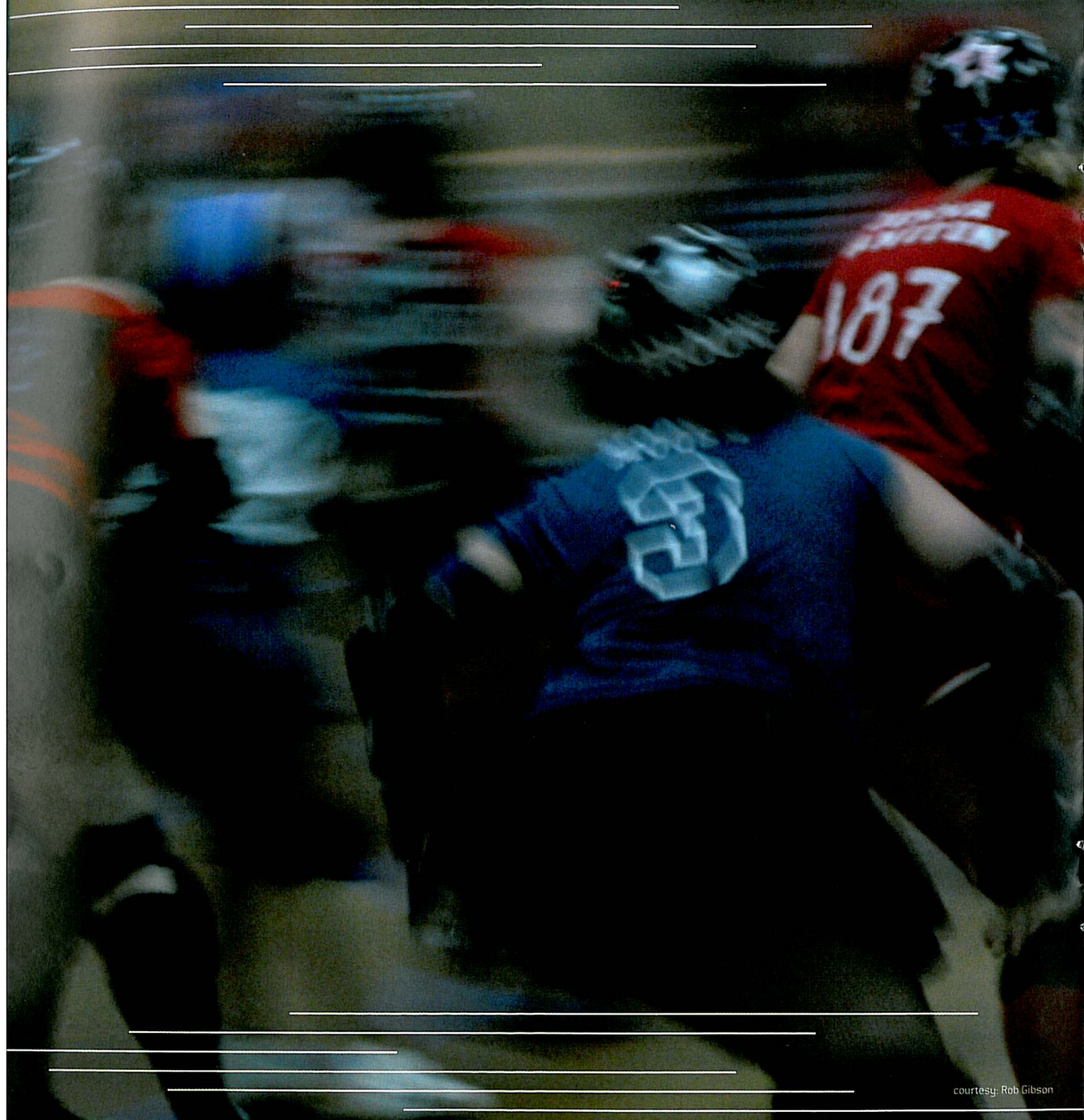


# LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL



courtesy: Rob Gibson

What do you think of when you hear the words “roller derby?” If you answered, “Loud music and attractive women in sexy costumes body-checking each other,” the Garden State Rollergirls league does not disappoint.

After seeing the ads on the PATH train, I couldn't wait to experience the Rollergirls in action. On the evening I made the trip to the Branch Brook Park Roller Skating Center in Newark, the girls weren't representing their normal teams, but were mixed up into two charity squads—the Justice Betties (in police department blue) vs. the Fire Foxes (in fire engine red). But during regular bouts, the ladies are on one of the two teams that make up the GSR league—Jersey City Bridge & Pummel or the Northern Nightmares. The league also has a travel team, the Ironbound Maidens, which pits 13 of the GSR's best against teams from across the region.

