

WE BREAK OUR BODIES TO SAVE OUR SOULS: IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION THROUGH THE PARTICIPATION IN FLAT TRACK ROLLER
DERBY

By

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ABSTRACT

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While sociology of sport has been growing steadily over the last few decades, with an increased focus on how sports participation allow for active identity construction, research on roller derby is incredibly limited. I argue that research on roller derby provides an important window for understanding gendered sports construction and participation. Derby also provides a space where identities are created through performance in addition to the creation of unique personas or in some cases primary identities. In this study, I conducted 15 semi-structured open ended interviews using non-probability and snowball sampling techniques of a rural roller derby league as well as participant observation for just over one year. Interviews revealed that skaters often identified heavily with their roller derby identity but also experience contention about what the derby community and derby athlete should look like, particularly in relation to what skaters wore during bouts. Participants were quick to assert they do not care how others present themselves, but also carried hegemonic ideas of femininity, embodiment, and sport identities where hyper-femininity and sexuality was often rejected for a more masculine or “legitimate” sporting identity. The reproduction of hierarchies and oppression that exist in derby are important to consider when viewing and athletic, derby,

identity since these identities develop in a sport predominately created by, and for, women.

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INTRODUCTION: ROLL OUT

The very nature of sports place women in identity and behavioral contradictions when they participate. Sports, particularly full-contact and collision sports, are traditionally dominated and played by men. Full-contact and collision sports in particular require the players to maintain attitudes of aggression, competitiveness, and heavy physicality. However, these traits are also most associated with masculine forms of expression (Halbert 1997; Ezzell 2009). Women who participate in full-contact and collision sports are placed in a position where they must take on these masculine traits in order to effectively play. When women present masculine traits they are forced to navigate stigmatized and deviant labels and are often punished for their transgressions in the form of sexual and homophobic harassment (Halbert 1997). Traditional notions of white femininity reinforces ideal womanhood as small, demure, quiet, and nurturing, quite the opposite of athletic and sporting expectations (Draft 2013; Musto and McGann 2016). Women in sports often try to reduce the amount of stigmatization they receive by highlighting varying aspects of their femininity. Draft (2013) and Musto and McGann (2016) found women will maintain long hairstyles and wear make-up during games to effectively “apologize” for the masculine traits they take on.

Most research on women in sports, particularly full-contact sports, has focused primarily on rugby and boxing (Halbert 1997; Ezzell 2009). While this research is useful in understanding the identity negotiations women face, these sports are limiting in understanding feminine negotiations in full-contact sports. Rugby and boxing are traditionally men’s sports and are still played predominately by men. Women in these

spaces will be confronted more often with trying to navigate hegemonic expectations of masculinity and are more pressured to emphasize their femininity to reduce backlash (Halbert 1997). Contemporary roller derby, however, was created and is still predominately played by women (Mabe 2007; Atwell 2015). I argue the women-centered space of roller derby adds another dimension to gender and identity construction because the navigations of transgressions are different. Roller derby was founded in 2001 with the expectations of hyper femininity and sexuality (Mabe 2007). Skaters still often present as highly feminine during gameplay, the femininity is often “in your face” and highly sexualized from fishnets, “booty” shorts, to the infamous tutu. However, roller derby has seen a recent push to actually defeminize the sport to further push for legitimization in the overall institution of sport.

Prior to this research, I participated in three rounds of level 1 bootcamp within the Small Town Derby league. At a training session outside of regular practice, I sustained an injury two days before I was to be assessed by my coaches to potentially graduate to level 2. My injury kept me off skates and relatively immobile for two months with another three months of physical therapy. During this time, I could not stop thinking about when I could skate again. My injury was the catalyst for this research.

I was curious to know what kept skaters in a sport that we pay to be in, are not paid to participate in, and literally break our bodies over. I had failed to pass my minimum skills examination three separate times until that point, and I knew skaters that had been in bootcamp longer than that, had sustained worse injuries than mine, and still

insisted on continuing. I want to know what it is about our identity and community that rationalizes breaking ourselves in order to build ourselves over again.

The purpose of this study is to explore and further understand identity construction through the participation in flat track roller derby. Currently, roller derby is the only full-contact, or collision, sport played predominantly by women. There is an obvious gap in sporting literature exploring the various identity negotiations those who participate in roller derby go through. Research on women in sport participation generally focuses on women who play traditionally male sports and so their negotiations of identity are influenced differently by the surrounding culture of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. Roller derby is put into an interesting place in sporting history because of its position as a collision sport developed by women, for women. While there is a heavy emphasis on women's empowerment and femininity, there is still often the threat of reproducing gender hierarchies in order to further gain legitimacy as a sport.

I would like to make a quick note on the language used throughout. I made the conscious decision to alter my language of the derby participants to refer to them collectively as "skaters." This decision came from the acknowledgment that not all who participate in roller derby, particularly even Women's Flat Track Roller Derby, identify as women. I have skated with multiple skaters who identify as non-binary and one of my participants also identifies this way. I will refer to individual participants by their pronouns but have made the decision to be inclusive in my overall analysis. While my analysis does focus on women and on feminine identity within sports, I want to honor

those who continue to participate in a very gendered space where their gender is not always acknowledged or respected.

Roller Derby: A History

Contemporary roller derby is still considered to be a subculture sport that has quickly grown into an international sensation. However, in order to grasp the prevalence of roller derby within the United States, I first introduce a historical analysis of the original or “traditional” roller derby, beginning in the 1930s. The derby renaissance of the 2000s brought a punk feminist, do-it-yourself ethos to the sport. In 2001, roller derby was played similarly to traditional roller derby, but with a punk/burlesque flair, walking a line of hyper feminine theatrics and athletics. In order to be “legitimate” and be taken seriously as a sport, contemporary roller derby has begun to shift away from the traditional theatrical aspects.

The beginning of the greatest sport on 8 wheels

Roller derby began at the height of the Great Depression when different types of competitions were gaining popularity (dance-marathons for example). Roller Derby, originally created by Leo Seltzer was not the rough and tumble sport we generally think of today (Mabe 2007). Rather, the sport was an endurance skate, a race both men and women participated in. In 1935, Seltzer began traveling with his derby teams across the East coast. At this time, the track was flat, but was still required to be built and taken down every time the teams moved. Seltzer would generally stay in one city for up to multiple weeks at a time considering the high costs of moving the track (Mabe 2007).

One of the main aspects of derby that drew large crowds was the fact that both men and women could participate. While they did not necessarily skate together, the sport drew in women more than any other sport played at the time. There was even a rumor the women were paid equally to the men, sometimes even more because finding women athletes was harder (Mabe 2007).

The participation of women in derby increased even more once forty-seven-year-old Josephine “Ma” Bogash began racing, as Seltzer tapped into a previously ignored section of the population, housewives. Derby began to be promoted in places where women frequented: grocery stores, fabric stores, etc. increasing the amount of women playing the sport, even going so far as to recruit entire families who eventually had their children play as well (Mabe 2007)

In the late 1930s, a point system was introduced to the game as well as the banked track. The banked track was raised at a 45 degree angle allowing for more speed. With more speed and a point system, “hip checking, body blocking, and all-out brawls entered the picture” (Mabe 2007: 31). The shoves and hits were used as a way to gain advantage over other players. The point system introduced a more competitive spirit to roller derby, which changed the way it was played. As Mabe (2007) said, “put more than one skater hell-bent on victory on a track of any sort and they’ll try to lap each other, get around each other, and win at all costs... even at the risk of bodily harm” (31). Players were now pitted against each other in two teams of 10, five women and five men with a total of four jammers and five blockers all on the track at once (Mabe 2007). Jammers were responsible for scoring the points while blockers were responsible for both offense and

defense, preventing the other team's jammer from moving through and making room for their own jammer to score points. Points were scored by the jammer every time they passed an opposing blocker. Roller derby was no longer an endurance sport but now two teams battling it out. Contact became necessary as skaters now had to maneuver through a mass of other skaters and “the real roller derby was born” (Mabe 2007: 33).

By 1941 skaters began traveling through different states and started living together. However, while derby may have been viewed as an “equalizer of the sexes” on the track, traditional gender roles pervaded the lives off the track. Women often washed the laundry in exchange for men doing work on their skates. Relationships also occurred between skaters, and while this was originally discouraged, it proved to be beneficial since many non-derby spouses were assumed to not understand or support the participation in derby (Mabe 2007). The relationships between skaters would also make its way into contemporary derby as well, with women skaters dating each other or bringing their boyfriends or husbands into the games to officiate.

Eventually, derby became more of a spectacle, similar to pro-wrestling, with heroes and villains. We saw “stories” that played up these roles, creating feuds and exciting the audience. However, the shift into spectator sport meant that sports journalists regularly played up the antics of the players rather than their athleticism. While the games were reported on and advertised, much of the advertisement focused on fights, broken bones, and team rivalry. The most famous “good girl” of derby was Gerry Murray who captained the New York City Chiefs in the 1940s (The New York Times 1973; Mabe 2007). Murray’s rivalry with her “bad girl” counterpart, Midge “Toughie” Brasuhn

of the Brooklyn Red Devils, is still known today in many derby circles. Brasuhn was a feared roller derby skater, known for her drinking and brawling attitude who regularly “gave Murray a run for her money on the rink” (Mabe 2007: 37). The New York Times (1971) even used the language of “legendary battles” to refer to their rivalry on the track. While Brasuhn and Murray pushed each other to perform to their limits on the track, many fans and reporters only cared about the “drama” created through their rivalry. Therefore, players were caught in a position where they wanted to be taken seriously as athletes but also wanted to provide a good show for the audience to keep them coming back. This catch-22 has continued to follow derby throughout its many incarnations.



Figure 1: Gerry Murray (left) and Midge "Toughie" Brasuhn (right)

1948 saw the first televised derby game, and after that the nation was indeed hooked. Leo Seltzer finally had the sport where he wanted it to be and had six teams he operated: “The New York Chiefs, Brooklyn Red Devils, Jersey Jolters, Philadelphia Panthers, Chicago Westerners, and Washington (D.C.) Jets” (Mabe 2007: 39). However, by 1953, with the saturation of the sport (playing 3 times or more weekly and no off season for skaters) television deals began to dwindle. Derby was then moved out west to

California in an attempt to keep the sport alive by Leo Seltzer's son, Jerry Seltzer. Jerry Seltzer had other plans for derby, moving away from marketing the sport as a sport to packaging the spectacle. Jerry Seltzer increased the advertising of the skater's fights, the broken bones, and played up the rivalry between various home teams. The sport stopped being televised in full games and instead only portions of the games would air, attempting to entice the audience to buy tickets to live games. In the 1960s, roller derby teams began playing against a new brand of skating leagues called roller games (Mabe 2007).

Roller Games, a separate league from Jerry Seltzer's roller derby, was based in southern California and promoted "more outlandish theatrics and stunts" than roller derby skaters were used to (Mabe 2007: 47). Roller games skaters landed harder hits and even harder falls often times overplaying theatrical antics. While Roller Games and roller derby teams did sometimes play against each other, the two leagues did not get along (LA T-Birds 2012). Many roller derby skaters were torn between "staying true to the sport or adopting the theatrical antics," and took offense to anyone insinuating that "derby was anything other than a true sport," the injuries were proof enough (Mabe 2007: 46). Athleticism began to take a back seat to the antics and with the gas crisis of the 1970s and the inability to travel, "the Seltzer-owned roller derby organization held its last game on December 7, 1973" (Mabe 2007: 48).



Figure 2: Lenny Sullivan of the Texas Outlaws, Roller Games League, overacting on a fall in 1969

In 1999, Rollerjam was introduced as a way to reinvigorate the derby spirit. Led once again by Jerry Seltzer, he took charge of the new World Skating League and working together with television channel, The Nashville Network (TNN), Rollerjam was born. Rollerjam took advantage of the incredible popularity of pro-wrestling, inline skates, and the nostalgia that accompanied the new millennium (Mabe 2007). Rollerjam was similar to the “real” derby in that, women and men would be on the same teams, but would play separately in different periods. Skaters used inline skates and incorporated more choreographed violence similar to pro-wrestling. Rollerjam continued to incorporate sugar and spice personas, where teams and skaters were once again given various personalities and styles such as Brian Gamble of The Enforcers listing “playing with knives as his chief hobby” and women were described as “loud, vocal, and opinionated” (Mabe 2007: 57). While Rollerjam was marketed through the rivalries and drama, and the competition and storylines were manipulated, it was impossible to adequately choreograph the skater’s actions and reactions to hits making the action, and broken bones, real (Mabe 2007). However, by 2001, the sport would air for the final time.

Once again, audience participation was lacking and TNN eventually dropped Rollerjam. Mabe (2007) claims that the demise of Rollerjam came from the need for not only drama, but also true athleticism. In the end, the true nature of the sport could not compete with the drama and storylines created.



Figure 3: RollerJam Florida Sundogs vs. California Quakes 1999

Derby renaissance

When Rollerjam ended in 2001, there had already been talk about how to reimagine roller derby in Austin, Texas in 2000. However, this version of derby was not to put the sport at the center, but to create a sort of performance art with sport as the inspiration. In January 2001, Daniel Policarpo (AKA Devil Dan) organized a meetup to start a roller derby league which brought in about 50 women. In this meeting, they agreed to bring back derby with a “punk/rockabilly aesthetic” (Atwell 2015: 39). Within the TXRD Lonestar Rollergirls league, four teams came out of this initial meeting, sporting names and themes inspired by local bars. These teams kept with the tradition of having “good” and “bad” aesthetics: The Holy Rollers (themed after naughty catholic schoolgirls), the Rhinestone Cowgirls, Hellcats (Hotrod themed), and the Putas de Fuego (Whores from Hell).

