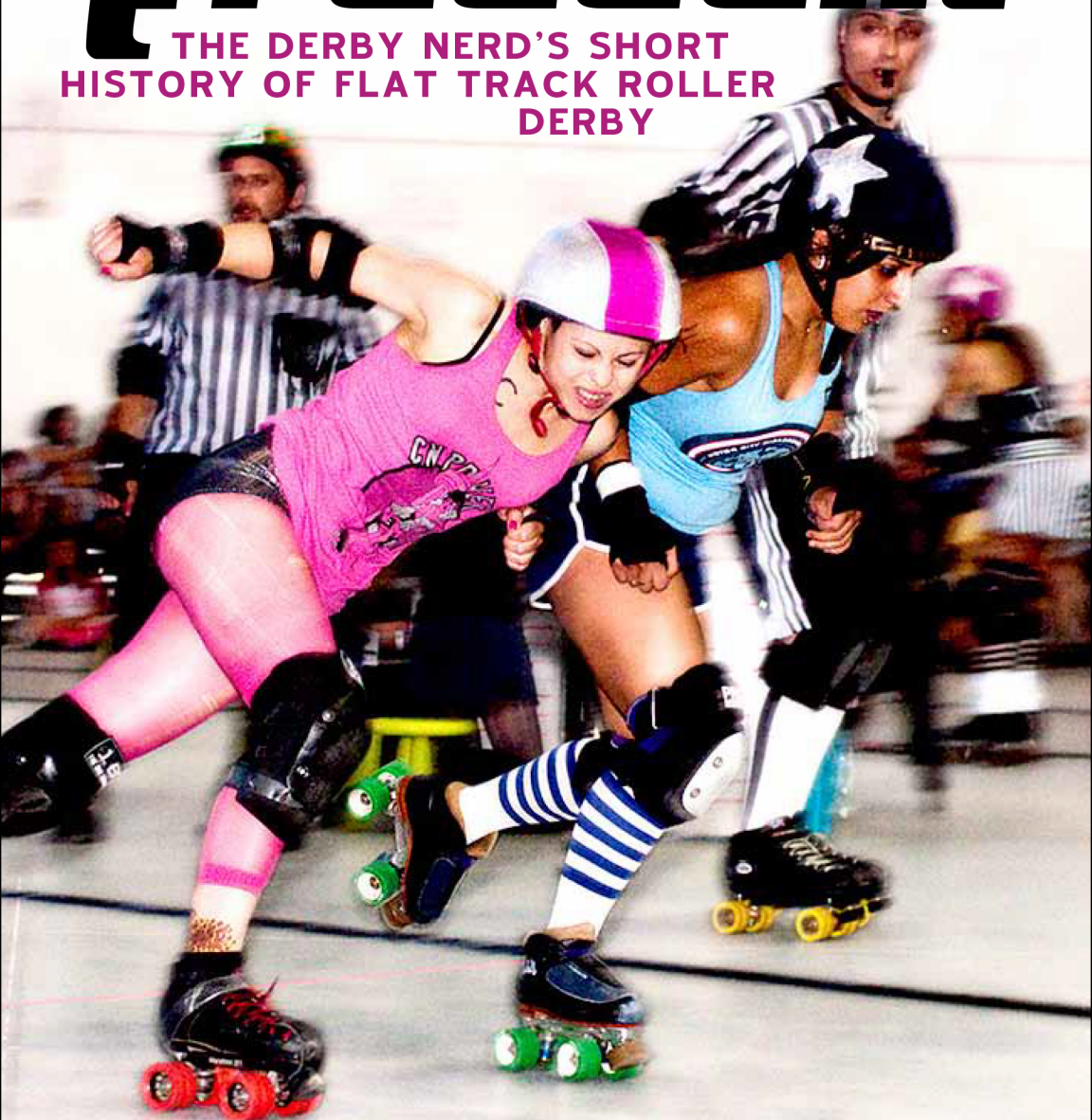


# *eight-wheeled freedom*

THE DERBY NERD'S SHORT  
HISTORY OF FLAT TRACK ROLLER  
DERBY



*dd miller*

*eight-wheeled  
freedom*

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WOLSAK  
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# *prologue*

My relationship with the game of flat track roller derby changed forever on November 5, 2010, in Chicago, Illinois.

