

“Denton Resident finds Empowerment through Roller Derby”

By Sara McNiel

On a 60-foot-long roller rink track, 10 women dressed in purple and black uniforms take positions at the starting line. A whistle blows and the women lunge off their skates jamming against each other. One woman, with the name “Savage Sunflower” printed on the back of her jersey, shoves her way through the pack, knocking some women to their knees. Racing ahead of everyone else, Savage Sunflower just scored the first points of the game.



25-year-old Denton resident Caitlyn Mangun, also known by her derby name as Savage Sunflower, is practicing her monthly roller derby scrimmage at the Lone Star Indoor Sports and Events Center.

“I love roller derby for many reasons,” Mangun said. “The culture is so empowering and positive; Many people see derby as knocking girls down, but we like to bring each other up.”

Mangun plays for the North Texas Roller Derby team Battling Mermaids, and has found it to be an incredibly empowering and life-changing sport.

Mangun moved from her hometown, Coppell, to Denton and attended the University of North Texas for a Radio/Television/Film degree. She was first introduced to roller derby through one of her new Denton friends, and was drawn to it because it seemed “tough and cool.” Mangun never participated in other sports growing up before she tried roller derby, though once she began

training, she knew this was the sport for her. Mangun started practicing roller derby in her free time between classes in August of 2016, and has been playing ever since. She practices two or three days a week, spending about 4 to 6 hours at the rink.

“Growing up I was *not* skilled athletically, and now I see something new my body is capable of with every practice and game. Roller derby is proof you can become an athlete at any age,” she said.

Roller derby began as a theatrical sport back in the 1940s. It wasn't considered an actual competitive sport until its revival in 2001, in Austin Texas. This all-female sport became influenced by the punk rock scene on Red River Street, and quickly gained popularity all throughout Texas.

Most roller derby players consist of women from their early 30s to their late 40s. This usually includes single or working moms and graduate students. The players build close friendships when pushing each other down while at the same time cheering each other on.

“I've had a lot of bullies in sports before too, so having a positive environment here is really nice,” Mangun said.

Everyone in roller derby has a ‘derby wife’, which is the player you would like to ride with you in the ambulance if you ever got hurt during a game. Gore-May Baker, Mangun's derby wife, describes the roller derby teammates as “a tribe of strong, amazing, hilarious women who can do anything they can set their mind to.”

Jet, one of Mangun's teammates, says that she and Mangun think of each other like sisters. “Derby has given me the opportunity to meet and build relationships with so many different kinds of women.” Jet said.

Mangun competes with other roller derby teams around the state such as the Big D Roller girls, Oklahoma Victory Dolls and Duke City Roller Derby. The North Texas Roller Derby has two

teams, the Fighting Unicorns who play at a national level, and the Battling Mermaids who play at a regional level in Texas and in neighboring states. Mangun hopes to keep challenging herself towards higher level teams, and possibly even the world cup.

Mangun encourages everyone to join roller derby as well saying that it has helped her come out of her shell and learn to accept failure, treating each loss as a learning experience. “My coach had to remind me what it’s all about, he would ask, ‘did you have fun? As long as you have fun that’s all I care about.’” Mangun said.

In the future, she wishes to keep playing roller derby for as long as possible and hopes to continue working towards a career in TV and Film.

“Roller derby has made me a better team player, as well as in a work setting with my colleagues, and has made me be more honest with myself and more accountable with myself,” Mangun said.