During this reincarnation of derby is when they also took on “skater names,” an alter ego of sorts following the tradition of the “sugar and spice” characters of traditional derby. Many of these names were also related to the team the skaters were on, reinforcing the “good” and “bad” teams. The skater names evolved out of the punk rock scene of having stage names, a way to reinvent yourself when you are on the track (Atwell 2015).

By May of 2001, Devil Dan left roller derby, the reasons for him leaving are not clear. This departure inspired a new twist to the sport, “no men allowed” (Mabe 2007). The new roller derby aesthetic was to create a sport comprised of sexy uniforms and alter egos but also removed from the scripted antics of traditional derby and promoted “unparalleled athleticism and fearlessness” (Mabe 2007). In July 2002, the first public bout in Austin, Texas attracted 600 audience members, new and old, to the Playland Skate Center (Mabe 2007).

As the sport grew out of Texas, there became a need for a defined ruleset and governing body of roller derby. In 2004, the United Leagues Coalition was founded as a way to keep teams in contact with each other and to establish a uniform ruleset (prior to this, due to the DIY nature of the sport, many leagues were playing under their own rules, causing issues when leagues played against each other) (Atwell 2015). By 2005, 20 leagues met in Chicago to create a more formal organization, changing the name to Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). It is unclear which teams met to form the WFTDA, especially because it seems the TXRD Lonestar Rollergirls did not participate. Currently, the TXRD Lonestar Rollergirls still play under the original banked track ruleset of 2001 instead of adopting the rules of the WFTDA. The WFTDA

established a governing body, voting structures, and a standardized track and ruleset (Atwell 2015). By 2009, there were over 440 WFTDA recognized leagues (Barbee and Cohen 2010). Currently there are 402 full member leagues and 57 apprentice leagues under WFTDA (WFTDA 2017).

WFTDA leagues were able to grow so exponentially due the fact the track was significantly changed. One argument for the sport's past deterioration is because the maintenance of the banked track was incredibly expensive and required the teams to have a dedicated space large enough to house the track. With the advent of the WFTDA also came the innovation of the flat track, that stayed in sync with the new do-it-yourself aesthetic of derby (Atwell 2015; Joulwan 2005; Mabe 2005). The flat track revolution of derby made the sport increasingly more accessible to skaters, only requiring a space and a roll of duct tape, lights, rope, cones, etc (Atwell 2015; Joulwan 2007; Mabe 2007). These tracks could be fashioned indoor or outdoor, space became less of an issue and this was a drastically cheaper alternative to the banked track (Atwell 2015; Mabe 2007).

With the reinvention of derby, the sponsorships and paychecks for skaters were gone. Now, any money made by the league was put back into the league. Leagues would form bonds with local businesses and women-run organizations in order to obtain money for practice spaces, travel funds, merchandise, and even to offset costs for injury (Mabe 2007). The mantra "for the skater by the skater" was born. With no monetary compensation, many began to wonder why the skaters participated. They were basically taking on second unpaid jobs as event coordinators, coaches, board members, skaters, and beyond. It all came down to "it's fun as hell!" (Mabe 2007).

While the renaissance of roller derby was framed as a counterculture movement because of its subversive use of sexuality and violence, currently, derby has begun shifting toward a more “legitimate” form of sport. Currently, some leagues which are housed under the WFTDA are recognized non-profits. With becoming non-profits, many leagues are now held to a strict standard of professionalism within the sport which originally had an air of rebellion to it. The non-profit status, while giving some credibility to the leagues, may become a hindrance when there are decisions to be made on how to “market” the team. Currently, the local roller derby league used for my data collection, Small Town Derby, has placed restrictions on clothing and names, especially in regards to sanctioned games in order to better market the team as “family friendly” and community oriented. The rebellious nature of derby is originally “by the skater, for the skater,” however by moving to non-profit status it has shifted more toward “by the skater for the community.” While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it does put pressure on the league to perform a certain way.

League skaters are pressured to be athletes but must also take on the responsibilities of marketing strategies, board members, and other professional spheres in order to continue receiving enough money to keep their league afloat. They no longer get to only focus on being athletes, but are now also business owners, compelling skaters to perform not only on their skates, but as professionals in their community.

The attempt to legitimize the sport as an “authentic” sporting arena is also due to the continued stereotype that roller derby is not real, that the hits and falls continue to be staged and scripted. By branding itself as an authentic sport, where skaters play in athletic

gear, skate under their legal names, and assert their position as athletes rather than performers, they can attempt to gain the respect of the overall sporting community. In this, the roller derby community has started rejecting the rebellious aspects that made the sport special in the first place and has incorporated more of a business model.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: GETTING THROUGH THE PACK

The institution of sport continues to be one of the most popular aspects of global entertainment. I seek to shift the conversation away from sporting as an institution, and look at the micro sociological aspects of the athletes and their identity construction.

While my research focuses primarily on the construction of identity through the sport of roller derby, literature available is limited. Therefore, this literature review will examine women who play a variety of sports, primarily in the United States, and how they negotiate the gendered terrain of the sporting realm through various theoretical perspectives and their actions in reproducing or resisting gender hegemony.

Theoretical Perspectives of Women in Sport

Early theoretical perspectives on women's sport primarily focus on perceived deviance (Halbert 1997). Sports have and continue to be traditional avenues for male competition and spaces for expressions of hegemonic masculinity (Halbert 1977; Dworkin, 2001; Chase 2006; Kauer 2006, Ezzel 2009; Finley 2010). More and more women are now entering traditional male sporting spaces such as rugby, weight lifting, boxing, basketball, and soccer (Halbert 1977, Dworkin 2001; Chase 2006; Kauer 2006; Ezzel 2009). The integration of women into men's sports has provided an opportunity to further explain and discuss what women do to construct and maintain their identity as women and athletes.

Stigma and deviance

Stigma is regularly reported as a challenge for women athletes (Halbert 1997; Kauer 2006). Women who participate in sport, primarily full-contact or collision sports, often experience stigmatization and labels of deviant because these types of sports are traditionally played by male participants. The label of deviant is not related to the actions of a person, but is instead the application of a label by outsiders (Halbert 1997). The application of “deviant” manifests as rules for social groups to abide by or else risk social sanctions. Deviance is therefore applied to women in athletics because of the social expectation of who gets to be an athlete, particularly in regards to full-contact sports.

Successful athleticism, regardless of the gender of the athlete, includes strength, aggression, ambition and competitiveness (Halbert 1997; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015). However, these characteristics are not perceived as feminine and women who do exhibit these traits challenge and push the boundaries of femininity (Halbert 1997). Halbert (1997) suggests the violations of traditional femininity (soft, docile, non-competitive) “often results in stereotypes, labels, and stigmatization designed to identify and sanction those defined as problematic” (Halbert 1997: 11). Women who challenge the boundaries of acceptable femininity are then branded as problematic/deviant/or other and are at risk for negative social sanctions.

Social sanctions are used to control athletic women because they are already pushing the gender norms of docile and nurturing womanhood. Women who are athletes are therefore more often labeled as deviant compared to other women who participate in

deviant acts. Halbert (1997) makes the distinction that while many women participate in deviant behaviors, the actual label of “deviant” is “often highlighted among women in athletics” (Halbert 1997: 11). The label of deviant is a direct response to the women’s challenge to men’s positionality within the institution of sport. Women often experience “sex discrimination... sexual harassment, [and]... homophobic harassment” for their gender transgressions and their perceived challenges to men (Halbert 1997:11).

Identity management

Identity Management becomes a mechanism for women to maneuver through athletic and sporting spaces. Goffman (1963) suggests individuals do not manage the tensions in an interaction, but instead manage the information they provide about themselves. Women athletes will often control what personal information they provide to others because of the stereotypes often placed on women in sports (Halbert 1997; Kauer 2006). Historically, women in sports have been accused of being “mannish” which has become synonymous with lesbian (Halbert 1997; Dworkin 2001; Chase 2006; Kauer 2006; Jamieson, Stringer, and Andrews 2008; Chase 2008; Ezzell 2009). The control of personal information often manifests as a response to homophobic sexual harassment, as exaggerating their relationships with men, homonegative behaviors, or refusal/dismissal about their sexual lives (Kauer 2006; Ezzell 2009). I will cover these responses further in my analysis of hegemonic structures of femininity.

Disciplined and docile bodies

Foucault has not been used often in an analysis of the sporting body (Chase 2006, 2008). Chase (2006, 2008) argues Foucauldian analysis is beneficial to understanding the sporting body as both sites of resistance and control. A Foucauldian analysis serves to push our understanding of the “normalized” sporting body and the positionality of those bodies within a sporting context. The sporting body, therefore, is often a site of control through disciplining forces. However, I also discuss the body as a site of resistance further in my analysis in the overall discussion of sport as resistance.

Chase (2006) uses Foucault’s notion of docile bodies to argue that the institution of sport operates similarly to other institutions in terms of control and discipline. Foucault (1995) explains the docile body is one that is able to be transformed and therefore, improved. The transformation of the body is enacted through subtle or constant and overt coercion (Foucault 1995). Chase (2006) uses the analysis of the disciplined and docile body in their analysis of sport because of the “array of disciplinary techniques in sport,” such as time management, rigorous physical training, nutrition control, injury prevention, and rehabilitation. Through the control, the expected result is a docile body capable of high intensity sporting performance.

It is necessary to establish the docile body in terms of femininity as well. Women who are athletes must conform to the regulated control from their sport regimens as well as the social control of their femininity (Halbert 1997; Dworkin 2001; Chase 2006; Kauer 2006; Andrews 2008; Chase 2008; Ezzell 2009). Chase (2006) describes the regulation of

the feminine body through “appetite, posture, gestures... general movement in space; and its overall appearance” in order to cultivate the “appropriate and acceptable femininity” (234). However, the most acceptable form of femininity is not only determined through physical changes made to the body through self-regulation. Appropriate femininity is also regulated by dominant ideologies of race, class, and sexuality where middle class, white, and heterosexual women are the only ones capable of achieving femininity (Musto and McGann 2016). Black women in sports are often viewed as “too mannish” and as exhibiting more masculine traits (larger, aggressive, etc.) (Musto and McGann 2016). Musto and McGann (2016) state that through the masculinization of Black women, they are stigmatized more heavily through assumptions of “sexual deviance and hyper-sexuality” compared to white women athletes (102).

While race and class are important aspects when considering who is afforded femininity, all women who are athletes utilize different control methods to ensure their femininity, affectively apologizing for their athletic transgressions through normative regulation (Chase 2006; Musto and McGann 2016). Some examples of women athletes performing normative femininity is through the use of make-up when working out, wearing bows in their hair, or having long hair (Musto and McGann 2016). Practices of femininity are reinforced through external pressures that may present themselves as disapproving looks, unwarranted assumptions, or even rejection from the sport (Chase 2008). Due to external pressure, athletes will also discipline and regulate themselves in presenting more (or less) feminine to reduce the possibility of negative social sanctions (Halbert 1997; Dworkin 2001; Chase 2006; Kauer 2006; Andrews 2008; Chase 2008;

Ezzell 2009). In other words, the regulation of the body comes from both external and internal negotiations through both societal pressures and their own self-discipline and self-surveillance (Chase 2006; Chase 2008).

Identity construction through sport participation

Symbolic interactionism traditionally associated identities with the meanings we attach to ourselves (Ezzell 2009). However, using a traditional framework of identity is limiting, primarily because identities do not exist in a bubble. Stryker (1980) introduced the concept of identity role, salience, and commitment. Women who participate in sport are regularly tasked with negotiations of not only their sporting identity, but also their feminine identity. Women athletes, and their athletic and feminine identities are different parts of the self and also conceptions of society that “carry with them expectations of behavior” (Burke and Stets 2009: 45). Ezzell (2009) explains identities as the signs and meanings perceived by both the individual and larger group. Identities, therefore, are not fixed but are “consequences of reflection and interaction” (Ezzell 2009: 111). As stated earlier, women who participate in sports are forced into positions where they must choose between the various parts of their identities, primarily their status as women and athletes. Because of the negotiation between the various roles, Donnelly and Young (1988) suggest a different way to examine identities in sporting subcultures.

Identity formation, while useful in examining situations of socialization, is of limited usefulness when discussing the participation in sports. Donnelly and Young (1988) suggest participation in sport is a much more deliberate action than general

socialization. Because of the deliberate nature of joining a sports team, Donnelly and Young (1988) prefer to use an identity construction analysis rather than identity formation. Stryker (1980) suggests identities are formed when a role is placed on an individual by others and the individual simultaneously appropriates and announces the role themselves. Therefore, identity construction is more deliberate because the athlete must have their identity expressed and validated by others while also claiming the identity for themselves (Stryker 1980; Donnelly and Young 1988). Donnelly and Young (1988) also suggest that identity construction comes from the possibility of going through potential traumatic role shifts in order to fit into the sporting space.

Using these theoretical perspectives provides an important framework when analyzing women and sport participation, particularly for understanding the relationships between the teammates as well as outsiders. I will use these frameworks to further discuss the issues women athletes face when negotiating different aspects of their femininity as well as how they can incorporate identities into sites of resistance.