Up until that time, my understanding of the modern version of the sport had been limited to community-level, DIY, local derby. This was a sport played in rec centres and iceless neighbourhood hockey arenas in the spring and summer months by brave, interesting (and not always athletic) women. Women who, for the most part, defied a single demographic placement, although on the surface there were a lot of tattoos, a lot of dyed hair and a clear queer-positive aesthetic.

By the end of 2010, I'd been swept up in the flat track revolution for a few years and I had watched many games in those iceless arenas in Montreal, Hamilton, Kitchener, London, Ottawa and Toronto. I'd had to set aside a new space in my closet just for roller derby T-shirts and my partner had become a skater on the Death Track Dolls, a house league team in Toronto. I'd begun to write fairly regularly about the sport, took road trips just to see games, had done some online colour commentary

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and play-by-play in Montreal, and was lined up to announce Toronto's locally televised house league championship game. I even had a derby name. Basically, I was as big a Canadian fan of roller derby as you could find. But even in the comparative isolation of the Canadian roller derby scene, I could tell something was changing that fall.

When Drew Barrymore's roller derby revival film, *Whip It*, had premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) a year before, I'd seen thousands of people cram Yonge-Dundas Square in downtown Toronto to rub shoulders with the film's stars and watch an exhibition roller derby game. Although the film dealt with a small, independent, banked track league in Austin, Texas, after the film's release, North American women of all ages were Googling *roller derby*, finding their nearest flat track league and buying fresh meat gear packages from the handful of derby retailers selling them at the time.

The larger community that supported the game was just beginning to open up to Canadians. Within the past year, both Montreal and Hamilton had become the first non-US-based members of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). Though still in its infancy, the WFTDA ran the closest thing the sport had to a professional league, annually organizing its members into four ten-team regional playoff tournaments, where teams vied for an opportunity to play in what had until then been called the National Championship Tournament.

Montreal, and its cheekily named travel team – The New Skids on the Block – turned heads in its first year playing within the association by qualifying for the Eastern Region playoffs. It was an appearance that had forced the WFTDA to rethink its marketing and its terminology as the game had clearly burst forth from

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the US border. *Nationals*, for example, became *Championships*, although in 2010 most people called them *Championals*.

With the rise of sites like The Derby News Network (DNN), Derby Tron and Flat Track Stats, I could now follow along with the growing rivalries of the sport's top teams, and I was getting to know the key skaters and the slowly expanding star system that resides at the heart of any sport. Glued to my computer screen and the Derby News Network's expanding broadcast of the regional playoffs (*boutcast* in derby lingo), my understanding of the game and the breadth of its growth was expanding rapidly. I'd become a big enough fan of the game that when I heard that Champs were going to be held in Chicago that year, I jumped at the opportunity to see the sport played at its highest level and by its best practitioners.

So on November 5, 2010, I walked into the UIC Pavilion in Chicago for day one of the 2010 WFTDA Championship (nicknamed Uproar on the Lakeshore). Although it was early on in the tournament, there were thousands of fans crammed into the lower bowl of the Pavilion. Vendors were hawking their wares on the concourse, and beer and popcorn sellers were squeezing their way through the face-painted, sign-sporting fans in the seats. It was like walking into any North American sporting event, only in the centre of it all was a blue sport-court flat track, and skating around it were two roller derby teams. The Bay Area Derby Girls (from San Francisco and the Bay Area) and Austin's already legendary Texecutioners, the founders of the modern revival, were well into the first game of the tournament. In the end, Texas took a low-scoring victory in what was an incredibly tough defensive game, but I barely noticed. I spent most of that first day staring in amazement, my neck swivelling



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in wide circles, attempting to take it all in. To figure out what it all meant.

This was big-arena roller derby, being played in a venue and for a crowd that was unprecedented in the seven years since the revival of the sport. The beer was overpriced and the concessions were awful. Some of the fans were obnoxious, belligerent, even had their bodies painted. There were mascots and loud music and half-time shows and vendor stations and everything else that you would expect to find at a North American sporting event.

