

Sport

The first rule of roller derby: don't call it Fight Club on Wheels. The second rule of roller derby: leave your misconceptions, and your dignity, at the door.

A smackdown with 40 women in hot pants, fishnet stockings and quad skates isn't how I choose to spend my free time. But here I am, at Wellington's Chinese Sports and Cultural Centre, lacing up skates beneath a sign that expressly prohibits the use of skateboards and roller skates.

The last time I had wheels this close to my feet, I accessorised them with leg-warmers, stirrup pants and a haircut verging dangerously on a mullet. Along with a Sony Walkman, those white boot skates with pink laces were my prized possession and I spent hours practising stops and turns on my parents' driveway to the *Xanadu* soundtrack.

The skates I'm borrowing today are more than a few rungs up the style ladder. Featuring reinforced leather heels, carbon wheels and sparkly bits, they cost about \$700. Competitor Venom de Plume (more about stage names later) says not only will they protect my ankles, they'll also "bring the bling", an essential part of roller derby.

Long before any of us cared how to pronounce derby American-style (it's derby, by the way, not darby), women in the United States were finding endurance skating marathons a pleasant distraction from the Great Depression. By the '70s, derby had more or less disappeared from sport's top table. A decade or so ago, it was resurrected in Texas by feminist-punk counter-culture, but this time as a full contact sport where the outfits and names are almost as important as ability, skill and tactics.

Wellington's Richter City Roller Derby started in 2007 and these days attracts around 50 women who spend three nights a week, and most of Saturday, learning how to smash into each other while travelling really, really fast. On the last Wednesday of every month, a "freshmeat and greet" evening introduces the sport to newcomers like me.

If you like your rules simple, then here goes: two teams of five score points when the 'jammer', usually a smaller, faster skater, overtakes members of the other team. The rest of the team, the 'blockers', try to obstruct the opposing jammer using their shoulders, hips and behinds as battering rams, all the while protecting their own jammer. The more laps, the more points scored, the louder the hollering and high-fives become.

To the untrained eye, it looks like a catfight in a roller



TALKER DERBY TOME

Sharon Stephenson signs up for a "freshmeat and greet" session with the roller derbying women of Wellington.

PHOTOGRAPHS: DIEGO OPATOWSKI

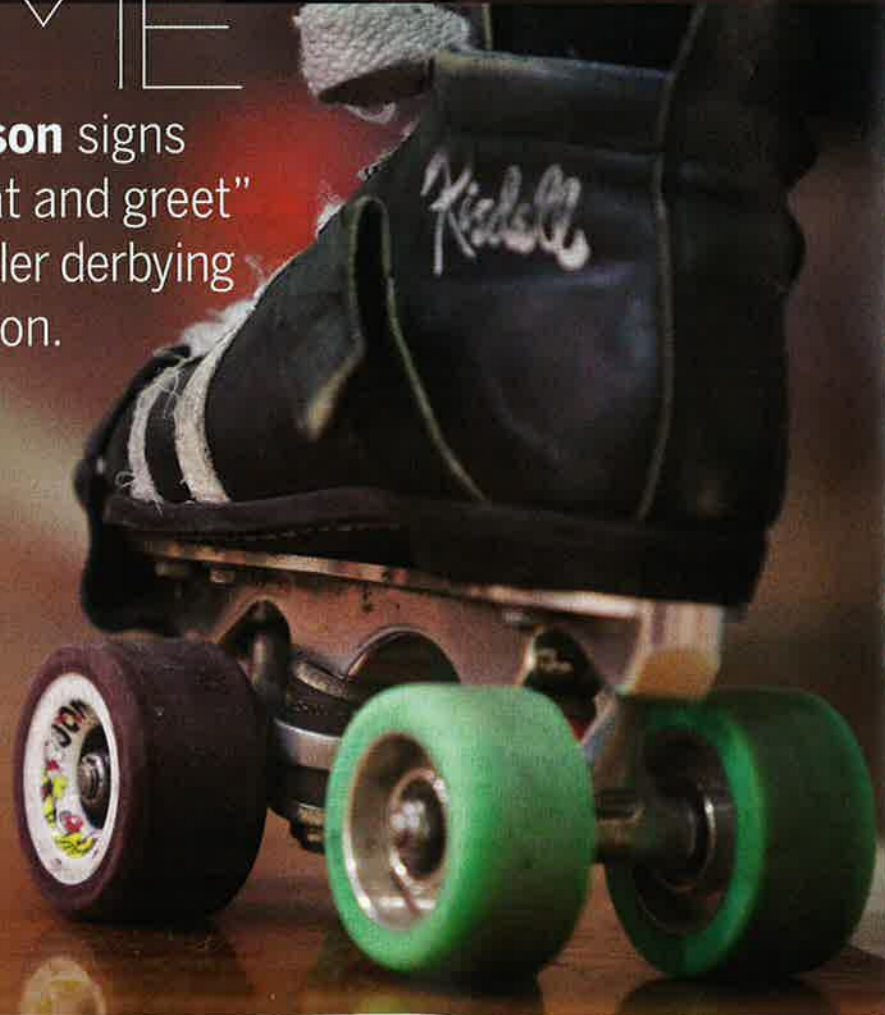
Clockwise from top left: Princess Slayer (Julia Bromley); Meat Train (Marcia Taylor); Wellington's Richter City team during training; Rusty Stiletto (Penny de Barst).