Hegemonic Structures of Femininity

There has been a growing number of literature examining the concept of hegemonic femininity. Hegemonic femininity exists similarly to hegemonic masculinity, in that it is used as a way to examine social benefits specific groups of women experience without necessarily acting on dominance (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic femininity, however, does not imply dominance on a social scale (as women do not have power over men in patriarchy). Hegemonic femininity, instead, is useful when discussing

the dominance of certain types of femininity, specifically those that fail to interrogate the patriarchal gendered lens (Finley 2010). My analysis of hegemonic femininity first concerns the difference and limitations between emphasized and hegemonic femininity, followed by how women participate in the reproduction of oppressions using a hegemonic femininity framework.

Emphasized and hegemonic femininity

Hegemonic femininity is meant to encompass a similar framework as hegemonic masculinity. Studies of hegemonic masculinity acknowledge the multiple kinds of masculinity but that a certain kind of masculinity is socially dominant through cultural expectations, practices, and the “marginalization of alternatives” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Finley 2010). Finley (2010) suggests femininities can work in a similar fashion, where there are hierarchies within femininities so that one acts as the dominant form through cultural practices and expectations. However, there has been push back against the original use of hegemonic femininity. Finley (2010) explains that hegemonic femininity was replaced with emphasized femininity to “reflect the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order” (360). Because hegemony refers specifically to a dominant position in power relations, and women do not hold institutional power, many scholars are reluctant to blend hegemony and construction of femininity (Finley 2010). However, Finley (2010) argues that hegemonic femininity is an important framework of analysis due to its complementary nature to hegemonic masculinity. While emphasized femininity is often

used to describe the most culturally preferred femininity, the removal of a discussion on hegemonic femininity removes the possibility of analyzing the “hierarchies of femininities” (Finley 2010: 361). Hegemonic femininity pushes the analysis of gender relations to examine how gender order and dominance is maintained through its complementary connection to hegemonic masculinity (Finley 2010).

Hegemonic femininity pushes the analysis of femininity by acknowledging the various ways women are supposed to present their gender. A hierarchy of femininity and womanhood is created to provide a classed and racialized ideal woman. Musto and McGann (2016) found the tensions to perform as an athlete and femininity are greater for working class athletes and athletes of color. Women of color, specifically Black women, are most often compared to white athletes and are more likely to be described through historically racist rhetoric of “mannishness, deviant sexuality, and ‘blackness’” (Musto and McGann 2016: 102). By placing women of color and working class women athletes as lower, a new hierarchy of femininity begins to emerge within the institution of sport.

While women in sport do not achieve hegemonic femininity, often due to body size/shape, or because of stigmatized behavior (aggression, competitiveness), I utilize this framework to further my discussion on reproductions of oppressions within feminine presentation. Women in sport are still expected to try and achieve the hegemonic form of femininity, though there are ways women can navigate their femininity should they transgress. I incorporate a further analysis of hegemonic femininity to further contextualize the role of hegemonic femininity in the larger cultural and sporting context. Hegemonic femininity incorporates and accommodates desires of men and athletes

negotiate these desires through the disciplined “heterosexy-fit” body, defensive othering and distance from other women, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Heterosexy-fit and the ideal sporting body

Ezzell (2009) defines the term “heterosexy-fit” as “simultaneously tough, fit, feminine, and heterosexual” (112). The heterosexy-fit identity may be classified as a new form of socially acceptable femininity. However, I would not yet consider the heterosexy-fit model to be the new form of hegemonic femininity. Those who exemplify the heterosexy-fit image will still try to accommodate actions and characteristics representative of hegemonic femininity.

While I do not classify the heterosexy-fit body as the new hegemonic femininity, the intersections of athleticism and femininity must be considered. Heterosexy-fit combines assertiveness with traditional expectations of femininity (Ezzell 2009). In Ezzell’s (2009) study of female rugby players, they found the players would emphasize their appearance to adhere to traditional heterosexual femininity. The players wore make-up both during games and in their regular lives, found pride in their small physiques, and would compare themselves to the “mannish” players of other teams. The use of a heterosexy-fit identity is meant to please the dominant group while simultaneously transgressing gendered expectations, effectively apologizing for the transgression (Ezzell 2009). The gender transgression is positioned as less threatening to dominant gender expectations.

However, in order to maintain the heterosexy-fit image, women athletes must maintain an ideal body or at least be working toward the ideal body (Dworkin 2001; Chase 2008; Jamieson et al. 2008; Gieseler 2014). While heterosexy-fit imagery moves away from the slim bodies of hegemonic femininity it still requires an obvious (or perceived) disciplined body. The heterosexy-fit image is one where skinny is replaced with “fit” (Dworkin 2001; Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009). Women athletes expect a change in their body when they begin exercising or joining a sport, particularly those that require more strength training (weightlifting, boxing, or rugby) (Halbert 1997; Dworkin 2001; Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009). However, the women who participate in these sports are still reluctant to get “big” or “mannish”. Hegemonic feminine ideology teaches women to “disappear by shrinking, slimming, [and] silencing themselves” (Gieseler 2014). The ideal heterosexy-fit body allows women to be active but does not allows them to gain size, or in effect take up space. Women athletes are still relegated to remaining small for their transgression of other gendered expectations.

The heterosexy-fit body is also heavily racialized. While the heterosexy-fit image allows for some transgression of femininity, such as being assertive and participating in full-contact sports, women of color are still going to be highly stigmatized if they also perform as an assertive athlete. Few researchers discussed race when considering the heterosexy-fit body but due to the relation to hegemonic femininity, there needs to be further analysis of race in relation to the heterosexy-fit body. Giesler (2014) made a note that race needs further examination as well and Dworkin (2014) discusses the concept of true womanhood as rooted in classed and racial hierarchies. Dworkin (2014), however,

discusses how normalized expectations of femininity span across race and class lines but does not go into detail about the racial formations placed on women of color's bodies.

Compulsory heterosexuality

Compulsory heterosexuality places heterosexuality at the center of institutionalized practices, privileging assumptions of the "proper" womanhood under the male gaze (Halbert 1997). Compulsory heterosexuality, originally examined by Adrienne Rich (1980), discusses the discreditation of the lesbian experience by assuming all women are heterosexual and that their sexuality is submissive to men's dominant sexuality. Halbert (1997) utilizes the institutionalization of heterosexuality to further examine the identity management women athletes participate in. Female athletes are labeled as deviant because their participation in sports renders them unable to conform to hegemonic, and therefore heterosexual, femininity (Halbert 1997; Kauer 2006). Women in sports are often relegated to a heterosexual fantasy or else a "butch" lesbian, bringing their sexuality into question and putting them at risk for social sanctions of harassment by men (Halbert 1997; Dworkin 2001; Gieseler 2014). Kauer (2006) found women often emphasize traditionally feminine characteristics to reinforce their heterosexuality, especially when they participate in sporting institutions.

Dworkin (2001) in their analysis of women in various fitness spaces, found women bodybuilders must negotiate their space within acceptable femininity. Women who are bodybuilders challenge notions of femininity by increasing the size of their body. However, they reproduce expectation of heterosexual, or heterosexy-fit, expectations by

tanning, having their nails done, and undergoing breast augmentation. According to Dworkin (2001), the increasing size of a woman's body is only acceptable when "'tamed' by beauty" (335).

However, Dworkin's (2001) analysis is in contrast to Chase's (2008) analysis of fat bodied runners. Chase (2008) found that fatness manifests different reactions, especially in regards to compulsory heterosexuality. A fat body is either perceived as asexual or lesbian. Framing fat bodies this way removes them from the compulsive heterosexual framework because they are not seen as desirable. The act of obtaining a "larger" body is only allowed when the act of getting larger is done in a specific way, in this case muscularity is more accepted under the heterosexy-fit model than fatness. In this case, muscles may be forgiven if the woman in question performs complementary femininity whereas if the size comes from fat, those women are not afforded femininity but are instead labeled as undesirable or homosexual.

Hegemonic femininity manifests itself in multiple ways throughout the institution of sport. Women athletes must regularly walk a line of transgression within their gendered sporting bodies. While femininity and compulsive heterosexuality are generally used by women athletes as a survival method, they can also be used as sites of resistance and mockery towards hegemonic masculinity.

Defensive othering

Subordinate groups often replicate and imitate dominant groups as a form of survival, where subordinate groups act out or support "the norms, values, and behaviors"

of the dominant groups (Ezzell 2009: 114). Defensive othering occurs when the subordinate groups reinforce “stigmatizing labels” on others but assert those labels do not apply to them (Halbert 1997; Ezzell 2009). While little research has been done specifically about defensive othering and roller derby, Ezzell (2009) and Halbert (1997) both found instances of defensive othering in their respective studies of rugby and boxing.

Ezzell (2009) found the rugby players in their study regularly aligned themselves more closely with men while othering other women and women athletes. The players did not contest that women may not be as strong as men as a whole, only that *they* were tough and aggressive and as strong as men. They also shamed other women for sexual activity and the use of makeup, even though the rugby players also joked and bragged about sexual escapades and wore makeup. Rugby was also positioned as the most acceptable sport, effectively othering women athletes who did not participate in rugby and instead played different sports.

Halbert (1997) found one of the most assumed stereotypes among female boxers was that they were “Foxee boxers.” Foxee boxers are described in the study as strippers, rather than boxers. While the Foxee boxers were more sensationalized and sexualized, they are positioned against the “real” boxers to give more legitimacy to women in boxing. However, even with the othering of Foxee boxing, many women who participated in boxing also used traditional gender markers to emphasize their femininity in an effort to be more marketable, such as wearing primarily pinks and white, having long hair, tanning, or adding pleated skirts to their attire. Women boxers were also more

readily able to get work if they looked “more feminine” and enjoyed being complimented when their femininity was noticed and approved of.

Both of these instances are examples of how women participate in defensive othering in order to further legitimize themselves as athletes. Players participate in defensive othering in order to further themselves from perceived deviant behaviors of other women. The defensive othering in the case of rugby and boxing stems from the overall culture of these two sports, primarily that they were sports played predominately by men. When women begin participating in men’s sports they find themselves at higher risks of sexual harassment and homophobic harassment (Halbert 1997). Defensive othering is an important aspect to consider when thinking about roller derby because derby is not thought of as a traditionally male sport. However, even though roller derby is considered to be a women’s sport, there are still aspects of defensive othering that occur in the space. The defensive othering is different compared to rugby and boxing. The defensive othering in rugby and boxing are meant to gain the respect and legitimation from men by promoting acceptable femininity. Within derby, the defensive othering is not necessarily to promote femininity, but is instead a rejection of femininity and promoting more masculine attributes, such as downplaying the use of make-up or pin-up posters created by other leagues. In my observation, the leagues who find pin-up posters problematic also do not partake in advertising their league in a hyper sexual manner.

Sport as Resistance

While I have previously discussed how sports are spaces where oppression is reproduced, it is also important to view sports as a space for many women to challenge gendered expectations. Sports such as running, rugby, and roller derby all provide instances where the athletes can challenge normative body, gender, and sexuality expectations.

Resisting hegemonic femininity

Krane (2001) offers up three ways that female athletes can resist hegemonic femininity within the sporting realm: be “Muscular and physically assertive... feminist sport participants... [and] lesbian athletes” (124). To be muscular and physically assertive undermines the expectations of how a feminine athletic body is “supposed” to look. Primarily, it creates a position where women are no longer docile but have agency over their body. Women are regularly positioned into a catch-22, they either are told they cannot compete with men because they are not strong enough and cannot keep up, and if they are shown to hold their own they are accused of being too masculine. In the case of muscularity and assertiveness, women are able to reject notions of hegemonic femininity and redefine what it means to be feminine (Gill 2007; Finley 2010). Gill (2007), in their study on rugby players, suggests violence and assertiveness is not unproblematic, but suggests the use of violence and assertiveness in sports can provide women with increased confidence in themselves, providing an alternative femininity. Derby created a space where sexuality and femininity are used in a subversive manner and paired directly

with assertive and violent actions of the skaters, thus creating a space where skaters project acceptable feminine appearances but act against acceptable feminine norms of frailty and docility (Finley 2010).

The second way Krane (2001) suggests participants can reject hegemonic femininity is to include feminist sporting participants. While this seems obvious, it is interesting when women participate in sports, even those that are women centered, they often do not identify as feminist. Being labeled a feminist risks also being labeled a lesbian, and therefore the athlete will be put at greater risk for discrimination within their league. In roller derby, feminist rhetoric is regularly used to describe the leagues: female empowerment, girl power, acknowledgment of derby being a “women’s centered space,” etc, regardless if the actual label of feminist is used.

Last, Krane (2001) believes the inclusion of lesbian athletes will subvert the expectations of hegemonic femininity. Hegemonic femininity is supported through compulsory heterosexuality. Many women fear being labeled a lesbian because it threatens their femininity, and puts them at higher risk of discrimination. However, including lesbians within the sporting realm subverts expectations for women, especially when you begin to include lesbians who represent their gender in many different ways. Roller derby has always been a place where queer women skated and has regularly been a space where queerness is celebrated, such as the practice of taking on a “derby wife” or even wives. The derby wife (or wives) is a practice in which a bond is formed between skaters that is described as “more than your best friend” or “a partner in crime” (Barbee and Cohen 2010). Through the use of the derby wife, regardless of the sexuality of the

skaters, queerness is still being used as a way to subvert compulsory heterosexuality. In an informal conversation between myself and a now retired skater, she mentioned to me when she made the team with 3 other women, they were all dating men, and now they are all dating women. Being around women all the time and forming strong bonds led to many skaters starting to date each other. This does not mean that heterosexual women did not and do not participate, just that there was space in the culture to subvert compulsory heterosexuality and there was a greater acceptance in exploring sexualities.

