

H A R D E R
B E T T E R



F A S T E R
S T R O N G E R

Roller derby is one of the few female contact sports in the world. Even though it's experiencing a huge growth, tough girls in skates still sounds like something out of a movie. We met some of the fierce London Rollergirls to discover the strong community that is fueling female empowerment.



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Little girls watch Disney movies and want to become princesses when they grow up. Then, they become young women who watch American romantic comedies and decide that roller derby is the way to go. Well, not all of them of course. Whip it, the 2009 movie written by Shauna Cross, author of Roller Girl, surely can be considered one of the big factors for the huge growth that the sport has experienced in the last decade.

From the USA, where it started as little more than entertainment in the 1930's, roller derby has evolved to a fully-fledged contact sport and spread throughout the world as one of the few, if not the only, predominantly female sport.

The revival that it experienced in the early 2000's was fueled by the fierce movie characters that portrayed badass women who were strong, independent and beautiful, played by actresses Drew Barrymore, Ellen Page and Juliette Lewis just to name a few. More importantly, Whip it showed women coming together as a team and even putting themselves before a love interest. Yes, you need to see it. But, as empowering as the movie might be, it also represents a side of roller derby that the sport is currently stepping away from.

"Interestingly I know the woman who wrote Whip it because I started playing roller derby with the Los Angeles Derby Dolls and she was one of the skaters there", says Bette Noir after offering us some coffee and sitting down for a chat at her beautiful kitchen table.

About ten years ago, this fierce American business-woman moved to London and played a huge role in introducing roller derby to Europe. The founder of London Rollergirls, one of the top four teams in the world, is an advocate of the "for the skater, by the skater" ethos, which implies a huge jump from the sexy girl gang presented in Whip it. "In the earlier days [of roller derby] it was very much about this kind of punk rock, tattoo, alternative, rockabilly chick. And very white too, obviously, because that's a stereotype of that alternative ethos as well, especially in America. But that has changed over these ten years".

In 2015, the BBC produced Skate Fast, Hit Hard, a documentary on roller derby calling it "Europe's fastest-growing female sport". Other newspapers and websites will say it's cricket, rugby or football that should take the title.

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The discrepancy of opinions only shows one thing: women are now participating seriously in sports and being successful more than in any other moment in history. Unfortunately, female sports still don't get the backing they need to develop their structure. When was the last time you watched, whether live or on TV, a female sports game? Exactly.

"I think our society is still sexist in many ways and there are a lot of people in the echo chamber of the Internet or anywhere else who will tell you that watching women's sports is not as exciting as watching men's.

I don't necessarily think that's true, it's just an opinion, but if they're the ones buying merchandise and they're the ones the television executives think they need to cater to, then that's going to continue to be the reality", says Bette Noir. "The England's lady team did really well in the World Cup and hardly anyone watched it here. They did get a lot more coverage than they've ever had before, but I can guarantee that most people in the UK were like 'yeah, whatever'. And I'm pretty sure Sky was not buying the rights to the ladies Arsenal game". Unlike football though, roller derby started as a female only sport. There are currently some male players and teams, but this is one of the few – if not the only – sport that was created primarily for women. A unique title that has connected roller derby to notions of female empowerment and feminism.

"Our mission statement is not to act as an advocate to further the cause of women and feminism in a direct way, but it is absolutely a side effect of what we are doing and a bit of the ethos behind it as well. The 'for the skater, by the skater' [motto] started as having a women centric focus because it was like 'no, we don't want some guy with a chequebook telling us what to do and what to wear'. It's just a natural progression for us to fly that flag", explains Bette.









One of the few things about Whip it that matches reality is roller derby names. Sheila, like so many of her team mates, was baptized in the pub.

"My roller derby name is Sheela Thekillia 2for1.

I laugh about it because I don't think it's very inventive", she says. An understandable position if we bear in mind that other team mates' names include Claire Force One, Sirius Whack or Van Hustling, just to name a few. Pearls. "There used to be a lot of overlap between roller derby and the pub, maybe not so much now. It's more like we're athletes".