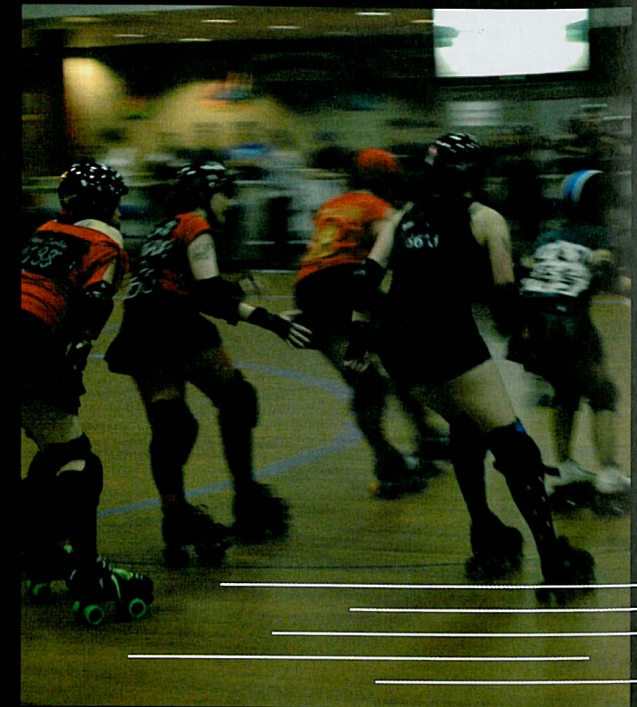
After paying my \$12 admission, I found a seat right on the rink. It took a few rounds or “jams” for me to figure out exactly what was going on. Here are the basics: Four defenders from each team line up and take off at the first whistle. They're followed seconds later by one scorer or “jammer” from each team, whose job is to break through the pack. It sounds easy, but the defenders do everything they can to prevent the opposing jammer from scoring—including swerving into their way and sticking out their elbows.

The old stereotypes about roller derby don't convey the sport's difficulty. And any questions you may have about the athleticism required are gone after watching the first of three 20-minute periods that make up a bout. Hard to describe and almost painful to experience, roller derby is a cross between hockey and speed skating. Or maybe speed skating and football without the protective padding. Or maybe it's just roller derby—no comparisons needed. My favorite move was when the blockers would try to open up a lane for their jammer while keeping the opposing jammer from getting through. Let's just say more than a few players went down. At one point, I was sure an out-of-control skater was going to end up in my lap. Just when I thought we might both be in trouble, she dropped down and skidded to a stop right in front of me. That night, after a see-saw battle the Fire Foxes took the Justice Betties, 94–92.

The league draws a wide variety of women from all walks of life, from stay-at-home moms to professionals. When asked why they do it, the first thing the girls mention is the lack of organized team sports for women. “Once you graduate college, women have no other organized sport. If I cross-check someone during mahjongg I'd get arrested,” says Pinstripe Punisher, who skates for Jersey City Bridge & Pummel. Team captain Layla Smackdown concurs, “For me, I really like being athletic. After college, I didn't want to just hang up my jersey.” The ladies say their sport certainly qualifies as a workout. “I'm a little sad my booty's getting smaller,” says Pinstripe Punisher.

Smaller booties aside, it's clear that the participants are in it for more than just exercise. Pinstripe Punisher says her teammates are her family. As Layla Smackdown puts it, her teammates offer “a shoulder to cry on and a shoulder to punch on.” And there are more than a few jokes about “derby wives.” Another Bridge & Pummeler, Jenna Jamitin, says the bonds on the team are almost unbreakable. “We have a girl on maternity leave. The true girls you don't lose to pregnancy or injury.”

The mention of injury isn't just idle chatter. The girls say they know the route to the emergency room well at this point. There have been countless injuries, including two broken ankles. Having health insurance is a prerequisite to being on a team. According to Layla Smackdown, “You don't want to think about the consequences when you skate. Our health is very important to us. This is the best shape I've been in and I'd like to keep it that way.” Or, put another way by Jenna Jamitin, “We don't want



to put you out of your misery behind the rink because you can't afford to go to the hospital.”

The league, which branched off from a prior Jersey start-up league, is organized by the team members and funded by monthly dues and ticket sales. Participation for skaters can be “cultish and all-consuming,” but executive board members say they put so much time into it that it's “like a whole other job.”

The teams are always recruiting—for men as well as women. According to Layla Smackdown, they're looking for “skaters, refs, EMTs, Jewish grandmothers,” and people to help with background support, set-up and post-match take down. The girls note that roller derby is a sport for many different body types. “If you're 4 foot 7 inches and 175 pounds, then no one's getting past that. You're going to be a star player. Look out for that ass,” says Jenna Jamitin. One of their recruitment tools is a bar night at league sponsor Lucky 7's.

Part of the fun of watching and participating in the GSR is experiencing the girls' alter egos. The names, costumes and the online profiles let some girls take on new personalities, while others say their skate name is who they really are. “I'm badass anywhere I go. I hide it at work,” says Pinstripe Punisher, who takes her name from her love of the Yankees. The tie between personalities and skate names is also stronger and more deliberate than you might think. “You just know when it's right. You try it on for a few weeks,” says Layla Smackdown. About her own moniker, she adds, “It's just such a sexy, strong name when I say it out loud.” Jenna Jamitin, whose name is a play on the porn star's name, said it is her doppelganger and her grandmother loves it.

Roller derby is something to be experienced instead of explained. The next home game for the Ironbound Maidens is on Friday, August 17. The next home game for the Jersey City Bridge & Pummel is on Friday, September 14. Go to [www.gardenstaterollergirls.com](http://www.gardenstaterollergirls.com) for more information and tickets.

• BY ROB GIBSON