Body as place of resistance

While the participant's in Ezzell's (2009) study reinforced heteronormative gender expectations, Chase (2006, 2008) found sports, rugby and running respectively, to be places of body resistance. While athlete's bodies are perceived as docile bodies (those that are controlled and transformed) they can also be seen as "resisting the discourse of the ideal feminine body" (Chase 2006: 235). In the case of rugby, players often find pride in their muscular shoulders and legs and wish to be bigger in order to hit harder and be strong (Chase 2006). Draft (2013) found roller derby to be similar. Skaters would often highlight bigger bodies as desirable, and while there would be some discussion of body image, participants never sought to make themselves smaller. In their study, there was still discourse around what was the acceptable large body. Skaters often want to be "large" generally meaning muscular or taller but did not desire to be the kind of large associated with fatness (Draft 2013). While rugby and roller derby can still reproduce bodily oppressions, it is clear there is room for bodies to disrupt the hegemonic

expectations of the athletic body. Clydesdale runners, however, are explicitly put into a category of fat due to the weight classes for running marathons (Chase 2008). Clydesdale runners are seen as bodies of resistance because of their labeled fat bodies (Chase 2008).

However, rugby and running provide very different avenues of resistance. Rugby players want to be stronger and bigger and this is generally accepted (except Ezzell's 2009 study found that sometimes this is not the case). Chase (2006, 2008) do not make the direct comparison of the differing avenues of resistance between rugby and running. I would argue being bigger within rugby is more acceptable compared to running because of the nature of the sport. Rugby is a collision sport, where contact is expected and supported. Having a larger body generally means giving and taking larger hits and taking up more space in general, which is similar to roller derby discourse around larger bodies. Running on the other hand is an individual, non-contact sport dominated by thin bodies. In this case, large rugby bodies are sites of resistance outside of their sport by transgressing acceptable femininity whereas fat runners can be performing resistance both within and outside of their sport due to the unacceptability of being large or fat in their sport and in society.

Roller derby incorporates many aspects of bodily resistance to the institution of sport. Roller derby, it would seem, is able to resist hegemonic masculinity more effectively because roller derby began as a women's only sport. The other sports I have discussed previously were originally spaces for men with women becoming second class participants. Roller derby, however, is privileged in that it does not have to necessarily compete with a male counterpart. Many roller derby skaters resist the "ideal" feminine

athletic body by showcasing scars, bruises, a diverse set of bodies and sexualities, and derby also flaunts having many age groups participating dismantling the expectation of what a female athlete should look like (Giesler 2014; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015).

Giesler (2014) found roller derby offers other avenues of bodily resistance beyond body size through the use of hyper sexuality and pariah femininities. Pariah femininities are classified as femininities that are not necessarily subordinate to hegemonic femininities but instead disrupt the relationship between femininity and masculinity (Schipper 2014). The characteristics of pariah femininities are often associated with masculinity, however, women who take on these characteristics are not afforded the privilege of masculinity but instead have these traits feminized. Schipper (2014) offers the examples of women who are authoritative (the bitch), physically violent (“badass” girl), or being sexually noncompliant (the slut). Roller derby embraces pariah femininities through their overt use of violence and sexuality during gameplay. Skater’s bodies become the sites of resistance through their performance (Geisler 2014).

The institution of sport is space where dominance and oppression can easily be reproduced but it is also a place where resistance is possible. Women who participate in sports are usually relegated to second-class participation and must compete with men in social dynamics of either acceptance or resistance. I would like to further analyze the difference in resistance among sports that are predominantly men versus women, as well between sports that have more esteem. It seems that roller derby continues to have more space for resistance because it is a predominately women’s sport and one that is on the

“fringe” of sports overall. However, with the current rise in roller derby, I wonder how long their freedom of resistance will last.

METHODS: LEARNING TO FALL DOWN

This study focuses on the themes of identity construction, specifically how identities are purposely constructed for those who participate in the alternative sport of roller derby. To find common themes, I have utilized a multimethod approach including participant observation and interviews. Data was collected from one league, Little Town Derby, over a 15 month period, between January 2017 and March 2018. I received IRB approval to begin collecting data January 10, 2017, confirmation number 16-127. The 15 month period of my field work included two training bootcamp sessions (making my total number of bootcamp participated in five), the home team game season, as well as other events hosted by the league. The league is located in a small rural county comprised of over 40 skaters and 200 volunteers. The league observed is registered and recognized by the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA).

Interviews and Recruitment

I began recruitment by emailing the Small Town Derby league through their contact email on their website. I sent out a formal e-mail to the league asking for participants and then asking if others could pass on my information to other skaters after interviews. Interviews occurred primarily in public spaces at the participant's convenience. Conducting interviews in public spaces may have caused some participants to censor their answers to questions, but most seemed eager to participate. Other locations included participant's homes.

I conducted 15 interviews in one roller derby league between January 2017 and October 2017. For the interviews I used non-probability and snowball samplings (Berg and Lune 2012). Interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. Participants were between the ages 18-45 and all participants were white. The racial makeup of my participants is indicative of the location data was collected in a predominantly white area as well the sport overall. All skaters were asked to pick a pseudonym different from their given name, any nicknames, and their derby name. I requested they not use their derby name because it is easy to locate skaters through the WFTDA registry or from running a Google search. If they could not think of one or did not care, I provided a pseudonym for them.

I opened the interview by reviewing the consent form and answering any question my participants had. I developed a semi-standardized interview (Appendix) utilizing predetermined open ended questions which were asked in the same order to all participants (Berg and Lune 2012). Questions were rephrased if participants required further explanation or when questions were not clear. I later took into account that Berg and Lune (2012) state questions must use the language familiar to the group. I digressed and probed for further information when necessary (Berg and Lune 2012). My questions ranged from skaters' initial involvement, decisions to skate, changes in experience, community and identity perceptions, resolving my interviews by asking if they knew anyone else who would like to participate or to spread the word at the monthly league meetings, again utilizing snowball sampling (Berg and Lune 2012).

My insider status with the league allowed me to pick up on the “special language” of the participating skaters (Berg and Lune 2012; Bishop 2008; Johnson 2002). As an expert in this case, I was able to assess what the participants were saying based on my previous knowledge and participation (Johnson 2002). However, I had to be aware of relying too much on previous knowledge and potentially misrepresenting my participants based on my own interpretations and assumptions (Charmaz 2014; Johnson 2002).

Participant Observation

In order to fully grasp the needs and demands of roller derby, I needed to adopt a participant observation method (Saylor 2016). I do not adopt a complete participant role since I am not currently on the team nor do I participate in league politics (Saylor 2016). However, it was still important that I continued to skate and participate in officiating after my injury in order to complete my research because of the ingroup status I had achieved from my past skating experience. Practices are also closed to the public, so unless I am skating, I am not allowed in those private spaces.

I began my observation January 2017 and ended my observations March 2018. Sites of observation included bouts (what the derby games are called), bootcamp practice sessions, as well as other derby related events and fundraisers. In order to negotiate competing agendas (Charmaz 2014), I reflected on my feelings and observations after attending my own practice. I refrained from taking field notes during social gatherings so as to fully participate in the event and type up my field notes when

practices and events were over. Abstaining from field notes while at study sites meant that I could also engage in informal conversations with league mates and move beyond observer to active participant in the scene (Charmaz 2014). Some notes were taken on my cell phone for later use but most notes were taken afterward.

Charmaz (2014) suggests coding for what is happening in the data rather than focusing on the individual. Coding occurred alongside transcribing both my interviews and field notes. I coded for actions through line-by-line coding rather than coding types of people, preventing the possibility of making the participants seem one-dimensional (Charmaz 2014). Through Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory approach, I conceptualized my analysis directly from the data rather than previous theoretical knowledge.

DATA ANALYSIS: IT'S BOUT DAY

Sports have always been a space where identity contradictions occur, especially for women (Halbert 1997; Kauer 2006). Current literature suggests women in sport experience extreme amount of stigma and must contend with hegemonic expectations of femininity. These barriers impact women in sport primarily in how they identify themselves and deal with tensions in regards to their sporting community, their own relationships to their overall gender negotiations, and senses of self. Roller derby offers an important avenue for discussing women in sport considering the foundations of the sport in the early 2000s. As roller derby became a women's empowerment space, the negotiations of identity and self were different compared to women athletes in men's sports. Using Krane's (2001) three suggestions for resisting hegemonic femininity in sport, it is clear that roller derby has attempted to create a space that is unique in the sporting world. Women in full-contact or collision sports are usually in sports that are predominately dominated by men, where the participants are expected to be male, meaning they are more likely to practice defensive othering (Halbert 1997). Derby has often relegated itself as a space where non-normative bodies are celebrated (i.e. large and strong bodies), where queer women are openly welcomed, and feminist ideals are often celebrated even if it is not directly identified as feminism.

However, even though roller derby has traditionally broken the normative rules of women in sport, there are still multiple contradictions skaters face when participating. My analysis focuses on the relationship between empowerment of the skaters and community and the various gender negotiations skaters find themselves in,

such as negotiations of body, aggression, and presentation. Gender negotiations are often in positions of both resisting and reproducing power structures within roller derby. These negotiations are important to consider in relation to roller derby because of the counterculture and rebellious history of the sport. I also explore how the derby name is used as a foundational theme of identity construction within the derby culture. We turn now to considering the issue of empowerment and community.

Empowerment and Community: I Love My Team

While the institution of sport is still predominately associated with men, sports, roller derby specifically, are also considered spaces of empowerment, especially for women. I use Pavlidis and Fullagar's (2013) definition of empowerment that supports "a collective sense of belonging and the complex pleasure/pain of individual involvement" (680). I use this definition to highlight the contradictory reasons individuals continue to participate in derby, even when their involvement is not always positive. Throughout my interviews and field work, empowerment was found to be applied differently and to have different definitions depending on the skater. While many skaters spoke of derby in a positive light, empowerment explicitly came up for half of my participants.

Krane (2001) has found sports to be a space where women are able to resist hegemonic femininity through their participation. This is also true in roller derby. The way empowerment is understood varied among my participants. Empowerment ranged from one's relationship with their body, their relationship to the broader community,

empowerment from the perceptions of others, or a mixture of these. The physical contact aspect of roller derby adds an additional layer of empowerment, and enhances confidence as well (Gill 2007).

Empowerment through the body was discussed heavily by one skater, in particular, Carly, 24, who admired her ability to take up space and becoming stronger throughout her time in derby:

My self-confidence has grown immensely... I've learned how to be more spatially aware like in ultimate [frisbee] and just everyday life, like grocery shopping... that's fun! Like squeezing by all the spaces, grab what you need. It's definitely helped. The self-esteem is the biggest, because I am comfortable with my body whereas before I was always "I need to be stronger, thinner, this or that" and now, no, it's whatever it is. After I broke my ankle I gained 30 pounds and I was really ashamed of it, and beating myself up like it was gonna be harder because I have more weight to put on my ankle that is just getting better but I have to learn to skate with it, and that just actually makes me stronger. So that is okay, being where I am, and I still struggle with it but [derby] has helped a lot

Draft (2013) discusses how sports are one avenue for women to explore the ability to resist hegemonic femininity specifically through taking up space either through movement or body size. Carly brought up multiple times in her interview how she has learned to better use her body after starting roller derby in other aspects of her life, from playing different sports to going shopping. She admires her ability now to take up space or be more spatially aware rather than trying to make herself physically smaller or unobtrusive. She has found the support of roller derby has encouraged her to resist the norms of hegemonic femininity where women are meant to be demure and small (Draft 2013). Carly's experience highlights Pavlidis and Fullagar's (2013)

definition of empowerment in which a team dynamic supported a sense of belonging for Carly. She finally feels comfortable in her body, even enough to feel that comfort outside of the derby space.

Community-based empowerment was based in how skaters related to the league as well as the local community. Roller derby is a special case when considering empowerment through community based work because derby is classically known as a DIY (do-it-yourself) sport. Multiple participants highlighted that roller derby is built to be more community minded because, without the overall community, the sport could not exist. Many participants meant that roller derby is still such a niche sport that without the community involvement such as sponsors, volunteers, and consistent audience members, the sport could not survive. However, while the broader community connections are important, Carly highlights the connection of community to her league as especially important. Carly states, “We are a family, we are there to grow together, to become stronger, and move together as a pack and it’s just so empowering and makes me feel stronger than I am

Carly’s connection to her team, her “pack” (the group of active players on the track during a bout), is what initially empowered her. While Carly has played team sports before, she talks of derby with more passion and love than her previous sport. Her empowerment is now connected directly to the broader community and ideology fostered within her league:

Being noticed as strong females in our community is something that we really value and want to teach young girls. That you have a voice

and it's important and it should be heard and if you have an opinion don't let it be silenced by anyone.

Again, Carly is directly speaking to the empowerment derby brings off the track.

Previously, she had discussed all of the events her league participates in such as the Women's March and the Martin Luther King march, and how it is important to demonstrate what the league supports. She discussed this in conjunction with her volunteer position in the league as the junior derby coach and how she finds it important to impart to younger skaters the power of being strong and using their voices to promote change on a broader social level. While the group connection and community involvement is not uncommon in other sports, roller derby in this case is more obviously political and willing to show what the league specifically supports. Small Town Derby League since its inception has fostered connections with the local community through their participation in various events as well as donating part of their game revenue to other non-profits such as Planned Parenthood, domestic violence prevention organizations, and foster care organizations to reference a few. Catherine, 31, explains that Small Town derby has "given \$1,000 every game to the community for the past 10 years... 60 grand right there." In this case, roller derby helps to foster empowerment amongst skaters because community is not only about the team, but also the entirety of the community the team resides in.