ALL DERBY DOME

Stephenson signs 'freshmeat and greet' with the roller derbying of Wellington.

GO OPATOWSKI



Princess Slayer Train (Marcia Taylor), city team during (Penny de Barst).



disco, but the global Women's Flat Track Derby Association details 30 pages of rules, including where and how contact can be made (the spine and head are, for example, no-go zones), and "unsportsladylike conduct", which can land a skater in the bin. "Incidental Touching" is, however, permitted.

I'd settle for being able to stay vertical without my legs rolling in opposite directions. I look, and feel, as feeble as a new-born kitten, but Venom, who has a derby injury that means she can't compete, offers me space under her wing. An archivist by day, she guides me along the track as though escorting an old lady to the loo.

I learn the best way to fall ("The trick is to keep your hands off the floor, so they aren't skated over"), including the one-knee and four-point falls and, everyone's favourite, the 'rock-star' slide, as well as how to slalom and get those pesky wheels to stop.

By now my thighs feel as though they're on fire, but I've been warned that although I can participate in the drills, it would take weeks before I'd be allowed anywhere near the bouts. Which is fine by me, particularly after a fall so jarring it makes my heart hide behind my liver and refuse to come out.

Instead, I watch the fast, furious two-minute 'jams', which run for an hour. And although I'll be hosting a couple of decent bruises for a week, I can see why roller derby is one of the fastest growing sports in the world.

It could also be one of the most over-educated: the Richter City club includes lawyers, engineers, journalists, teachers, students and, this being the capital, a fair smattering of public servants. Ages range from teenagers to women in their mid-40s and size is no barrier: in fact, being well-upholstered is an advantage for blockers, while skater J'Knee Dodgem, for example, is as sleek and fast as a greyhound, making her an ideal jammer. And there's no truth to the stereotype that entry is by tattoo: although several tasteful designs wrap around legs and arms like climbing ivy, none of the skaters is as heavily inked as their overseas counterparts. The attraction of derby, says a woman called Meat Train, is not just the chance to "socialise with people you wouldn't otherwise meet" but also to get fit.

"Many of us have sedentary jobs so from an exercise perspective, it's fantastic. I'm not a gym kind of girl, but I wanted to take up a sport that wasn't rugby."

In six months, the counsellor has gone from size 18

to size 11 jeans. "I lost heaps of weight and improved everything from my posture to my social life."

Like many in the sharp-elbowed, sports bra-ed frenzy whipping past us, Venom's introduction to derby was by word of mouth. "A friend told me about it and it sounded like fun, so I tagged along." Also, like many, she had never skated, but admits it didn't take long to make the physical and mental somersault to competing.

Call me a wuss and a coward, I answer to both, but these women don't seem bothered by the roll-call of injuries, from broken legs ("there's one every season") to the obligatory cuts, bruises and concussions.

"With any contact sport, there are injuries," says Venom. "But safety is paramount and we're all aware of the need to follow the rules."

Nobody, however, has come to play nicely and Meat Train tells me she's seen a physio almost every week since starting roller derby a few years ago. "But the only time I really hurt is when I'm not skating."

Helmets, mouthguards, knee and elbow pads are compulsory, but beyond that, anything goes. Richter City's "boutfit" consists of orange hot-pants, purple singlets and tights. Always tights to avoid chafing, or 'rink rash'.

Do derby rules also prescribe uniforms that, let's be honest, rate highly on the sexist meter? Cue eye-rolling. "Dressing up is part of the theatricality of the sport, but wearing tight gear isn't about being sexy; it's so other skaters can't grab you by your clothes," says Venom. "What we wear also has to be practical because it gets pretty hot and sweaty out there. It's really about wearing what you feel most comfortable in, so if you don't want to wear hot-pants, then fine, wear your running pants."

And what about the OTT names which have more than a whiff of the Worldwide Wrestling Federation about them?

Sugar Guerilla (or Murielle, as her parents know her), admits that's also part of the fun. "We pick our own names, usually something funny or with a pun, but which also incorporates how hard-core the sport is."

Hence the crazy names painted on helmets: Scarface Clawdia, Heidi Contagious, Evilicious Diva and Smash Malice. But crazy works for these women who, in the absence of a national league, organise everything from local and national bouts, to designing t-shirts and doing leaflet drops.

"It becomes a lifestyle," say Venom. "The question isn't, 'Why do you do this?' but, 'Why aren't more people doing it?'" ●