I was not alone in making my pilgrimage-style march from north of the border to the 2010 WFTDA Championship, and I was not alone in having a life-changing moment at the event either, although it probably didn't coalesce as nicely as I like to remember it. But I came to some realizations that weekend. Thoughts that I'd been having about the sport – the state of the game, its role in my life and the world and the future of it; thoughts that every roller derby skater and superfan have probably had – were finally forming into something coherent. I was seeing the early stages of the twenty-first century (at least from a Western perspective) playing out in women's flat track roller derby. It was a fully wired, Internet-driven, grassroots (yet increasingly global), non-partisan, anti-judgmental women's revolution. I don't want to sound too hyperbolic, but in the simplest way I realized that modern flat track roller derby had grown so beyond its roots that it was here to stay.

This was something that had never been taken for granted before. Everyone – even my grandmother – was aware of roller derby's semi-dubious history, its ebbs and flows and shifts and alterations. Its languishing in the dregs of sports entertainment. No matter what the incarnation, roller derby had never

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lasted, always vanishing when the novelty of that latest spectacle waned. But buoyed by social media and the rise of web streaming, from 2003 to 2010 the flat track version of the sport had grown by nearly 1500 per cent. It had gone from a kitschy, loosely organized, punk rock-inspired third-wave feminist movement to a global competitive sporting phenomenon played in nearly twenty countries and counting.

And in Chicago that weekend, beginning when I first walked into the Pavilion and ending when Denver's Rocky Mountain Rollergirls were in the midst of a last-moment comeback that would see them defeat the defending champion, Oly Rollers, it became clear to me that roller derby had grown well beyond Austin's Texas Rollergirls. It had grown beyond all of the skaters in Chicago that weekend, the thousands of fans in the building, the many more tuning in to DNN for live coverage. It also became clear to me that when we were all gone, the sport would not be. Flat track roller derby would be played by someone else and watched by countless others – changed, tinkered with, made better – but whatever was going to happen and whatever the future held, for the first time in its somewhat troubled history, I knew without a doubt that this time roller derby was not going to fade away.

# ***a wholly unique music***

## **THE CALL OF THE FLAT TRACK**

**May 31, 2008. Montreal, QC**

The streets were so empty we could hear the sounds of our shoes scuffing the sidewalk, kicking up dust created by the remarkably dry, warm spring air. We were rushing down St-Dominique Street in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood, late, and up ahead we could see our destination. Arena Saint-Louis was nondescript, a squat-looking brick arena that wouldn't look out of place in any city, town or village in Canada, and it seemed silent from a distance, empty perhaps. I was starting to wonder if we'd even come to the right place. But once we stood at the foot of the steps leading up to the main entrance we could hear it: a faint din leaking out through the glass doors at the top of the stairs; the muffled moans of a crowd; the sharp voice of an announcer cutting through a blanket of sound. We hurried up the steps, our hands slipping from each other's grasp.

Entering the door we gave our tickets to a young woman with a thick nose ring. Tattoos of paws scampered up her left forearm, her hair was an asymmetrical, spiky blue, but she had a sweet smile and welcomed us in slightly accented English. She

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ushered us through the inner doors and we found ourselves on a concourse overlooking a bowled arena with a wall of seats immediately beneath us.

It was packed, as packed as this small Canadian arena could be, and loud: the acoustics of the building allowing the sound to rebound, echo and erupt as they would for any sporting event. Only the crowd was unlike any I'd ever seen downtown at the Bell Centre watching the Habs. It was mostly women, for one, and predominantly lesbian, I assumed: heavily tattooed, pierced and as equally decked out in armless, punk rock-certified fraying jean jackets as they were in hipster-chic skinny jeans and retro plaid. It was a glorious sea of riled up, belligerent fans, screaming at the action below with their hands thrust skyward, clutching half-drunk cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR). I followed those cries down onto the arena floor – iceless now – to an oval in the centre of the polished concrete, marked out by pink duct tape over a rope and ringed by a circle of fans three-rows deep, who either sat directly on the floor or stood, leaning over those sitting, straining to have their voices heard on the track where two groups of women roller skated.