Catherine echoes the sentiments of Carly in finding empowerment through building and maintaining community:

I'll talk derby to anybody, any time of the day. I have cards in my purse, anybody who says anything I'm like "Do you roller skate? Do

you know how to roller skate?" I've asked lots of people and I think that I do that because I want people to feel as empowered, as awesome, as being a part of something as what [Small Town Derby] does for me. So being able to lend out my skates or my gear or encourage somebody to start a boot camp, you know what I mean? To just work on themselves, work in this community which means so much and defines so many of us. Not necessarily all of who we are but it's a big definition of once you get in this family... to be able to give that to somebody else is like maybe one of the best things I could ever do for anybody.

Catherine explicitly reports feeling empowered by being part of Small Town Derby league and seeks to share that empowerment with others even going so far as to lend her gear out for individuals to learn how to skate. While she acknowledges not everyone will necessarily define themselves through the community, she finds her participation to be important to her overall sense of self. Her sense of belonging and the resulting empowerment she receives from her derby "family" are experiences she feels compelled to share with others. Andi, 35, also mentioned the concept of family, similar to Carly, in relation to the derby community but actually did not feel like the sport was necessarily her "family." However, even though she struggles with labeling her relationship, she still defines the sport as both empowering and also inspiring:

I struggle with like trying to describe my relationship with the sport 'cause I feel like [for] some people it's... more of their family... and they're like besties with everyone on the team and I'm not really like good friends with everyone on the team... [but derby] was super empowering for me and like watching it empower other people and I love that with derby too. I love watching people and just being part of it and watching everyone else just kind of do well. And I've watched so many people on our team be star skaters now. I've watched them come up from like bootcamp and just become awesome. And it's inspiring. It's inspiring to be around people like that who are pushing themselves all the time.

Carly, Catherine, and Andi all find empowerment in derby through building the community of skaters. These skaters often express a desire to see others succeed within the sport, while Carly takes her empowerment a step further to also encompass the overall community the league resides in. While Andi acknowledges the power derby can have for some individuals through the perceptions of a family, Andi does not necessarily feel that sense of belonging. However, Andi's reasoning for this is because she had a slow start to derby due to surgery, grad school, and her job kept her moving to different locations. At the time of our interview, Andi had only been with Small Town Derby for about a year after being on and off with the league for eight years. Even though she does not directly identify with the family dynamics of the sport, she still finds empowerment by being part of the derby community and seeing others become stronger skaters.

Skaters often found their sense of empowerment through their relationship to the overall community. However, while community was also considered by the following skaters, other themes emerged that enhanced the players sense of empowerment such as presentation of sexuality, overcoming barriers, and others perceptions of the skaters.

Catherine also relates her empowerment to her sexuality and the ability to present that sexuality on the track. For her, sexuality is related to her ability to also feel strong and powerful:

I am one of the spear heads of the booty short mafia. Self-appointed, because I really like feeling strong, sexy and empowered and I think that, that's a lot of what brought me to derby to begin with. 'Cause you know you don't have to try to be a man in a male sport, you can

be a woman in a female sport. That can be defined as whatever is beautiful to you.

Catherine was brought to derby because there was the option of being able to be sexy but also strong. She does not separate these two and often feels more powerful when she also feels good about how she looks. Her specific comment about being a “woman in a female sport” was to highlight that there are not as many clothing rules in derby, so the skaters often are able to wear what they want. However, she did go on to say that she often feels singled out for her presentation on the track:

It's so funny too because usually when team emails and stuff go out [for games], they're like captain's choice, whoever gets to pick the bottoms and they're like "No ass hanging out." And I'm like "Okay you're only saying that to one person." I think [a few skaters] wear some booty shorts these days so it's nice to have a few other bootylicious mommas on that mafia with me.

Because other skaters have continued to participate in wearing “booty shorts,” Catherine has continued feeling confident in wearing them as well. While she has felt singled out by the team’s captains for her dress choices, she still maintains a sense of belonging within the league knowing teammates also dress in what could be considered a sexual manner.

Hanna, 45, and Lara, 36, both viewed derby as place of empowerment because they overcame barriers in order to be able to skate. To them, empowerment is defined by the ability to participate in something they were previously unable to participate in, but for very different reasons. Hanna does not have an athletic background and so was never introduced to playing sports. Since Hanna never identified herself as an athletic

individual, however, she found derby to be something that could be attainable after she saw a game being played on television:

I just was inspired. I never had seen women with tattoos that weren't muscular and super fit being athletes and it looked attainable and it looked empowering. And I was like that is possible for me. I could do that. I never played sports before but that just looks like something that needs to happen.

Hanna defines her empowerment through seeing women like herself be represented in roller derby. Hanna is a tall, heavily pierced and tattooed individual and roller derby represented this kind of athlete. She did not hesitate to join and joining derby was something she needed, and felt compelled, to do. In the overall institution of sports, the average athlete is often portrayed as lean or thin, white, and still conventionally attractive and therefore also coded as heterosexual (Halbert 1997; Ezzell 2009; Musto and McGann 2016). Musto and McGann (2016) found women athletes generally wore their hair long while Ezzell (2009) found that women also often wear makeup during games as a way to accentuate conventional femininity. In this case, women in sports are often compelled to present and accentuate their femininity to, in effect, apologize for their transgressive behaviors in sport. The hegemonic femininity portrayed in many sports may prevent many women who do not fit traditional forms of femininity from participating because their bodies are more heavily stigmatized. Derby has often highlighted the differences in the skaters as an asset (Draft 2013). Skaters often have colorful and/or unconventional haircuts, piercings, tattoos, differing body sizes, and often do not have an athletic background or identity before joining the team. In this sense, derby provides empowerment to skaters because of the representation the

sport provides, inviting individuals of varying backgrounds to join regardless of ability or presentation.

Lara came to her own understanding of empowerment toward derby when she was discouraged from participating by her now ex-husband who she describes as having a “controlling nature”:

Once I divorced the guy, I realized, "Hey, I can do what I want now," so I started that, and then pretty quickly, the people in the training camp became my friends and my support group... It definitely was [empowering]. I was like, "Hey, I can do this thing that I wasn't allowed to do."

Lara is one of three skaters who participated in another league before becoming part of Small Town Derby. Lara found a sense of belonging with her first league not only because of the support the league afforded her when she was still new but also because there was a sense of rebellion against her ex-husband. She describes it as a “way to kind of throw my middle finger at the situation,” when referencing her ability to pursue her own interests. Hanna and Lara both had different ways of representing their empowerment but both had the similarity of coming into the sport from various social barriers.

Lara goes on to describe her feelings of being in the group as both frustrating and extremely rewarding. Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013) consider the conflicts athletes face, particularly derby athletes, in regards to the pleasure that is attached to the pain athletes go through. Lara explains that:

With derby you've got your bumps and bruises and breaks, and hurt feelings, and tears from either pain or frustration, or whatever. So

just working through all of that and realizing that, you know, you can still get up and do it again.

Lara's statement came after her discussion of bullying within roller derby and how after a recent injury that kept her off skates for most of the competitive season, she felt she had been somewhat forgotten by her current league. However, she did remain optimistic about her relationship to derby, "it's like the whole cliché, you know? 'Fall down, get back up again' type of thing." She echoes a frequent saying within the league where you will inevitably fall down but the important part is to get back up and keep moving. Even though Lara claimed to feel somewhat forgotten, she still wanted to continue skating. She is revealing her engagement with the sport as something important even if she is having negative or painful experiences currently.

While many skaters perceived their own individual empowerment as an internal process of acceptance from the league and overcoming boundaries, Liza, 36, finds empowerment externally in relation to how others perceive her due to her skater status. Liza is a single mother who had recently made the team at the time of our interview. Her empowerment came from the image she was building for her daughter and how other's viewed her due to her participation in derby, specifically highlighting how it made her look stronger:

It [roller derby] automatically gives you this whole, it's empowering. It really is. People see you as stronger, and especially as a female when you are perceived as strong there's just something about that that makes you feel like... okay I'm gonna get a little emotional. Because I'm a single mom I feel like I'm leading such a better example for her than I would be struggling with this. I'm finding a way, an outlet, I'm finding my [self], you know, who that person is, and just being strong. And getting her [daughter]

involved, and building up her self-image at such a young age, I think it's gonna be amazing for her.

Liza's daughter had recently begun training on the junior derby team which Liza also began assistant coaching for. Liza, in this case, felt her identity as a single mother made her involvement even more impactful because of the strength she is able to pass on to her daughter in the hopes of building her confidence and self-image as she grows up. Her version of empowerment is rooted in other's perceptions of her as a strong woman, and also a mother. Her ability to be viewed as strong comes specifically from her involvement in a very difficult and physically demanding full-contact sport, something with which women are not generally associated.

Sara, 26, on the other hand, had a different opinion when it came to considering empowerment. When speaking with Sara, empowerment was something that occasionally brought about challenges because of how strong-willed she perceives the other skaters to be, "[what] I feel is important to know about roller derby in general is just when you get 40 really strong, empowered women together, in a group, sometimes trying to make decisions can be difficult." Even though Sara uses the language of empowerment, which is considered a positive characteristic in sports, she expresses frustration because she views skater's individual empowerment or pride to get in the way of group decision making and cohesion. However, she also recognizes the more positive aspects of the difficulties that come with any large group of empowered people trying to make decisions:

At the end of the day, at the same time you have these strong empowered women which can make things difficult but at the same

time... where else do you find a group of such strong and empowered women that understand each other and support each other in being strong empowered women?

While Sara acknowledges the difficulty that comes with being a large group, specifically noting a large group of women, she brings up an interesting point - that it is hard to find groups such as this anywhere else, especially in sports. Because roller derby was made primarily for and by women, it is clear roller derby has fostered a space of safety for many. Skaters do not feel like they need to be quiet or silenced and are instead supported in their opinions, regardless if others agree, because it is the principle of supporting other women which adds to the community.

While empowerment and community were often linked, not everyone discussed the community in relation to empowerment. Three skaters expressed frustration with different aspects of the derby community and either felt stressed by the community or somewhat alienated. Stress manifested through intra-league drama, where skaters would allow personal issues to overwhelm their ability to play. Alienation from the team generally took the form of not being able to initially effectively integrate into the league or issues with rostering for certain bouts.

Katy, 36, is one of those who discussed stress in relation to the league. She did not directly reference empowerment in her statements, instead addressing that, to her, the team was becoming more stressful, claiming “team stuff at this point is becoming more and more frustrating and actually making it feel less likely that I’ll stay.” Katy did not go into too much detail, but described “personal problems that bleed onto the track” and the consequences for the team that occur if emotions and drama are not kept in

check. Katy expresses a different viewpoint than a majority of my other participants who claimed that personal issues were forgotten once on the track. One reason for Katy's honesty could be because we have a closer relationship compared to other skaters I interviewed and so she may have felt more comfortable confiding in me some of the issues she has with derby. This is also consistent with one other skater, Jamie, 27, who also bluntly addressed difficulty integrating into the team when she was a new skater. I also was able to notice this from casual conversations when in the field as well as one interview, when frustrations occurred over who would make the game rosters and about league organization from both competitive and noncompetitive skaters.

One other skater, Roz, 28, found herself becoming frustrated when the various rosters for teams would be announced. In Small Town Derby there is either the "A" team or the "B" team, where the "A" team will play in games that effect international rankings within WFTDA. The "B" team is more recreational and is usually comprised of a mix of new and veteran skaters. Roz discussed the previous game that had occurred before our interview where the "B" team roster included seven out of 14 "A" team skaters:

The last game, which was a B team game... our roster came out, and it had half of the skaters on it were A team skaters, and that was the first time I was frustrated with a roster. Not because I felt like I should be on it, because I felt like if this is a B team roster, then what am I even working for... If the B team roster is seven B team skaters, then that just diminished my chances of being on a roster by 50%. Because I know I'm not going to be on an A team roster and I'm fine with that, but I want to have something to work towards.

Roz defines herself as non-competitive and often does not take the sport too seriously. Her frustration mainly came from her acceptance that she will never be on the “A” team, and concerns that if the recreational “B” team roster is half of the best skaters in the league, then is that really a “B” team? She goes on to discuss the drastic point gap in the last game where Small Town Derby won by over 200 points, so she questioned the rationale for comprising the team in this way while also acknowledging her own feelings of alienation from the team based on her own skating ability.

While some skaters did discuss frustration with the league community, the overall response was positive. Empowerment was often linked directly to community and the relationships the skaters had with their league after joining. While some skaters, such as Hanna, identified empowerment before starting, it is clear the community was a defining factor in her relationship to empowerment. Throughout my fieldwork empowerment is often used to describe the culture of roller derby in general. The respondent’s connection to the derby community as empowering is also indicative of a repeated theme within sporting spaces where individuals become part of an overall collective experience that contributes to their own identity construction (Donnelly and Young 1988; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2012). While each individual had their own reasons for identifying empowerment within the sport, it was also clear their relationship to the community increased their own sense of empowerment as well. It was not only individual interactions, but the messages the skaters received from others as well as the cultural expectations within the space. Donnelly and Young’s (1988) initial assertion of

purposeful identity construction is occurring through the skater's explicit perceptions of empowerment and then their preceding choice to continue participating in roller derby.

