

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

GENDER, SPORT, AND
THE ROLE OF ALTER EGO
IN ROLLER DERBY

Colleen Arendt

ROUTLEDGE
Focus

The logo features a stylized white silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, facing right, positioned to the right of the text 'ROUTLEDGE' and above the text 'Focus'.

Gender, Sport and the Role of the Alter Ego in Roller Derby

Gender, Sport and the Role of the Alter Ego in Roller Derby focuses on the resurgence of roller derby by examining the appeal and dedication to a sport that combines the masculine aggression and physicality of sport with a more feminine, or alternative, style of organizing and community building.

No longer a scripted sport filled with fake fighting and hair pulling, derby, though still dangerous, has nevertheless exploded in popularity around the world. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with women players, Colleen Arendt reveals how derby has come to serve as a site of gender rebellion and emancipation that empowers participants. She demonstrates how players find roller derby a place to build friendships and support networks, while giving back to their community. The book also analyzes the adoption of derby personas, or alter egos, which many players use. While many players derive joy and other benefits from their derby personas, others argue that personas and alter egos detract from the athleticism and legitimacy of the sport. Finally, by considering the relationship between gender, sport, society, and power, this book tries to answer the question: Why derby? Why now?

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Gender, Sport and the Role of the Alter Ego in Roller Derby

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To my daughters, Madeline and Natalie. I love you.



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1 Introduction

The resurgence of roller derby

With origins dating back to the 1920s, roller derby has seen a resurgence in the past few years. A Hollywood movie, *Whip It*, books, social media, and even televised games have renewed interest in the sport. Roller derby is a contact sport combining physicality with strategy as well as a strong sense of community among teams and leagues. The resurgence of flat track roller derby began in 2001 in Austin, Texas with the Texas Roller Girls and has grown to more than 450 leagues worldwide, in part due to the relatively small capital needed to begin a league (WFTDA, 2016). This contributes to the do-it-yourself grassroots appeal of the sport that allows leagues to tailor themselves to their community and the women who participate.

The women who compete in roller derby leagues all over the world are dedicated to this physically demanding sport while juggling the demands of their lives, including families and “mainstream” careers like teaching, finance, and law. Roller derby is often considered to be the most violent of women’s sports, borrowing the term “bouts” for their matches because they are “a fight to the end” (WFTDA, 2016). Many events require EMTs on site and online forums are dedicated to discussing injuries.

Based on nearly 3,000 minutes of data collected across forty in-depth interviews with women players, this book focuses on the draw and dedication to a sport that combines the masculine aggression and physicality of sport with a more feminine, or alternative, style of organizing and community building. In the early years of its revival, derby contained more overt sexuality, seen through their outfits (some women wore tutus and fishnet stockings), logos, and promotional photographs and apparel, that is usually absent from men’s athletic contests. As the sport has grown in popularity around the world, some cultural aspects of the sport, including the counter-culture, kitsch, theatricality, and sexuality, has disappeared as streamlined rules and uniforms emerged and participants’ athleticism and skill level increased.

2 Introduction

This book examines various aspects of roller derby through five chapters, followed by the methodology of my study in the Appendix.

- Chapter 1 introduces the sport, with a brief primer on the rules, positions, and leagues. This chapter also discusses misperceptions of roller derby, including (a) the misconception that derby is merely staged fighting, complete with hair pulling and throwing elbows and (b) the misconception of derby as filled with hypersexualized, dangerous women.
- Chapter 2 examines obstacles the women face in their quest to play the sport, including the large time and financial commitment, and the promise of serious injuries.
- Chapter 3 follows by examining why the women continue to play – and love – a sport despite the serious challenges detailed in Chapter 2.
- Chapter 4 discusses what many outsiders consider the most interesting aspect of the sport: the derby personas, or the pseudonyms the women play under. When roller derby reemerged in 2001, alter egos, or separate selves, dominated the landscape of the game. Now that the game is growing and evolving, the alter egos are largely disappearing in favor of derby personas, which are less extreme personality differences the women experience by skating under inventive, clever pseudonyms they create.
- Chapter 5 attempts to answer the overarching question of my study: *Why derby? Why now?* What is it about the sport that has helped it grow and thrive – even during the financial collapse of 2008 – when its athletes report large expenses, a time commitment that is akin to a part-time job, and numerous serious injuries (e.g., broken bones, torn ligaments, reparative surgeries)? Not only do the women remain in the sport, but everyone I spoke with discussed plans to remain involved in derby in some fashion after retiring from competition. Chapter 5 connects my findings to existing literatures in my attempt to answer the question: *Why derby? Why now?* Chapter 5 additionally explores societal constraints and moments of social emancipation and activism, befitting the critical theory lens employed in this study.
- Finally, the Appendix provides the methodology of the book, including information on qualitative methodology, ontological framework, participants, procedures, and data analysis.

