

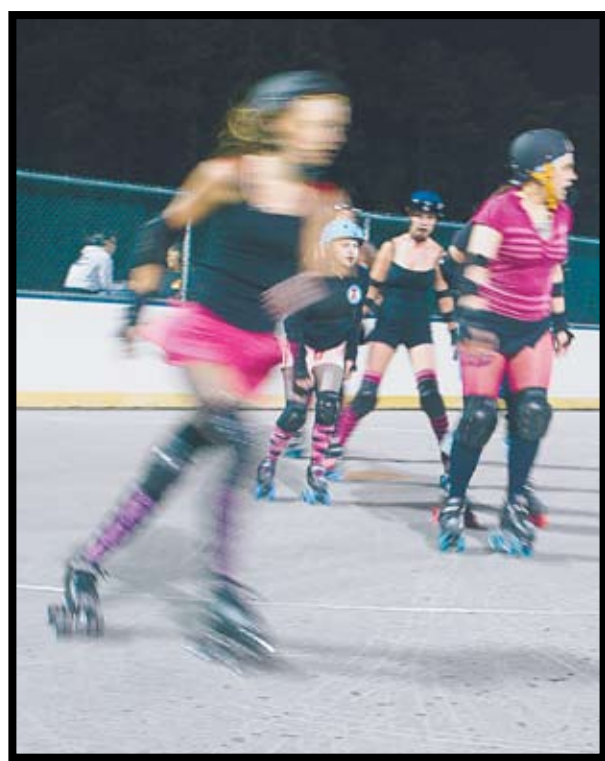
The Wheel Deal

CoverStory



Above, members of the Boardwalk Brawlers take a break from the action for a quick pose. Top right and center, Boardwalk Brawlers lap the rink at Doc Cramer boulevard, Manahawkin. Bottom, Lori Totoro of Atlantic City and Linda Scillia of Toms River lace up their skates before practice. (PHOTOS: ROBERT WARD)

By Kim "Infra Red" Predham / staff writer



ROLLER DERBY IS BACK.

Rapidly rising up from the underground, roller derby's popularity is growing everyday as women — and some men — join in record numbers. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association counts 38 member leagues, but says at last count there were actually more than 150 leagues in the country and others have sprung up in Canada, Mexico, England and New Zealand.

Add one more to the list: the Boardwalk Brawlers, Ocean County's very own roller derby team. "I love it. I haven't been this excited about something since my wedding," said Clare Smith, a member of the team since February.

The Brawlers originally began as the Hurricane Honeys, but internal conflicts caused the group to split apart and reform as the Boardwalk Brawlers in March. The team now has 12 members, and they are always looking for new recruits. They hope to start bouting (the derby term for competing in a game) next year, said team co-captain Alex "Hell Kat Thrasher" Dashkevich of Brick.

Roller derby has existed in one form or another since the 1930s, when struggling film publicist Leo Seltzer began showing teams of male/female skaters engaged in endurance racing around a track. He later added more contact between players. The sport has gone in and out of favor during the years. The popularity of roller derby's latest incarnation, which is predominantly female and self-organized, can be credited to the Lonestar Rollergirls, whose players appeared in the A&E show, "Rollergirls."

Smith, aka "Black Eye Betty," said the series caught her attention when it ran last year. So when the Toms River resident heard there was a roller derby league in her county, she joined up.

Based on what she knew of roller derby participants, she said she was surprised when she met her new team members.

"I expected everybody to be tattooed," said Smith, a 25-year-old massage therapist.

Some members do in fact sport tattoos, including Linda "Sleazside Sally" Scillia. But as a former member of the corporate world, she believes she does not fit the mold of the "stereotypical" punk rock derby

chick. The women of the Boardwalk Brawlers come from all walks of life, agreed Smith. A couple of the team's members are married, and at least one (Scillia) is a proud stay-at-home mom. But there is one trait that unites all the Brawlers: these women are tough. They have to be. In some past forms, the action in roller derby was staged. But these days, every hit, every fall, is very real.

One night, Smith said she was practicing whips — a teammate propels another forward with one arm — when she lost her balance and busted her elbow. The elbow was bleeding and she is certain that had she not been wearing an elbow pad, it would have shattered.

But, she added, "It's worth it." For many women (and some fans), derby becomes something of an addiction. "To get together with a bunch of girls, put on a pair of skates and do something competitive, it's just such a blast," said Scillia, 31.

Scillia, too, has had her share of injuries, including a torn muscle when she skated for the Space Coast Slashers in Florida.

But she said the threat of pain has not stopped her since her first practice in Florida, when she got knocked down by a woman twice her size. "When I realized I could take it, I stopped worrying," she said.

The same cannot always be said for the loved ones of roller derby women.

Scillia's mother, for example, still fears she will be hurt, Scillia said.

Smith's husband was also not on board when she originally joined the team, she said.

"He was like, 'Roller derby? Really? You?'" Smith recalled.

But he tagged along when she attended the East Coast Extravaganza, a two-day event in March hosted by the Philly Rollergirls that featured bouts between WFTDA leagues and shorter scrimmages between WFTDA-eligible rookie leagues. "He was so into it," Smith said.

Now, he is asking her for a "Roller Derby Husband" T-shirt and has told all his friends about his wife's new obsession. And, Smith said, "He promised to ice down all my bruises."*

Derby basics

■ A derby game is called a bout. Points are scored during jams, which can last up to two minutes.

■ During a jam, five skaters from each team typically play.

■ Four members from each team assemble together in a pack. Three are blockers; a fourth is the pivot, who controls the speed of the pack.

■ Twenty feet behind the two teams are one member from each team called a "jammer."

■ The jammer's goal is to break through the pack before the opposing jammer. Her teammates try to help her through while preventing the opposing jammer from passing through.

■ The first jammer to make her way through the pack without stepping off the track is lead jammer, and can end — or call off — the jam at any time. If no one is named lead jammer, the jam runs for two minutes.

■ Jammers score points by passing members of the opposing team.*

— Kim Predham



Alex Dashkevich of the Boardwalk Brawlers stretches before practice. (PHOTO: ROBERT WARD)

It's rough, tough, down and derby