I chose to combine empowerment and community here because of the overlap between the two concepts. However, positive relations to the sport were also addressed through various other aspects. Skaters continued to discuss positive relationships and identification to the sport through various gender negotiations and identity constructions in relation to roller derby.

Gender Negotiation

Women and aggression: "A place to be an asshole"

In order to be successful in sports, it is expected a player will exhibit traits of assertiveness and competitiveness. Often times, being assertive can be interpreted as aggression, especially for women who are not socially supported in expressing what are traditionally masculine emotions (Halbert 1997; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015). The ability to experience aggression and anger was discussed frequently by my participants as something positive and unique to them being an athlete. Stanger et al. (2016) defines aggression as "verbal or physical behavior intended to harm another individual" (4). In the case of sport, this can be viewed as an action that could seriously injure another player (Stanger et al. 2016). My participants, however, reference aggression in a very different way. Many of my participants refer to aggression as the ability to feel emotions that are generally not afforded to women, such as anger and competitiveness. Women are often expected to be docile and the emotions most commonly associated

with sport are generally also assigned as masculine traits (Halbert 1997). During interviews and field observations, I found that aggression aimed toward purposely harming another individual was discouraged, however, aggression defined as assertiveness and competition was encouraged and often expected.

During the training camps, the coaches would often use aggression as a measurement of how badly one wanted to improve or a skater's overall commitment to participation. The coaches clarified aggression was not used as a way to harm other players, but rather as an internal aggression to push a skater to their fullest potential on the track. I reached out to Sara, who also a bootcamp coach, after our initial interview to ask for clarification on how she defined aggression. Sara describes aggression as a "primal feeling of wanting to attack... not necessarily a place of anger, just... so much strength and focus that it explodes." The definition provided by Sara is very different than how aggression is usually used. Aggression in derby is meant to encourage a feeling of bringing forth emotions that women are not generally supposed to act upon. Typical definitions of aggression are usually referred to as more external actions against others, whereas Sara defines it as more of an internal or individual feeling. Carly also provided an extended definition of how she views aggression and shares similar views to Sara.

Carly also interprets aggression as an internal struggle or competition with oneself. Carly speaks specifically about women and how aggression is viewed as taboo and so women who are in sports are often competing with not only others around them but also themselves. However, Carly does not view this competition as inherently

negative and believes that the state of competition within oneself is a push to improve and work harder for the overall team. Carly says “[women are] not supposed to be aggressive, we are supposed to have that part of our emotions in check, but yet we’re emotional beings, so every other emotion is okay, but our aggression needs to be justified.” Carly is specifically discussing the expectation and stereotype that women are “emotional” but are only allowed to present certain emotions, where aggression is usually reserved for men. She refers to her derby space as a “safe place” for her to be aggressive. There is a contradiction here where some skaters explain that derby is a place where you leave all your “baggage at the door” while others claim derby as the space where their aggression (or stress/frustration from the day) can be used constructively on the track.

Sara promotes aggression in her coaching style and continues to support aggression from her bootcamp skaters but also acknowledges she came into the space with a different expectation of appropriate aggression levels:

I just thought roller derby was a place for me to be an asshole and get out my frustration and aggression and throw temper tantrums but I have learned more so that it is a place for me to deal with the emotions [that] lead to those things so that I don’t even have to have a temper tantrum in the first place.

In this case, while Sara promotes an aggressive playing style, her understanding of aggression has changed. She originally may have subscribed more to Stanger et al.’s (2016) definition of aggression when she originally started because she thought that kind of aggression was expected in roller derby. However, she has found roller derby to instead be a space of awareness for her overall emotional needs rather than coming in

and “blowing up” at her teammates because she had a bad day, “that has been my one thing I have been working on this season and it has been interesting, I have made a lot more friends than I ever have.” Sara’s relationship to the derby community improved when, according to her, she was able to handle her emotions in a more constructive manner and become more “grounded” in her emotional wellbeing and understand that while derby supports a certain level of aggression on the track, there is still an expectation that uncontrolled aggression is not supported in the team dynamic. Both Carly and Sara comment about their positions as women and what is expected of their emotions. Carly and Sara both view derby as a space where aggression is not only supported but is expected and encouraged.

Zed, 18, echoes the sentiment of Carly and Sara, explaining aggression in derby has helped her because of the supportive atmosphere and encouragement she gets when she successfully hits a teammate on the track:

So I have a lot of anger issues and I actually went to therapy for my anger issues for a really long time and... it was a good way to take out aggression in a closed setting where it was okay and it was monitored and stuff, so it was really good for me and my brain to have that... And everybody’s okay with it. Like if I hit my teammate and she falls down she’s like, “Wow that was a great hit” and... She doesn’t get upset. We know it’s not personal, what happens on the track stays on the track, but off the track we’re best friends.

Zed appreciated the opportunity to express her anger and aggression in a closed and controlled setting where it was also supported. She reports it being good for her overall mental health considering she was in therapy prior to starting in order to work on her anger. The supportive atmosphere is also helpful because everyone acknowledges that

hitting will occur and so there is less of a risk a skater will “take a hit” personally. Catherine is another skater who highlighted her appreciation for hitting in the context of the sport, “I really enjoy the hitting. Consensual hitting is probably one of my favorite things. I've always wanted a t-shirt that said, ‘I support consensual hitting.’” The actual physical aspect of hitting and having the physical outlet of aggression is seen as an overwhelmingly positive aspect of roller derby for many skaters. Gill (2007) suggests the added physicality of full-contact sports adds an additional layer of empowerment and confidence building for those who participate, particularly women. It would seem many skaters definitely benefit emotionally and physically from the space derby has created for women to transgress expected gendered emotions. Gill (2007) explains that contact sports are the first time women are often able to experience pushing their bodies to the limits, which leads to heightened self-esteem and confidence. In the case of my participants, it is not only the pushing of one’s body, but also pushing themselves emotionally. Many of my participants highlight the ability to feel aggression as positive because they were not able to feel those growing up nor had never learned how to handle those emotions constructively. However, not every skater felt the need to act aggressively, but found the support for aggression to be positive.

Jamie did not enter the sport with an aggressive streak nor felt the need to be overly aggressive when playing. Jamie feels she regularly needs to work on expressing her aggression on the track because of the perception from others that she may not be trying hard enough. Jamie says, “I don’t feel like I need to take out my aggression that way...” but does acknowledge the cultural way women are taught to experience their

aggression “because it’s a women’s sport... you know you’re taught to be a certain way and you grow up a certain way in our culture, you know, puts you in a certain area and expects you to act that way.” She goes on to explain further that maybe individuals who grew up in more conservative environments may feel the need to be more aggressive because participating in derby would be one of the first times they were able to express that part of themselves. Jamie saying this is interesting in comparison with Carly, who said that growing up, her father would refer to appropriate aggression as “righteous aggression,” that it needed to be legitimated and justified. While this cannot be applied to every skater, it seems to show that some skaters may present and act more aggressively based on their past experiences of what was allowed in the home.

Jamie does not only apply aggression to actions on the track, but also to how skaters represent themselves with make-up and clothing. Some skaters will paint their faces to look intimidating toward the other team and will wear ripped up tights promoting a punk DIY aesthetic. Jamie says, “sometimes [skaters] can look scary and be like, you know a deterrent for the other team.” She says that performing aggression through dress and make-up allows skaters to get into the character and space of being aggressive because they look scary and can interpret themselves as intimidating toward the other team.



Figure 4: A skater wearing “scary” joker inspired make-up

Jamie feels skaters that wear more theatrical make-up and outfits are also more popular with the crowd and with the team, prompting them to perform differently than if they were just another face on the team. While Jamie makes this acknowledgment, and that maybe it could help her to be more aggressive, she does not find the need to change herself to stand out:

I think when people put on makeup they can, they can get into character and they can be a little more popular of a skater and they are respected a little more within their team... I think that because I don't like to hit, it means that my hitting skills aren't improving and its scary still for me and so that gets in my way in terms of moving forward and becoming a better skater but it also doesn't really bother me.

Jamie is making the connection about the expectation of aggression in derby and knowing that aggression is necessary when the goal of the game is to hit other skaters. Because Jamie does not feel like an inherently aggressive person, she perceives this to be limiting to her growth as a skater. She compares her experience to those who wear make-up to games because she believes the ability to take on a new character is beneficial to one's success in the game. The success comes from not only the skater's

perception of themselves, but also how they perceive the audience to respond to them. While she knows she has to work on hitting, she also is not bothered that she is not as aggressive or competitive as other skaters on the team, which may be a hindrance in her ability to integrate, “I was able to [integrate] with some effort, it takes some effort and it was not easy.” She attributed her inability to hit other players effectively to her lack of overall aggression and felt that if she were more aggressive then maybe she would have had an easier time. However, she was able to make up for her lack of aggression through making personal connections and her confidence in asking questions. She explains how she has made an effort to be more welcoming to new skaters by being more compassionate rather than overly aggressive. In this way, she has managed to find a comfortable place of integration but still acknowledges the challenges she had.

In negotiating gender expression, emotions are often heavily controlled and policed in women, especially aggression. Full-contact sports often provide the first space where women can safely and constructively express aggression and competitiveness (Halbert 1988; Gill 2007; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2015). While social sanctions may occur due to transgressing the normative expectations of emotion, there is report of heightened self-esteem, confidence, and connectedness with the team (Halbert 1988; Gill 2007). While skaters are supported in expressing traditionally masculine emotions, it is also interesting to examine what happens when the skaters take on more feminine attributes. Jamie for example expressed difficulty in integrating because she did not feel the need to be overly aggressive, in this case presenting masculine emotions. There is still heavy control over how skaters negotiate and express

their femininity. Women in predominately male sports are often expected to highlight and over emphasize their femininity, whereas derby skaters are often expected to highlight more masculine traits. This rejection of femininity is highlighted more distinctly and controlled in regards to the type of clothing skaters wear during bouts.

Gender presentation: "If you touch that tutu one more time"

The presentation of skaters has become a contested area as the sport has grown in popularity and become more accessible to mainstream audiences through the televising of roller derby tournaments. Since the renaissance of derby in the early 2000s there has been an expectation of hyper femininity and sexuality within the sport. Skaters would often wear exaggerated make-up (heavy eyeliner, lipstick, or even go so far as wearing gore/horror-style make up), short skirts, shorts, and fishnets or tights. The clothing was inspired by the punk rock scenes of the 1990s and while many skaters and audience members still think of this type of dress when they think of derby, there has been a push back in recent years with an enforcement of professionalism (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2013).



Figure 5: Widow Makers vs Viva Roller Derby 2013



Figure 6: Widow Makers vs Viva Roller Derby 2013

Much of the contestation in regards to clothing depends on the type of bout to be played. Bouts are either sanctioned (which means those games are competitive and will determine a team's international rankings within WFTDA) or non-sanctioned (recreational). Non-sanctioned games are more lenient both formally and informally in regards to what skaters can wear. Informally, many skaters in Small Town Derby league feel non-sanctioned bouts are the place to have fun, and that those bouts are the ones played specifically for the audience and putting on a good performance is more

important to keep the crowd consistently full and entertained. This means skaters are more encouraged and supported in wearing flashy and flamboyant clothing such as tutus and fishnets, or long socks and colorful pants.

Sanctioned games, however, played by the competitive “A” teams, have dress codes enforced. While more leniency has been given to the team (allowing them to wear either tight or loose shorts, leggings, or pants) they still must wear black pants, the standard team jersey, and from what I have observed in the field they generally do not use too much make-up. Many skaters cite their reason for wearing specifically athletic gear and not wearing make-up as purely for the sake of comfort. However, even though there are no formal rules against fishnets or tights, there is often internalized misogyny that comes with the choice to wear make-up or fishnets/tights during sanctioned games. Some participants reported not liking the use of fishnets or “booty” shorts in games because they felt there was a reduction in the legitimacy of the sport. However, when one form of dress is more legitimate and also happens to be markedly less feminine (a jersey and regular black pants), then I argue the legitimization of the sport becomes about gender presentation and gender control, especially control of feminine markers. Other skaters expressed feeling more powerful because of the opportunity to wear what they wanted, but one skater also felt singled out because of their preference for “booty” shorts.

Catherine often felt singled out for her decision to wear “booty” shorts to games. E-mails were sent out to skaters explaining the dress code would be at the coach’s discretion. Catherine commented that the e-mails would regularly include phrases such

as “no ass hanging out.” She also reported feeling somewhat singled out because she is one of the few skaters who consistently wears “booty” shorts. Her reasoning for wearing small shorts is not only for comfort’s sake (her one time wearing pants she felt too hot and restricted) but also because presenting as sexy make her feel more powerful:

So it's like, I like booty shorts, I think they're cute with fishnets... that's very empowering. So I love it, I love being able to just dress up with a little bit of whimsy and fun and sexy and... like, when we make a bottle of glitter and bringing this beautiful strong thing that's gonna whip your ass.

Before this statement she had described how the clothing and powerful sexuality is what drew her to the sport in the first place. She explains how the variation in skaters was a way to define beautiful however the individual skater was able to define it for themselves. She appreciates the opportunity to be feminine and powerful.

Sara was also very adamant about what she wears for derby and actually referred to her make-up as a before-derby ritual, both for practice and bouts:

I will not wear make-up all day during the day and like run errands and buy groceries and not wear make-up, but I wear make up to every single roller derby practice. That’s like part of me getting ready for derby is putting on my eyeliner and my lipstick because it makes me feel super badass.

Sara uses make-up as a way to feel better when she goes to play roller derby, she also refers to make-up as being part of her derby persona.