Following this brief synopsis of the book, I return now to an overview of the sport.

A gendered perspective

Throughout this study, I examined my data through a gendered perspective, specifically one that considers gender as a social construct. Gender as

socially constructed refers to gender as “an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (West & Zimmerman, 2002, p. 4). Moreover, gender is what defines our “roles, rights, and responsibilities and obligations” (Vasiljević, Marling, & Örténblad, 2017, p. 4). In other words, gender has been “nurtured” into us by socially constructed institutions that serve to divide the sexes.

The process through which individuals learn these “gender norms” is known as gender socialization. Because gender is a “historical phenomenon” (Alvesson & Billing, 2009, p. 9), gender norms change across time and within and between cultures. Thus, as Wharton (2012) says, to study gender is to take “an interest in a moving target” (p. 103). By studying roller derby at this point in its revival and against the larger backdrop of the current social, economic, and political landscape in the United States means that I seek to understand the ways roller derby and gender inform each other.

While gender norms socialize people to enact differing gender roles, crucially, these roles confer different social statuses. Vasiljević et al. (2017) explain, “Gender difference is also a hierarchy in which practices and behaviors associated with men have historically been valued higher than those linked to women, resulting in women’s disadvantaged status in all spheres of society” (p. 4). Thus, to “see” gender roles and norms, and the power structures inherent in the gendered socialization of men and women, is to call attention to the inequalities and inequities entrenched in a gendered society, and to search for opportunities to subvert this domination.

The sport of roller derby

Rules and positions

Modern day roller derby is played on a flat, oval track. Two teams compete in two, 30-minute halves. Each half is filled with jams that last up to two minutes. During each jam, both teams field five skaters. Of the five skaters, four are blockers, and the fifth skater for each team is the “jammer,” denoted by wearing a helmet cover with a large star. Each team’s jammer starts the jam behind the eight blockers. The two jammers need to fight through the pack of blockers. After that initial passing of the blockers, a jammers then circles around and earns a point for each opposing player she passes. In other words, the jammer fights through the pack at the beginning of the jam and then circles around and passes everyone on the opposing team, earning five points. The blockers, meanwhile, are simultaneously trying to block the other team’s jammer while creating opportunities for their own jammer to break through the pack.

4 Introduction

At the beginning of a jam, when the two jammers start behind the eight blockers, the jammer who breaks through the pack first is called the “lead jammer.” This means she can end the jam at any point, which is why a jam can be “up to two minutes long.” Typically, a lead jammer, e.g., *Jammer 1*, might call a jam just before the other jammer, e.g., *Jammer 2*, is about to score points. That means Jammer 2 needs to fight through the pack and place herself in scoring position as quickly as possible, because even if the jam is called before she can score, she also held Jammer 1 to few points. Because the oval track is not very large, allowing numerous laps, and because the 60 minutes of competition is comprised of many jams, teams often score in the 100s and 200s.

Though derby is a contact sport, rules prohibit many types of contact. Despite misconceptions, skaters cannot throw elbows, push, pull, or trip opponents, and they cannot block from behind. Rules also prohibit making contact to opponents’ heads, back, knees, lower legs, or feet (WFTDA, 2018). Skaters typically make contact with opponents by bumping each other, which is why one of my participants referred to the sport as a “collision” sport rather than a contact sport. Skaters have more flexibility in how they make contact with their own teammates. A jammer can use an “arm whip,” which occurs when a blocker extends her arm to her jammer and then propels the jammer forward as a transfer of momentum, or a “hip whip,” which is similar but refers to a jammer grabbing one of her blocker’s hips and pulling herself forward.

Because the athletes are moving quickly on skates, the collisions and tripping or tangling of skates can lead to serious injuries, as I discuss in Chapter 2. Injuries can also occur from illegal hits, which are penalized by the skater sitting in the penalty box for 30 seconds of the jam, leaving their team to play shorthanded. If a jammer is sent to the penalty box, the thirty-second penalty is referred to as a “power jam,” as only one team can score points. Sometimes a lead jammer will call a jam when the other team’s jammer heads to the penalty box so they can start a fresh jam, perhaps with a new, rested jammer, to maximize scoring opportunities for those 30 seconds the other team is without their jammer.

Another important element of the game is the pivot. Each team can designate one of the four blockers as their pivot, denoted by wearing a helmet cover with a large stripe on it. At any point during a jam, a jammer can take off her star helmet cover and hand it to the pivot, who then puts on the star helmet cover and is now the jammer and can score points. The star helmet cover must be handed; it cannot be thrown or picked up by the pivot. The previous jammer is now a blocker and is no longer able to score points for the duration of that jam.