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ENTERTAINMENT

Why Cincinnati is becoming a roller derby destination: 'It is kind of a crazy story'



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It's 7:30 p.m. on a Tuesday and the sounds of roller skates scraping against concrete are trickling out from a seemingly unordinary brick-red warehouse called The Apex.

Faint shouts from a coach executing drills float across the parking lot outside the venue, which sits at the south end of [Northside](#) and is a stone's throw from picnic tables buzzing with patrons at Urban Artifact brewery.

Inside, The Apex doesn't look like much. There's blue tape resembling the shape of a roller derby track in the center of the room and camping chairs clustered in the corner used as makeshift benches. The floor is peppered with spare knee pads and helmets, and a swarm of roller derby players outfitted in protective armor congregate in the center of the warehouse.

Millie Beiting, better known by her teammates as "Shipwreck," is squatted in the corner, balancing her weight on her two quad skates and closely studying clips from a scrimmage on her phone. She's the youngest on the team at 18 but has some of the most experience – she's been playing roller derby since she was 6.

Normally junior teams start at age 7, but she was able to convince Northern Kentucky-based Black-n-Bluegrass Junior Roller Derby to let her start a year early.

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"I want to play derby until I physically cannot anymore," she said.

Their space is merely a slab of concrete now, but to these skaters, better known as the [Cincinnati Rollergirls](#), The Apex is their first home in the approximate 20-year lifespan of the all-volunteer group. It's also the new home for

three other local roller derby groups: Cincinnati Junior Roller Derby, Black-n-Bluegrass and Black-n-Bluegrass Junior Roller Derby.

The evening practice primed the Rollergirls for their housewarming of sorts at [The Apex on May 10](#), when they faced Akron Roller Derby in a double-header to open the 2025 season. There, the venue appeared more finalized with a projector screen acting as a scoreboard and folding chairs, acquired via [an Amazon wishlist](#), for the players to sit.

But there's still much in store for renovating the venue, with plans to add a concessions area, locker room and bleachers. That'll all have to wait until they get epoxy on the floor, though, according to the Rollergirls' coach Crystal Armbruster, or "Crystal Whip," as she's known on the track.

"We just needed a place to skate, so that was kind of the rush to get in here," Armbruster, 50, said. The mother of two discovered roller derby in 2017 when she visited a drop-in derby class at The Place rink in White Oak and thought "it looked fun hitting people."

"We can make anything work. If we've got some concrete, we can make it work."

The Cincinnati roller derby team was left with nowhere to skate

For 2025, the Rollergirls were supposed to play at the Queen City Sportsplex, a multipurpose arena in Evendale that they called home from 2022 to 2024. Renovations, however, left them without a venue.

Northside-based [Grey Rock Development](#) found the building that is now The Apex at 1641 Blue Rock St. and started vetting different parties. Grey Rock's co-owner Sarah Thomas heard the Rollergirls were looking for a space to play and began discussing ideas with them around November 2024.

Since then, it's been "a bit of a time warp," Thomas said.

She knew the team was in a time crunch, so they wanted to get the building in what she described as "the bare minimum of operable" to allow the group to proceed with its 2025 season.

The long-time Northside resident and developer admitted she'd been a fan of the Rollergirls for years. And though The Apex has been the team's home for only a few months, she has already witnessed all they add to the Northside community.

"They've already been participating in neighborhood events (and planning) other programming they want to do in the space," Thomas said.

"They're a big add to the neighborhood district," she added. "And they're more than just a skate program."

'People want to come see roller derby'

The Rollergirls played their first season in 2006 at [the Cincinnati Gardens, the historic indoor arena in Bond Hill](#), and stayed there until it was demolished in 2018. The team has also played games at Xavier University's Schmidt Memorial Fieldhouse and the Cintas Center.

Samantha "Star Flatten'em" Fox said the team sold well over a thousand tickets for various Cintas Center games in 2022 and 2023.

