

Introduction

Roller derby operates in a space of both-and, never either-or. Skaters play offense and defense at once. The hits are as ferocious as the skate skills are precise. Roller derby is as rough as it is playful, as athletic as it is alternative, campy, and intense and beyond precise explanation. While the general public may (somewhat correctly) perceive our sport as ambiguous, the bigger issue is the general public's lack of perceiving us at all. Our full-contact sport on wheels is played by cis women, trans women, trans men, and nonbinary folks. And perhaps because sports fans aren't used to seeing a full-contact sport played by anyone other than cis men, people can't seem to get a grip on the nuanced, legitimate, refereed brutality of the modern, ever-evolving world of flat track roller derby.

Invented in 1935 by Chicago event promoter Leo Seltzer, the original Depression-era game was one of the first sports ever to feature men *and* women—teams were coed, but skaters alternated men on the track, then women. Eventually the sport moved to Hollywood through several 1950s roller derby movies and TV shows, and it gained international traction in the '70s with teams like the Tokyo Bombers. Roller derby was reinvented in every following decade, through the roller jamming of the '80s and '90s right up until the most modern version was established in the early 2000s, featuring the gender-expansive skaters we know and love today.

But as roller derby evolved into a revolutionary showcase of athletes largely ignored by the world of sports, the revolution remained on the roller derby track. US American culture has not run parallel and is, instead, on a track of devolution: Americans are busy supporting or churning out legislation to control other people's bodies, to ensure

historically marginalized people stay in the margins. I'd argue that makes playing, even paying attention to a sport like roller derby, an act of subversion, of political defiance. Ours is now a sport with almost five hundred teams worldwide, played on every continent but Antarctica.

And yet—who is watching? Who is paying attention?

The following are questions we are frequently asked about the best sport if perhaps least understood sport in the world:

So, it's like a show, right? Is it a free-for-all? Can you punch people?

Is this WWE but with girls on wheels? Do you skate in lingerie?

And my personal favorite: Have you ever kicked someone in the face with a skate?

Queries like these might come from an innocent place and, I'm happy to say, seem less common than they once were. I, too, came to the best sport in the world with a misunderstanding of what was expected of me beyond fishnetted activewear and a clever, punny name. It is beyond measure, the pride I felt when I christened myself *KEGEL SCOUT*, #319. I admit, it makes sense, people asking the above kinds of questions of me, a person who spends at least 50 percent of her time choosing to be called by a word defined as a vaginal strengthening exercise.

Maybe the problem is mine. Maybe I enter these conversations defensively, the baggage of past conversations holding me down. For example, there was a beer festival I worked with Ohio Roller Derby, running coat check for cash tips, as our whole business operates on fundraising and dues and the invaluable volunteer efforts of league members. I passed out game schedule cards with coat check numbers and talked to people about derby. I took one man's coat, and when I returned his ticket to him, he said, "Well, I do love a woman who can take a hit."

We stared at each other. Where the hell does one go from there? The man turned a slight purple, mumbled an apology, and fled into the pretzels and froth. I wanted clarification. What was it that he truly meant to say? And how could we work together to frame it in a less domestic violence-y kind of way?

What I'm getting at is that telling people I play a brutal, body-breaking game, one that is both real and performative, where mostly cis women,

and trans women, trans men, and nonbinary folks are the main players (because there is roller derby, and *then* there is men's roller derby), well, for many, it's too much to fathom. It can't be allowed in all its complexity. It has to be whittled down to something accessible, palatable, for the audience that our culture, our world, still centers—cis White men. That assumed audience may identify what they define as sexy women hitting other sexy women. That audience has not often provided, has not *been* provided, opportunity to let women and trans people and gender-expansive and queer people define themselves, to play a sport made by and for themselves. I find the people involved in roller derby are often very grateful to finally have a people and place where they can joyfully take up space. A team of misfits can be a glorious thing, lucky too; ours is a choreographed chaos, one we can only manage together.

In the spirit of such collectivist complexity, we've decided to call this book a "Team Memoir," which mirrors the dual authorship of this book, and the player profiles we've written, with great love, featuring some of Ohio Roller Derby's most enduring players, those who are the reason we are still around, no matter if they still skate with us or not. We—Samantha Tucker, a.k.a. Kegel Scout, and Amy Spears, longtime leader and unofficial Ohio Roller Derby historian—had no choice but to build this narrative together. While my perspective is as an outsider coming into the fold, a cultural critic in search of community and commonality, Amy has been involved with the world's fastest-growing sport since the near beginning. She has witnessed the accelerated growth, change, and evolution of this sport from a vantage point unavailable to most of today's players. She can attest to the ever-collective nature of this game and its international governing body. The sections titled "A Word from Amy Spears" remind us that the only way women's flat track roller derby survived, and evolved, was through the combined time, energy, and dedication of skaters, officials, volunteers, and fans—a group of people who pay to participate, co-operating and trying very hard to keep a legit but marginalized sport going, forever.

And here I am, always back at the same insistence that roller derby is a *real* sport. Whatever that means. It is festive in attire and punk rock in attitude and political by nature and athletic as fuck. It is a series of two-minute races between jammers, who are helped or hindered by blockers, blockers who play offense and defense at precisely the same

time. Roller derby is a sport with beautifully complex rules and an international presence, and once our world championship game was played on ESPN. Well, it originally aired live on ESPN 2 but then it was bumped to ESPN 3 for reruns, replaced on the lower-numbered channel by live-action cornhole,¹ a sport of sorts, with a larger audience than the Women's Flat Track Derby Association. Or at least an assumed larger audience, per ESPN 2.

Through the course of this book you might learn how to play roller derby, or you may come to vaguely understand how *we* play roller derby. We hope you will come to love roller derby and admire the tenacity of a game that continues to succeed on the fringe, despite an American culture that allowed for its creation but fails to support its growth. We hope you cherish our teammates and opponents, our chosen family, as much as we do. But most importantly, we want you to know who is included in this family, this collective *we*, why *we've* continued to play, and how *we* cannot stop bettering what *we've* started, together.

1 Never heard of cornhole until Ohio.