, below the knee or above the shoulder.

- Only skaters who are 'in play' can engage another skater to impede their movement on the track.
- Only skaters who are moving in an anticlockwise direction are able to block other skaters. Blocking when stationary or moving in a clockwise direction is prohibited.
- Skaters must have at least one foot on the track when executing a block.
- If a skater is blocked and knocked off the track, she must re-enter the track behind the skater that initiated the block so she does not gain an unfair advantage in relative position.
- Jammers do not receive a point if they are out of bounds or foul the player they are passing.

Other rules govern all players' conduct during the bout. Breaking any of these rules can lead to players being sent off for penalties, and, as a result of that, spending time in the penalty box. Players usually spend a minute in the penalty box for one major penalty. This may not sound like much time, but a minute can be an entire jam. An accumulation of major penalties can also lead to expulsion from the game.

A much more detailed outline of the most commonly used set of rules for playing flat track roller derby can be found on the WFTDA website at <http://wftda.com/rules>.

In roller derby, referees are responsible for enforcing the rules to protect the safety of the skaters.





## POSITIONS IN ROLLER DERBY

Roller derby is played by two teams of five players. One of the players on each team is the 'jammer', and the other four players on each team are blockers. One of the blockers on each team also acts as a 'pivot'. The blockers and pivots skate together in a pack, and the jammers start each jam skating behind them. There are ten players on the track in any one jam, unless any of the players has been sent to the penalty box.

In a bout, each team will usually have up to 20 players, with up to 14 on the roster for a specific bout on their bench so that they can alternate the line-ups of players that go on in each jam to prevent the players from getting too exhausted. Each jam of up to two minutes can be very intense and physically demanding, especially for the jammers. Leagues can change a team's rosters from one game to the next.

### The pack

The pack is defined by the largest group of blockers from both teams skating in bounds and within no more than 10 feet in front of or behind the nearest pack skater. The jammer is not part of the pack.

The pack: Team Sweden and Team Brasil at the Roller Derby World Cup 2011.

