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High Altitude Roller Derby, fostering excitement and opportunity

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1 of 4



The Flagstaff roller derby scene may not have the largest following, but it is one of the most exciting events in town.

Flagstaff's roller derby league, High Altitude Roller Derby (HARD), has been around since 2012. The league had a solid footing in the community for many years until the pandemic forced it to a standstill. Recently, however, HARD has come back better than ever thanks to a community that refuses to see local roller derby die.

The sport of roller derby has existed for more than a century. Its roots are from the early 19th century as organized endurance races were held on flat and banked tracks. Eventually, roller derby transformed in the 1930s and became the high-intensity contact sport that is known today. In Flagstaff, and all across the country, the sport has become an outlet for individuals to express themselves.

What makes roller derby unique is that it is truly a sport for everyone. “We love everybody,” is the message that the roller derby master of ceremonies, Honey Guns, preached over the loudspeakers.

There is no place for limitation or discrimination in the world of roller derby. The passion and acceptance are felt as soon as you enter the arena. People from all backgrounds and ages come together for an event that feels more in tune with a family gathering than it does a clash between teams. However, that is not to undersell what occurs once the stands are full and the teams are ready to skate.

The bout, as it is referred to, consists of two 30-minute halves, separated by a 15-minute halftime. Each team has five players on the track at a time, and players can be suspended for certain amounts of time similar to hockey. Instead of a penalty box, however, there is a naughty box where offending players must sit until their penalty time is over.

The action is condensed into two-minute periods called jams. Each jam begins with either team's jammer behind the pack of defenders. When the whistle blows it is the goal of the jammer to fight past the pack and round the track as many times as possible to score before the period is over. The jam is where the real action begins.

A jammer pushing through the pack is reminiscent of a running back plowing through a defensive line. In many ways, however, it takes more skill. Not only does the jammer have to push through a pack full of defenders determined to put them on their back, but they also have to stay agile on a pair of roller skates that do not allow for much lateral maneuverability.

The only way is forward, and many fall before any progress is made. Still, even after all the hard hits and tumbles to the ground, the smiles outweigh the bruises.

When the bout is over, the encouragement and praise for players are not yet finished. All the people involved in the roller derby are appreciated from the EMTs to the referees and, most importantly, the fans who line the outskirts of the track postgame to high-five every player who

skates by. By the end of the event, everything that goes into making the roller derby a fun and inclusive experience gets recognized.

Shawna Ritter, a.k.a Honey Guns was a player for five years, and now takes on a new responsibility as the announcing voice for home HARD bouts. Ritter also coaches newer players, some of which have never even put on skates or played a sport of any kind.

“The new girls are my absolute passion and they pull on my heartstrings,” Ritter said.

The "fresh meat" players — newcomers to the program who learn to skate and play roller derby — are what Ritter now lives for.

“There is something really exciting about watching a girl who is not athletic, be scared and get hit, fall down and get up, they have this face ... it's like, I survived,” Ritter said.

It is a facing your fears type moment for some, but necessary for players to realize that they have greater potential.

“Or when they put the hit on somebody, knock somebody down for the first time, and their like ... I’m alive, I did that,” said Ritter.

Marisa Liuzzo, a.k.a Hugs ‘n Stitches, is a lifelong roller derby player and a freshman at NAU. Liuzzo has been playing since the age of ten when she competed in Phoenix. Now, she is a part of four different leagues, three in Arizona including HARD and one based in Maryland which Liuzzo travels with.

“It’s the best thing that could have happened to 10-year-old me,” Liuzzo said.

Liuzzo has a passion for roller derby that is reciprocated by everyone involved with HARD. Now, the goal for her is to create a club at NAU for those that want to test their skills on skates.

Liuzzo’s vision follows the same model that so much of roller derby keeps close to heart, learning and inclusion. NAU’s new roller derby club would not just be about derby bouts, but would also create a space where derby veterans and newcomers alike could come together and form a community.

“I just want people to have fun and try new things in a safe space that’s not so intimidating,” Liuzzo said.

Liuzzo said she also wants to offer outreach for anyone who just wants to learn to skate, as well as have camps for those that want to learn the game of roller derby. Theme nights are also a part of the vision.

Part of the planned outreach and camps would also involve teaching newcomers about the varying rules of roller derby. There are seven different rule sets in the United States depending on where bouts are played. HARD operates under Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) rules and regulations. Other sets include the Men’s Roller Derby Association, Roller Derby Coalition of Leagues, USA Roller Sports (USARS), Modern Athletic Derby Endeavor, short track and Junior Roller Derby Association (JRDA).

Different variations of the rules can make it difficult for players to adjust when traveling. USARS is one of the industry standards because of its relationship to the Olympic derby, but unless players decide to travel, there is not much exposure to USARS rules in Flagstaff. Liuzzo’s vision includes clinics specifically to teach USARS to those that may not be familiar.

The presence of a roller skate club may potentially help HARD continue to grow as well. It could provide a chance for both the club and HARD to use the University Union Fieldhouse as a more temporary location for home bouts. On March 25, NAU Skate Club was given the opportunity to use the fieldhouse for an event with KJACK Radio that included live music and food. This gave some members of the future roller derby club hope they too would be able to take advantage of the venue’s expansive floor space.

The biggest challenge in keeping roller derby together had been finding an available space. Flagstaff has no indoor facilities that are capable of accommodating sanctioned derby bouts, other than the fieldhouse. Up to now, HARD has not been able to secure the space on campus.

Currently, league bouts and practices are held at the Flagstaff Junior Academy. The league rents the school’s gym and installs its own track every time they use the space, twice a week for practices plus games. The track itself is a combination of cord and painter’s tape. Approximately three rolls of tape are used if not more, to create the temporary track. Volunteers with large tape rollers spend 30 to 45 minutes laying down the markings. The temporary track works in the interim, but the lack of a larger space, specifically for roller derby, limits how much the league can grow.

WFTDA regulations state that track boundaries must be marked by a raised boundary at least a quarter inch high and no more than a half inch in height. The track boundary line width must also be at least 1.5 inches and no greater than three inches wide. An area of 10 feet outside the track is also required to have sanctioned bouts. If HARD were able to share the club space at the fieldhouse, the league would be able to host sanctioned events and bouts could count toward national point totals. Additionally, HARD could finally get the chance to receive more national recognition and find its footing within the Flagstaff community.

Another challenge the roller derby is facing is funding. HARD is skater-run, meaning league members are responsible for keeping the league afloat financially. To help fund the league, each member pays a monthly fee. HARD also receives revenue from sponsorships and bout tickets. However, most of the profit goes towards renting track space and supplying materials.

For every challenge the league faces, there is a silver lining.

The community that surrounds roller derby has no lack of excitement or support. The idea of resilience is prevalent, not just within bouts, but within the people that have built HARD into what it is today. The league would not exist without the skaters who put their whole hearts into the game.

Hugs n' Stitches, Bloody Bridget, Sun-plow-her, Glitter Bomb, Gnarly Quinn, Kate Smush, Mini-Fridge, Vivien Slaya and so many more help create an environment with no room for animosity. If there is any residual stigma surrounding roller derby, the members of HARD are working to erase it.

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