"People want to come see roller derby ... it's just that there's sort of this shortage of mid-sized sports venues in the area," Fox said.

"Something about it is kind of a crazy story. The fact that (roller derby is) such a big thing around here."

Fox is a primary jammer, an offensive role in which the player must skate at full speed and break through a wall of blockers from the opposing team. Off the track, she's also the Rollergirls' director of PR and marketing – one of several volunteer leadership positions that keep the team running.

She has played on multiple teams, including Black-n-Bluegrass and, last year, she traveled to Lansing, Michigan, to play for Team Ohio at the [Skate Wars](#) all-star competition. The 32-year-old was the sole Cincinnati skater chosen to represent the Buckeye State, and her Rollergirls teammate [Krysten "Krystonite" Lapid](#) also played as part of Team Philippines.

In pictures of Fox skating, she looks "wide-eyed and crazy," she says, but her brain is at ease.

"In my head, there's no noise," Fox says about her time on skates, which began in 2019 when she saw a Rollergirls game. Though she'd never been on roller skates, she thought "I could do that."

Out of all the cities she has played in and all the teams she has joined, Fox said she had yet to find the level of excitement for roller derby exhibited in the Queen City.

"You don't see quite as much as a wider community showing out for (roller derby)," Fox said. "The fact that we do have the opportunity to have this space speaks to the Greater Cincinnati sports community and how excited people get, which I just think is fantastic."

The Apex is meant to attract skaters from everywhere

Similarly, before they had The Apex, the Black-n-Bluegrass adult and junior teams played at a mixed bag of venues, including The Fieldhouse, a sports training venue in Covington, and in the back of Hits Indoor Baseball and Sportsplex in Florence.

Per [a disclaimer on the junior team's](#) website, Hits had no air conditioning – so skaters were advised to dress appropriately and drink lots of water.

It's still in the beginning stages, but the ultimate vision for The Apex is to be a destination for teams around the region to compete, Fox said.

She calls the Midwest a "wildly accessible derby spot" given there are so many teams within driving distance from one another.

Beyond the Greater Cincinnati teams, others in the Midwest include Ohio Roller Derby in Columbus, Circle City Roller Derby in Indianapolis, Louisville Roller Derby and Nashville Roller Derby.

"It's really cool, one, on a local level to bring these teams together," Rollergirls player Gabrielle "Jackie the Ripper" Larkin, 33, said. Larkin was the point person for this venture, having been contacted by Grey Rock, she says.

"It's something that we've never been able to do."

This season marks Larkin's eighth year playing on the team, which keeps her busy when she's not at her day job managing local coffee shops or being a mom. In 2017, she committed to joining the team to conquer her fear of roller skating, which she had carried ever since breaking her arm at a skating party in fourth grade.

On Larkin's right cheek is a small lightning bolt – a fake tattoo, she clarifies. It's an homage to her "Jackie the Ripper" derby name and a testament to being fast like a lightning bolt on the track.

"It's like creating a character, that when you roll onto the track, like 'I am Ripper now, I'm not Gabrielle,'" Larkin said.

"A lot of us have no idea what (each other's) government names are."

The name of the venue, on the other hand, reflects the goal of unifying the four Greater Cincinnati teams, Larkin said. A poll was distributed for all the teams to submit names. A junior skater dreamt up the name "The Apex," and, from there, Larkin designed all the branding for the new space.

She said The Apex is one of the few venues in the country dedicated to roller derby – a sport nearing its century anniversary after the first athletes laced up their skates at the Chicago Coliseum in 1935.

"Ultimately, it's always been about the skate community and selfishly about myself – I wanted to find somewhere to continue the sport and play," Larkin said.

The Cincinnati Rollergirls are slated for home games at The Apex on June 7 and 14 and Aug. 23 this summer. Learn more at cincinnatiollergirls.com. Those interested can view all games being hosted at The Apex at the venue's Instagram page, [@TheApexCincinnati](https://www.instagram.com/TheApexCincinnati)