When I have my eyeliner that’s sharp enough to cut a bitch I feel like I can get a bitch, like straight up... it’s a part of my gear... part of my like [derby] persona is the make-up. I don’t feel like [myself] without the make-up... [she] is totally obsessed with make-up... Sara is the one who is like, just wants to sit in bed and watch Netflix

Sara's use of make-up is also not always traditionally feminine, and so while she is partaking in feminized rituals, her make-up is often very bold and can often times be considered scary or threatening, incorporating heavy winged eyeliner, lipstick, and face paint with fake blood and different colored contact lenses. Her make-up is either grotesque or a form of hyper and exaggerated femininity. The question is then raised what kind of femininity is allowed and supported within the space, especially when Sara goes on to say, "it's a sisterhood and not like a sisterhood of the traveling pants 'oh let's all be cute and watch *Sex and the City* together' it's like, no, we are fucking badass and gonna fuck shit up, we are here to question everyone and everything."

While there is a certain expectation of femininity, it is a very specific kind of femininity, usually one that is loud and often times heavily sexualized with the inclusion of short shorts and skirts and fishnets. However, the sexuality the players present is not one that is meant to be objectified, but one that is meant to be powerful and feared. While women's sexuality is often portrayed as demure and submissive, roller derby has regularly been a place where women can be sexy and strong (Owen 2014). However, there are contradicting opinions to this where some feel the use of sexuality takes away from the sport overall and leads to de-legitimization. With roller derby gaining international recognition and being broadcast on television, there has been a lot of conversation around the utility and lack of professionalism of wearing non-athletic gear or wearing make-up during games.

Other skaters prefer to have a unified presentation for the team. This is often done through the use of wearing a cohesive sporting uniform. The team uniform

includes matching helmets (same color and accents), matching jerseys with the names and numbers written in the same font and size, and black pants. The pants can be anything from shorts, mid-calf or ankle length athletic pants, or loose fitting shorts as long as the pants are black and the skater has their entire buttock covered. Katy supports the team wearing a uniform because there is a sense of intimidation when facing a brand new team and they all look the same:

If we are showing up at a tournament, to show up dressed in uniform, and to have 14-16 people in uniform, walk in together all dressed alike, looking alike, looking fierce is more intimidating to the opponent than a group of people walking in in like silly clothes.

If everyone looks alike then there is also less chance the other team will be able to pick out who is new. Katy and I discussed the game that had just occurred the weekend before our interview where one skater was wearing pink shorts and a blue shirt with their name and number pinned to the back:

Like, if you notice... the B team this last weekend, everyone was in matching uniform and one person had a different shirt on... they probably just had a name and number put on the back [of a normal shirt], like that also for me, might also make that person a target, they're new obviously, obviously there's something like... so that's what I automatically think like, you're new, you might be a weak link, I'm gonna check out that hypothesis

If a rival skater stands out too much, they risk being targeted by more experienced players on the opposite team. Katy also explains that she does not have an issue with players wearing tutus or fishnets as long as they can continue to be serious athletes, and she admits to sometimes wearing long socks with fun pictures or colorful shorts over her athletic pants. However this is in contradiction to her previous statement

about walking in and looking “silly,” which is why she also specifically reserves her particular form of “dress up” for non-sanctioned games:

If other people wanna wear fishnets and tutus, I don't have a problem with it as long as they're still serious athletes, like playing a serious game. But serious games can still be fun, I totally agree with that, but my dressing up [is] colorful and putting shorts on over my capris. So it's a little bit less like flare I guess than maybe other folks. To me it's just, I... like to play in what I practice in. or something similar to what I practice in is what's gonna be more comfortable. I'm certainly not gonna wear fishnets to practice and I don't find them that comfortable anyway, so if I'm wanting to be the best athlete I can be, I need to be comfortable in what I'm wearing. And some people are comfortable in tutus, I am not.

Her overall opinion comes down to personal comfort for herself but she does make a clear distinction between what she wears for “fun” games versus “serious” games,

We're going to a tournament this weekend [and] traditionally at home games I wear tall socks with specific things on them that fit with my [derby] name, there's no way in hell I would do that when we go to Bakersfield and its 80 degrees. I will be wearing my athletic shorts I will be wearing athletic short socks and I will be playing to win a game.

There is a cognitive dissonance between some skaters and audiences in regards to what clothing is usually worn in contemporary derby. While many participants described not caring about what other skaters wore, they were also quick to say it just was not for them, but others can “do what they want” as long as it came down to other skaters taking the sport and their athleticism seriously. However, when having casual conversations with officials and others who enjoy watching the game, conversations about the clothing regularly came up as a point of intrigue and as something they

enjoyed. One official commented during a scrimmage that she viewed derby as a place where “burlesque meets badass” in reference to a skater who was playing in ripped tights and a garter belt under her shorts. Others who enjoy watching the games or who had heard of derby ask if the players still wear fishnets and tutus and how it is so fun to watch because of the costumes the skater’s wear. However, this image of the game is often frustrating for skaters because they are not taken seriously as “real athletes,” as Jessica states, “We’re athletes... There can be this misconception that it’s like a fun thing, like people are surprised when they hear we practice.”

Jessica was not implying here that she does not have fun, but rather many people do not understand the amount of hard work that goes into practicing and training to be a roller derby player. Jessica was not the only one to feel like certain outfits took away from the overall athleticism of the sport. Kendal, 28, goes on to describe a person they skated with in their first roller derby league:

I can't remember her full name, but we called her Tutu. She wore an effing tutu. In my mind, that was the worst thing you could do 'cause you're saying, "I'm not an athlete. I'm here for a spectacle" and I wanted to be an athlete. She wore a tutu and every game she would fidget with the tutu, fidget with the tutu and I looked at her during a game. I said, "If you touch that tutu one more fucking time, I'm going to rip it off of you." Because in my mind she's like, "Oh, here's my outfit. I don't need to play the game." And I started out wearing fishnets myself, okay? But I felt at this time, let's transition away from the bar league into a women's athletic endeavor. I'm all for the face paint and the warrior paint. Whatever you need to do to get out there, but... If you wear a damn tutu and you can't play, you're too worried about how it looks, how are you going to go play the sport?

Kendal is recalling the time when derby was initially being revitalized in the early 2000s, where fishnets and tutus were common, as was drinking (with her reference to

transitioning away from the “bar league.”) Kendal admitted to also partaking in using fishnets and later also face paint when she skated, but she shares the same sentiments as Jessica. Kendal fears the integrity of the sport will not be maintained if there is a constant worry about what one is wearing while on the track. Shifting away from the costumes, to some skaters, means the sport can evolve from spectacle to a legitimate sport. To Jessica and Kendal in particular, they worry that the costumes will also reduce how the audience perceives the seriousness of the team.

The misconception and conflation of what one wears and an individual’s athleticism has driven many skaters to resist the hyper feminine and resistive feminine aspects of the game. While this is a legitimate way to respond in order to try and gain respect from the larger sporting community, it does take away from the overall “spirit of resistance” the sport originally tried to cultivate as a women and feminist centered space and the attempt to renegotiate what a serious sport would mean for women. It also continues the implication that women in sport are not taken seriously if they express femininity. Previous research has suggested women must over compensate their femininity in order to resist social sanctions, primarily from men (Halbert 1988; Kauer 2006; Ezzell 2009; Musto and McGann 2016). However, the previous research has focused on women in traditionally men’s sports such as boxing and rugby. This is limiting in understanding gender negotiations of presentation because women in these sports must attempt to achieve hegemonic femininity, complementing the hegemonic masculinity already present in these sports.

Roller derby offers a different way to understand gender negotiation because roller derby was reinvented as a women's only space. Therefore, skaters often do not have to contend with hegemonic masculinity and exaggerate their femininity in order to reduce the possibility of social sanctions. However, the opposite occurs where there is a pushback against the hyper femininity, effectively masculinizing the sport, in order to gain legitimation. Now, skaters must downplay their feminine representation in order to reduce the possibility of social sanctions, rather than highlight it.

Alex, 25, offers some interesting viewpoints in relation to how skaters present themselves and what it means for the overall "business" of the league:

I know there are skaters who don't want it to be perceived as a show or if it is then we're the show, kind of the sport is the show... We need it to be in order to keep the wheel turning of the sponsorships. We have sponsorship because we offer advertisement. If we're offering advertisement that means we need to get more people seeing that advertisement in order for the sponsors to feel like it's effective enough advertising to keep buying their spots... it's a rough one because there is this desire for it to be seen as purely a legitimate sport and if you go to... the playoffs, it is. It's very much in the same realm as any other high-end elite sports thing but I think for [Small Town Derby] specifically, we have to do it the way we do it in order to keep dues lower, in order to pay for our practice space... Just the cost of renting the warehouse, the cost of renting our space [for bout day] is too much. It's too great for the skaters to carry it alone so I totally get this whole concept of wanting it to be just seen as a legitimate sport and what not. But yeah, I don't see that being an option, and Humboldt ... I don't see people wanting to come if we don't have the lights and the music and the crazy announcer and whatnot.

Alex is worried that without the spectacle aspect of the sport, then the league would not be able to exist in its current state. Alex goes on to also talk about the lights and music of the bout productions that are unique to Small Town Derby. Alex believes

the reason Small Town Derby is able to draw in the large crowds is because they are able to put on what would effectively be called a show. However, Alex also touches briefly on the idea that all sports are inherently a performance. Catherine also mentions briefly how the ability to put on a good show gives back to the audience and the community, something she believes is an important aspect of roller derby. It seems there is a lot to continue discussing in how the sport and skaters overall represent themselves. Sara offers an alternative to current mainstream pushback, referring back to the roots of derby:

I understand the want to be taken seriously but I think instead of conforming to society's standards of what is serious, we as a sport, what roller derby means, what roller derby stands for, is NO this is what we call serious, and for society to accept our form of serious instead of conforming to society's version of serious. So yeah okay, we are in booty shorts and fishnets but that doesn't mean that we are not serious athletes.

After this, Sara discusses her use of fishnets as a sign of both maintaining her connection to the roots of derby as well as a sign of rebellion. The rebellion aspect is interesting considering derby as a whole was traditionally a sport of rebellion against traditional sporting avenues. With the introduction of more respectability politics in roller derby, presenting as hyper feminine or performing a hyper sexuality is now rebellion within derby rather than as resistance to the overall institution of sport.

Identity Construction through the Derby Name: "A Badge of Honor"

While clothing is a hotly contested area, the use of the derby name has maintained support within the derby community. The "derby name" refers to an alternate name skaters may choose to be printed on their jersey and to be referred by,

primarily during gameplay. However, most skaters outside of derby events are also referred to by their derby name rather than legal name. Derby names have become a traditional and culturally important aspect to derby that I argue adds an additional layer of identity construction in comparison to other sports. Roller derby originally began using nicknames early on in the original game but very sparingly. The names were usually given to more popular skaters by the fans, such as “Banana Nose,” given to Ann Calvello who had broken her nose multiple times, among other injuries (Martin 2006; Miller 2006). With the renaissance of derby, the derby name was meant to signify a new persona. These personas were meant to give the skaters an air of toughness separating themselves from their primary identities (Mabe 2007).

The derby name is an extremely unique aspect of derby compared to other traditional sports and offers new insight into sporting identity construction. Identity construction is useful when discussing the sporting identity because it is a deliberate act to change oneself for the group one is entering (Donnelly and Young 1988). Most individuals in sports construct their identity in relation to others around them and then are validated in their new identity through interactions (Stryker 1980). Roller derby is different because the skater is not only validated in their athletic identity by the group but is encouraged to take on an entirely new name and persona as well. The derby skater is not only constructing their identity in relation to the league, but is also shifting their understanding of self through the use of a new name; effectively a new identity.

Some skaters claim to like the derby name because it allows them to take on a new persona while others simply like the derby name for its uniqueness. Skaters wear

their derby name on the backs of their jerseys in place of their last name and are referred to by their derby names in everyday conversations even beyond the derby space. There were many instances when having conversations where a skater's legal name would be used and I would find myself confused about who was being referenced, this is due to the extent at which the derby name is often used. I would find myself in positions where I often did not know a skater's legal name. The derby name in this case can often become more than just a secondary persona that skaters wear and often evolves into a primary identity.

The derby name is seen mostly as a badge of honor skaters must earn and is often more than just another nickname. The derby name usually provides insight into a skater's identity and often becomes an alternate or even primary identity to the skater. While some skaters are more non-chalant about what their derby name is, it is clear the derby name means a lot to them through their use of their name even outside the derby community. Sara explains that her derby name is used more often than her legal name and has also been used in other aspects of her life. While I cannot use her legal or derby name for confidentiality reasons, she explains that she has used different iterations of her derby name for other activities. Sara participates in burlesque and also performs as a Drag King. In her burlesque persona she uses a more feminine version of her derby name, while her Drag King persona adopts a more masculine form. Her derby name has become more than just a persona and has become more of primary identity off of which other identities are based.

Sara discusses multiple interesting aspects of the derby name and its importance to skaters. First, she describes the importance of choosing an identity, and engaging in deliberate identity construction. By participating in derby, a person is making a conscious decision to be someone else or even someone they have always wanted to be. While the derby name is often associated with a “character” similar to pro wrestling, it seems skaters associate make-up and clothing with the “character” persona whereas the name is an actual identity the skaters adopt:

You’re basically deciding who you want to be. I feel like in life we just kind of like take these little pathways, left right, forward or backward and it kind of inevitably gets us to where we are going and we don’t always have a choice in that but in the sport of roller derby you get to choose who you wanna be, literally, like what you wanna be called how you want to identify yourself. It’s really weird and it’s really awesome. Where else do you get to do that?... there is Sara, that person, then there is [derby name].