The action on the track that they were all so focused on was a blur to me, a swirl of purples and greens and blacks, hair whipping out from under helmets, arms flailing, bodies tumbling, a cacophony of seemingly uncontrolled chaos. Over it all, I could hear a single voice cutting through the noise with a crisp timbre that focused my attention. Standing in the centre of the oval, seemingly flitting above the mess of bodies that surrounded or scrambled upon the track, was a stunning human. A topless feminine figure, confidently decked out in very little: high-heeled black leather boots that stretched up to the knee and gave way to smooth, toned thighs, black booty shorts and a matte-black

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corset that thrust and presented the figure's masculine, muscular chest upward toward a perfectly contoured face. The face – sharp, deep-cheeked, with smoky charcoal around the eyes giving them an enigmatic, yet still penetrating look – was framed by a shiny platinum bob that cut a line of straight bangs above the brow. The announcer strutted about the action, drifting effortlessly between English and French, sometimes interacting directly with the crowd and seemed to be describing the sight in some carnivalized version of a traditional sports play-by-play. As I listened I began to see – ever so crudely – the links between the action and the words. The chaos on the track seemed to slow somewhat, at least to the point where I could distinguish one team from another and the skaters from each other. I began to see the slight consistency in the uniforms, but mostly I was taken by the personalized variations: the heavily stickered helmets, multicoloured knee and elbow pads, the fishnets or booty shorts. I may not have understood the game, but at least I recognized the sport of roller derby.

I wish I could remember what my expectations were for that night, but whatever they may have been, I know they were wrong. It's probably more accurate to say my expectations were shapeless and weighed down by murky memories of a dead sport. I would quickly learn that the state of the game was in a similar spot, that the muddle I was seeing and feeling was actually the murkiness of a game trying to figure itself out.

My partner, Jan Dawson, and I were nearing the end of our time in Montreal. We'd been in the city for two years while she completed her graduate degree in Library and Information Studies at McGill University. We had been tipped off about Montreal's roller derby league from two of her classmates who were budding fans. We were supposed to meet them that night, but our

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late arrival made finding them difficult. So instead, we grabbed a couple cans of PBR (two for five dollars) and headed to where a few seats remained in the southern edge of the stands. As the first game neared its end, Montreal's defending house league champions, Les Filles du Roi, were on the wrong side of the score against a team from Boston called the B Party. In the buildup to the evening, I had naively thought that flat track roller derby was exclusively a Montreal thing, so I watched enthralled as these women who had travelled all the way from Boston rocked the Montreal skaters. As the night wore on and the pyramids of empty PBR cans began to rise along the side of the track (they were called *beeramids* I would later learn, built in the hopes of being knocked down by a skater hit out of bounds), the crowd became increasingly belligerent toward the opposition, and downright rude and obnoxious toward the referees.

For someone like me – a slightly nerdy, but passionate sports fan, who'd played a few sports, but would never have been considered a jock at any point in his life – being in that arena that night felt like being in a kind of paradise. Here was a sport that had many of the trappings of the traditional sports spectacle but managed to feel completely different. From its competitors – women who ranged widely in size, shape, sexuality and style – to its announcer to its fans, nothing seemed recognizable to me, a lifetime consumer of the Big Four North American sports and the bloated amateurism of the Olympics. One thing that remained the same was that core of sports empathy that is nearly indescribable and that people seem to crave once they get a taste for it: the joining together with a group of others and rallying behind a team. I could feel it there that night immediately, even if whatever was happening on the floor in front of me was unlike

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any sport I had ever seen and the audience surrounding me was unlike any I'd ever been in.

Walking into Montreal's Arena Saint-Louis is for fans of Canadian roller derby what walking into the old Montreal Forum would have been for fans of hockey. After the closing of Edmonton's Grindhouse (a.k.a. the Metro Sportsplex) in the summer of 2014, Arena Saint-Louis became the single oldest continuously used arena for roller derby in Canada, and some of the defining moments for the sport in this country have happened there. In May 2008, Montreal Roller Derby was in the early stages of its second competitive season. I was surprised to discover that the league consisted of about sixty women, separated onto three home (or house league) teams: Les Contrabanditas, La Racaille and Les Filles du Roi. The top sixteen or so skaters had also recently formed the all-star team, The New Skids on the Block.

