

Girl power gets wheels as US roller derby takes off



by Michelle Stockman

Tue Oct 6, 4:03 am ET

WASHINGTON (AFP) – Women dressed in ripped fishnets and lace-ruffled panties raced around a wooden track, deliberately slamming into each other. Welcome to the wild, adrenaline-charged sport of US roller derby.

About 500 fans cheered raucously in the stands at the Washington Armory. Some were boyfriends, kids, and mothers. But others had flocked to the stands for very different reasons.

"I came to see beautiful tattooed girls on roller skates, ah, knock the crap out of each other," said Brandon Mullen, 29, a tattoo artist from Newark, Delaware.

"It's very attractive to see tough women on skates hitting each other in skimpy outfits," said skater Angela Wall, 36, also known as "Condoleezza Slice". "That's a draw for just about anyone."

But it's not the only attraction. "She's getting a great work out," said Marion Fluchere, 56, of Newport, Pennsylvania, who came to cheer on her daughter, 26-year-old "Velocity-Raptor".

"And I haven't seen her this happy in a dozen years," said Fluchere. "She's having the time of her life."

Today's roller derby athletes dismiss as staged catfights the commercial version of the sport which had its heyday in the early 1970s. And today it is attracting a growing number of amateurs who see it as a legitimate sport.

Roller derby began in the 1930s as an endurance sport for both men and women, according to Joe Blenkle, a reporter for a Sacramento sports website.

Teams skated in marathon sessions of up to 57,000 laps, equivalent to 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers).

The man credited with founding roller derby, Leo Seltzer, saw the crowd reaction when a fight broke out on the track and decided to introduce body checking -- using one's body to impede an opponent -- into the sport. After a downturn in the late 1970s and 1980s, modern roller derby came back in the early 2000s primarily as a women's game.

Roller derby was revived in 2004 with the consolidation of 35 North American women's leagues into an association that now boasts 78 such leagues. Organizers say there are 300 more unofficial leagues across the world, primarily in English-speaking countries.

"Recently women have made the most political, social and economic advances and it's just another way to push that boundary. Contact sports are one of the very last areas where women are restricted from full

participation," said sociology professor Caroline Storms, from the University of Buffalo.

In competitions called "bouts", one skater, called a jammer, scores for the team. She earns a point each time she skates a lap around the main pack of skaters, called a jam, within a two-minute period.

"Blockers" try to force the opposing team's "jammer" off the track with body checks to the hips, arms and midribs.

"The contact makes it very competitive," said Karen "Obitchuary" Eakes, 30, from Washington. "You're definitely going to be hitting the floor several times throughout the bout."

Most of the women have full-time jobs as nurses, teachers and even military officers.

But on derby day, these babes on wheels put on an unfettered display of in-your-face girl-power, through irreverent nicknames, sexy costumes, and serious skating skills.

"Roller derby offers a great combination of both athleticism and also a celebration of women and what we're capable of," said Mandie "Lucy Arson" Yanasak Worsley, 27, who works at a labor union in Washington.

"We get to be fierce and competitive and we don't have to shy away from being real athletes."

Hollywood too has trained its sights on this girl power sport. A film directed by Drew Barrymore called "Whip It" is out this month showing how a nerdy girl defies her beauty-pageant-loving mother to join the rough girls on the roller derby track.

At the bout in the Washington Armory, "Marion Barrycuda" gave a bruising to "Shredica," trying to knock her off the track with a fierce shoulder slam. For many players, that's the sport's main draw.

"I never got to play contact sports as a kid," said one skater whose derby name is "Dyke Diggler". "When I was a little girl that wasn't encouraged. This is the first full contact sport I've played and I'm 39 years old."