In 2010, Sheila was recovering from a breakup and in between university. "I'd finished my undergrad and was waiting for my Masters so I had loads of free time. I was like 'I need to get out of the house'".

Roller derby was a way of meeting new people, but also of finding herself. "I think that one of the biggest things roller derby has given me is more self confidence in general". Still on the positives, there is physical fitness, of course. "I don't like running or going to the gym, so this is really good because I have fun while I'm doing it so it doesn't feel like exercise", says Sheila.

In 2016, the London Rollergirls celebrated their 10th anniversary. In that decade, roller derby has gotten so much bigger, not only in the UK, but all around the world, that it has "naturally grown to encompass outside of the stereotypes", as Bette puts it. "There are plenty of people who play roller derby that don't have tattoos, only want to listen to pop music and couldn't care less about wearing fishnets. As the sport has become more athletic and less centred on the fun side, it has attracted a lot of people who are serious athletes. Some of the best players in the States are competing at an international level at speed skating or come from hockey backgrounds".

A roller derby team is composed of four defensive players and one jammer, who is the point scorer. As the jammer tries to race past the opposing team's blockers (defensive players) to win points, things can get quite physical and intense.

Let's not forget that this is a contact sport after all. "Accidents happen, both in practice and in games. You could be flying at people with quite a lot of speed, but we've got as much protective equipment as we feel we need. Plus, everyone in the league does a lot of off-skate training so that our muscles are as strong as they can be to make sure that we're supporting our bodies", says Hanna.

After five years of roller derby, she jokes about the fact that she's never gotten seriously hurt. "I've still got all my teeth, they're all real. Touch wood. No broken bones, no concussions, those are probably the most common injuries we get". In 2011, a bit like Sheila, Hanna was going through a rough patch and felt like she needed to get out of the house.



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"I moved back with my parents after university and was in that dip that a lot of recent graduates probably go into after they've had freedom and suddenly they're thrust back with their parents. I was waitressing and most of my friends were still at university so I was lonely. Then I remembered I had seen this really cool film and wondered if there was someone local doing it".

Hanna entered the Fresh Meat, an entry program to develop basic skills and a first step into one of the teams that compose the league. Today, she is Cheesus, captain of the Batter C Power team. "I spent a year learning the basics, then another couple of years perfecting skills and then a few more to build up to this competitive level I am at now", she says.

Baby Cheesus, her roller derby name, is not to be seen as an alter ego. In roller derby, as far as Hanna is concerned, Clark Kent and Superman are the same guy. "I'd like to think that I'm a little bit fiercer when I'm on skates, on the track. Maybe a bit more focused on what I'm doing, in the moment. But I've never felt like I was a completely different person. It's just more interesting to have on my T-shirt than Hannah".

The London Rollergirls practice together three times per week, which takes a minimum of six hours. Then there's physical fitness training off-skates at the gym, and then a lot of volunteering so that London Rollergirls can carry on the "for the player, by the player" ethos.

The freedom of not having an external private owner comes with a cost, of course, but it's one that the players are happy to pay – and they pay it with their own time and skills. Marketing, PR and most of the roles you'd find in your common company exist here too, but are carried out by players, ex-players, friends and fans, on a mainly volunteer basis.

"Of course everybody would love to be able to focus their time on doing this and getting paid, but I don't think that is totally realistic for the next ten years. It's going to be a slow process because we are a women's sport and we are not on television", says Bette, who is also the Director of the London Rollergirls, a registered company.

In Whip It, one of the strongest moments is how the movie ends – ring the spoiler alert. There's a sexy guy that has left to follow his dreams and, when he comes back, the girl hasn't been waiting around for him. She's moved on, with a little help from her friends and a renewed confidence she found in her sporting abilities. It's not your typical Hollywood ending, but it's been a starting point for a lot of girls that now believe they can stand alone. Or, even better, with each other.



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