Jan and I saw every game that season, never leaving our spots at turn 1 of the trackside suicide seats. We saw the regular season and the playoffs. On July 12, we watched our first Canadian inter-league game between Montreal's New Skids and Hamilton's Hammer City Eh! Team, where I realized, for the first time, that this sport was being played elsewhere in Canada. All of this was to come, but on that initial night in May, I remember Jan and I glancing at each other in silent wonderment. Once we'd gained some confidence, we began to ask the fans around us about certain aspects of the game, but we quickly discovered that not many in the audience really knew what was going on. Many had seen the sport only once or twice before, or, more often than not, not at all. The best we got was that there were three positions: the blockers, the pivot (who was a blocker that wore a stripe on her helmet, the reasoning for it beyond my understanding at the

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time) and the jammer, the skater who could score points and who had a star on her helmet.

By the second game of that first evening's doubleheader, I was starting to figure things out, at least on a large scale. The sprawling mass of what seemed to be pure confusion began to take on shape, and I could see a little order to the commotion. And, like most of the people who have leapt into twenty-first century roller derby, particularly in those first years when it was still essentially unknown and you could stumble unaware into an unassuming neighbourhood arena and discover this thriving, raucous subculture, I had what some skaters refer to as "the calling." Most skaters, announcers and officials are able to boil their callings down to a specific moment. A moment when the sounds and sensations create an almost out-of-body experience that allows something small and specific to suddenly open up to expose an all-encompassing bigger picture.

This calling doesn't happen as much anymore because that element of being caught off guard has been lost. Even if people don't quite know exactly what it is, everyone seems to know that there is a roller derby revival going on, so the sport surprises people less and less. But when it was still a derby little secret hidden away in rinks and gyms in a few places across North America, the discovery was often a shocking revelation. The first few waves of the growth of the sport consisted of women having this calling and following it to extremes. In Canada in 2007 and early 2008, there were only a few cities where derby was played – Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, Edmonton and Vancouver – so at this stage the future roller girls who would soon take up the game in London, Ottawa, Kitchener-Waterloo, Red Deer and Victoria relied on the existence of those initial leagues to discover the sport.



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The moment of my calling came late on that first night in Arena Saint-Louis. Fuelled by equal parts wonder, adrenaline and beer, it was life altering.

It turned out that both Montreal teams were quite over-matched (I would learn later that the US teams were significantly more experienced), but in the second game, featuring La Racaille taking on Female Trouble, a team from Baltimore, I finally began to notice that whenever one particular skater took to the track wearing a helmet cover with a star on it, La Racaille's score rose. She was easy to pick out as she skated with an awkward, hunched-over stride that brought her so low around the turns she could slap the floor if she wanted. She gave me something to latch on to and gaining a centre point allowed me to see that there was an order to things. There were strategies and counter-strategies. I could match the cheers in the crowd with this skater's ability to get through the pack, weave her way through the opposing blockers and take assists from her own.

The skater's name, I learned quickly, was the Iron Wench.

As Iron Wench approached the track and one of her teammates knocked an opposition blocker out of the way so she could get past, the sport began to unfold for me. It was a raw understanding, though the sport at the time was still in a fairly raw state, but when that fundamental understanding of the game coupled with the energy in the arena that night, I knew I was falling in love with the game. Luckily, when I looked over at Jan, I saw that something had changed in her as well. She was the one who would first describe to me the moment of her own calling. Later she told me that as soon as she walked into the arena, she felt as if she were surrounded by her "people," though she couldn't explain with any more precision who those people were.

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As La Racaille's loss at the hands of Baltimore was winding down, we began to anticipate when Iron Wench would come back on the track. We could easily recognize her loose gait, the rounded back and the jutting elbows. Eventually I began to look beyond her stance and down at her feet. When I'd first walked in, the tangle of legs and knee pads had been a blur, but late in the second game, I could begin to make out the skates – all quad roller skates, of course – cutting through the air. They almost seemed to be floating above the concrete. Then I finally heard the sound, the muffled screech of wheel edges connecting, digging into the concrete underneath. It was unlike anything I'd heard before, maybe similar to an ice skate stopping sharply, digging into ice and kicking up a spray of snow and ice bits, but it was deeper, heavier. It was as if the hard plastic wheels were sanding down the concrete, grinding it away to nothing; and the more the skaters moved their feet – stopped, started, leapt, turned – the more the wheels would screech. It was unnerving. It was mesmerizing. It was a wholly unique music, and I was hooked.