Sara goes on to describe how her derby personality is now more a part of her than her original identity. She is now called by her derby name more often than by her birth name and she says she has become her derby persona just “a little bit more.” The derby persona has even become a primary identity that she has based other parts of her life on. Burlesque and drag are other arenas where people are able to take on new identities and reinvent themselves on the stage and within their performances. Sara chose, instead of creating new identities, to actually incorporate her derby persona into these performances. Her “alternate” identity has become both a primary and secondary identity, the “real” person and the performance.

Catherine, similar to Sara, really connects with the derby name as a concept and put a lot of thought into her own:

I think the name is really important... it's gotta be your alter ego. There has to be strength behind it, there has to be personal meaning behind it... I just feel like it really says a lot about you.

Catherine goes on to describe the many layers that went in to creating her derby name. Hers has multiple meanings depending on the context and even language used. Her derby name can be understood as either a local joke, connecting her to the overall community, or as meaning "powerful" or "strong" fortress in another language. She finds pride in her name because of the many layers to understanding it, and from her initial discussion about the derby name, it would seem her name also says a lot about her and she seems to feel the same way, "I definitely feel a connection with a lot of the meaning in it... it's nice for that and... it's just super fun!"

Katy also describes her derby name as becoming a part of her everyday life, even bleeding into her professional life:

there are people in my work life who will call me [by my derby name] too and it's... that to me, that name and my legal name are interchangeable, it doesn't feel like a different person or that I'm tougher with my derby name or anything

Katy's relationship to her derby name is slightly different than Sara, where Sara identifies more heavily with her derby name as opposed to her legal name, Katy sees them as interchangeable where one does not outweigh the other. However, even though Katy may have a more casual relationship with her derby name it is still important to acknowledge the profound effect the derby name has when even co-workers in her

professional job refer to her by her derby name, or that this new name can be used interchangeably with her birth name.

Jessica discusses a fondness for the derby name, and while she does not necessarily feel as connected to hers as Sara or even Katy, she still feels the name is incredibly important. Her disconnect from the derby name seems to come specifically from her not feeling particularly creative in picking her own (which is a play on a pop culture reference, one of her favorite books). However, even though she may not feel a particular fondness for her own name, she did say the derby name is “kinda like your badge, like I completed training camp and now I have a name. It’s special.” In Small Town Derby league, it is custom to take a derby name once you graduate bootcamp and become part of the team. The derby name has a ritualistic aspect to it where you need to officially earn the name upon making the team. In my participation, new bootcamp skaters are instructed to not use a derby name or nickname when they enter bootcamp and are told to “hold onto their name, keep it sacred” until they pass bootcamp.

Other skaters used the derby name as a way to improve their confidence, specifically when they are on the track. While the previous participants explained how their derby names have become more interchangeable with their overall identity, other skaters used the derby name to “trick themselves.” Kendal discusses her use of choosing the derby name as a way to convince herself that she was tough and able to play:

I needed something tough because I am not a tough person. I may put on a tough exterior, but really I'll curl up and go cry in the corner because I'm sad. But I'm not really a tough person and everybody thinks this sport as you have to be angry and mean and that was how it was when I was playing. You had to be angry and mean and I'm

like, "I've worked way too many years on my anger." I'm like, "I don't want to be angry." So, I tried to pick a tough name... It's pretty silly, but it kind of worked for me.

Lori also took a derby name that she describes as not really applying to her personality overall. She describes herself as "this weird, kinda nice, benign, friendly person" but has a derby name that would generally be described as scary and intimidating. Lori at the time of our interview had just recently made the team and was unsure of her name but said that it was "growing" on her. Both Kendal and Lori here may not necessarily use their derby names as interchangeably as others, but do participate in the more purposeful construction of identities as Donnelly and Young (1988) suggest. Kendal and Lori are also partaking in forms of identity management (Goffman 1965) where they refrain from expressing what they perceive to be their "true" identities as nice and quiet and replacing these characteristics through the use of their "tough" derby names.

Jamie was one skater who expressed frustration with the derby name. While others struggled in picking a name (usually because they claimed difficulty with creativity), Jamie found herself pressured to pick a name immediately upon making the team:

I felt a little pressured to pick a name really fast... and I don't have, I'm not very good with coming up with names or like, funny innuendos, like that's not part of me, and my name was actually found by somebody else and I really liked it, and I really liked what it represented, but it was a point of pressure.

While Jamie is not the first or only one to say they struggled with picking a name due to a lack of imagination, they were the only one who said they found it to be a point of pressure upon entering the league rather than it being a more organic

experience. This is consistent with Jamie's overall experience with the league and with roller derby in general where she has stated she has no need to "over-represent herself," which makes sense as to why she may not have necessarily felt the need to put too much thought into picking the derby name, or felt like she was pressured to pick one too quickly. She did not appear to be someone who thought a lot about the derby name before making the team, whereas other people make the team already knowing what they want to be called.

Two skaters discussed not really caring for the derby name. Alex discussed further the shift in derby to a more "legitimate" sport. Alex suggested the derby name may be fading out in order to further cement the sport as "real" rather than spectacle. Alex still took on a derby name, but chose one that was close enough to their last name to "[cater] to the legitimate sport aspect and catering to the spectacle of it." They figured if they ever had to change their derby name to their legal last name, there would not be as much of a change since their derby name so closely resembles their last name.

Hanna was the other skater who did not like the derby name and actually never wanted a derby name to begin with. Hanna explains she only took a name because she felt like she had to. However, she actually expressed frustration because her derby name was often misused, giving it a different meaning where she describes "because of my role in [Small Town Derby], it became military... my derby name created an identity for me." Hanna is expressing how she did not have an active role in what her derby name meant and instead had to take on the role others put on her because of the misinterpretation of her name. Her role in the league became one of militancy rather

than fun as she had originally intended. After speaking with her more, she mentioned that she did eventually begin skating under her legal name, when probed as to why, she explained:

I guess because I wanted people to know that it was me. I wanted people to know that I was working hard. That I put in the time and when I went out in the world I didn't want to be secretive. You know what I mean? I just wanted to know, that girl goes to practice four days a week and she's on the track and she's getting her ass kicked and she goes to work, and she's running the organization. I didn't want that to be secret.

Hanna has a drastically different viewpoint than the rest of my participants. Her perceptions of the derby name were not ones that implied strength or power, but as something to hide behind. She felt that she would not be recognized for her hard work if she continued skating with a derby name. She is also the only participant to describe her derby name as being misused and creating an alternate persona that she did not want. However, Hanna still enacted purposeful identity construction through her decision to stop skating with a derby name. She was constructing for herself how she wanted the audience and the community to view her; as a strong and hard-working athlete.

Roller derby provides additional layers of identity through the implementation of the derby name. Even when skaters choose to skate by their legal name, they are still making conscious decisions as to how they want to be identified and perceived. The derby name continues to be a powerful way for skaters to represent themselves or even manage what others know about them (Goffman 1965; Donnelly and Young 1988).

Using the framework of identity construction, it is clear the derby name serves as one

of the main avenues for skaters to, quite literally, construct a new identity for themselves.

DISCUSSION: FALL DOWN GET BACK UP

There are clearly very complex relationships among and between skaters as well as within the derby community. Participants discussed variations of resistance in their participation through derby, lining up with previous research of sport as resistance spaces. Roller derby continues to be unique in its position as a contact sport that is women and feminine centered. Other full-contact and collision sports played by women are often sports that are played predominately by men. Women in these positions tend to emphasize their femininity in response to hegemonic masculinity to reduce instances of potential harassment. While women in these places were able to resist some markers of hegemonic femininity (such as building more muscle tone) they were still subject to harsher criticism if they transgressed too much. Roller derby on the other hand has very different avenues in regards to reproduction of hegemonic ideology. Skaters were often resistant to performing femininity because they viewed it as less serious and instead opted to reduce their feminine presentation in order to be viewed as “real” and legitimate athletes.

Skaters rarely reported feelings of stigma or labels of deviant and instead viewed their participation as overwhelmingly positive. Their perceptions of themselves and perceptions of the community supported their positive feelings in regards to their sporting participation. Comparing derby to other sporting literature, we can make the assumption that roller derby is one of the most progressive sports that aligns with Krane’s (2001) suggestions of resisting hegemonic femininity in sports. Most stigmatization and deviant labels placed on women in sports are those that assume the

women are “mannish,” “butch,” and/or “lesbians” often times leading to players participating in defensive othering and putting these labels on other women trying to distance themselves from the “other.” However, roller derby being a women’s space, and often times a queer women’s space, means that many of these labels are already accepted and often times expected. Only one skater mentioned being somewhat uncomfortable about others now beginning to question her sexuality based on her participation in derby, she did react with some level of defensive othering (by her bringing femininity to the team implying others were not feminine enough). However, this skater was clearly the exception whereas other skaters praised derby for its inclusiveness of many types of people, adding to the supportiveness of the space.

Skaters also frequently identified themselves as strong and found power and pride in their ability to be strong. The derby community also often praised varying body sizes and found all kinds of bodies to be useful in gameplay. There are some contradictions here when actually looking at the team, however. While the derby community tries to support different kinds of skaters, it is clear who the skaters are, or at least the types of skaters who are favored for more competitive. This is similar to the findings of Draft (2013) who studied the derby athlete body and found that while some skaters were praised for being bigger, the more competitive the bouts got, the more likely there would be a homogenization of bodies. While this was noticed particularly in my field observations, it was not something that often came up for skaters during interviews. It would seem there may be a greater perception of acceptance among the skaters during interviews because many of them did not come from particularly athletic

backgrounds or had also been participating for so long that they viewed the league and community more positively in relation to their own personal experiences.

Throughout this work I would have to agree with Ezzel's (2009) assessment of sport as a more deliberate action of identity construction rather than a passive identity formation through basic socialization. Roller derby provides various avenues of constructing identities beyond the aspect of the disciplined body. Chase (2006, 2008) identifies the disciplined body within the context of sport to discuss the very active role change individuals must go through in their participations from schedule, to nutritional and bodily control. Derby supports additional identity construction by still allowing for individual representations of self in the form of outfits and the derby name. Skaters often had conflicting viewpoints about what could be worn during games. Currently there has been a shift to wear more athletic clothing to appear more legitimate and "real" as a sport. I would theorize here that the shift away from the individual presentations is, for one, because oftentimes skaters would dress in hyper feminine and hyper sexualized attire. Femininity is already not seen as the dominant or ideal athlete and so in order for roller derby to continue growing into a more mainstream sport it must appease mass audiences thereby watering down the unique feminine and sexual aspects of the sport. However, the derby name was still supported as a way to hold onto the traditional roots of roller derby. Two participants mentioned there is a slow shift in some leagues using given names or only numbers on their jerseys, and one skater was opposed to using a derby name initially and also did eventually begin skating under her legal name. Overall, the consensus has been to maintain the derby name. I am uncertain

why the derby name in particular has stuck around. Those who mentioned using given names or presenting only numbers on jerseys rather than the derby name were more concerned with the promoting a team mentality rather than an individual mentality.

Continuing research must, first, include a wider variety of skaters. While my own study had a wide range of ages, having only white participants will not give adequate representation to the overall athletic identity, especially when discussing resistance to, and reproduction of, hegemonic femininity. Further research would also benefit from having a larger sample size and more leagues included. My research only included one league from a very small and rural community, which will be drastically different from large urban areas that can support multiple teams and even multiple leagues. I would also like to explore other aspects of the sport that some participants discussed but was unable to incorporate into this project, such as: how injuries from roller derby are perceived by others, the politics of co-ed and men's roller derby, and also further explore the role of the body and embodiment in relation to roller derby.

I continue to wrestle with my understanding of the sport and where it is heading. While roller derby has continued to be a space where queerness and weirdness is expected, I am wondering how quickly the legitimizing process will outweigh these special aspects of roller derby. With derby becoming more widely televised (the championships in 2017 were aired on ESPN 2, up from ESPN 3 in 2016) it will be interesting to see how much overt queerness can be displayed, such as skaters kissing their girlfriends after the championship match or skaters like Brawn Swanson skating in a mustache, effectively performing drag while participating in derby (Gieseler 2014). I

wonder where the quirky parts of derby will find space in the continued effort to maintain a legitimate face for the sport.

While there are conflicts occurring within the derby space, one thing is for certain and that is the skaters do work extremely hard and regardless of what they are wearing or calling themselves, they are true athletes. Skaters identify themselves as strong both on an individual level and in relation to their teammates. It is clear roller derby is undergoing cultural shifts that are worth exploring in future research. While I have touched on the cultural shifts briefly in relation to participants understanding of roller derby, it will be interesting to see where roller derby goes as the fastest growing sport in the world.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Involvement

1. How/where did you hear about derby?
2. Are you currently in bootcamp or on the team?
3. What prompted/contributed to your decision to start participating in derby?
4. When did you start?
5. How long have you been participating in roller derby?

Experience

6. Can you recall when you first started?
7. Tell me about that. (what are your feelings about derby?)
8. How does that compare to how you feel now?
9. Why do you think you are still feeling the same?
10. What keeps you skating?
11. So that helps with covering up those bad moments right?
12. Can you explain some of those struggles you have had on and off the track?
13. What has skating done for your own emotional and physical health?

Community

14. How would you describe the derby community?
15. What is your role in the league besides skating? (if on team)
16. How would you describe your experience in relation to other skaters within the league/bootcamp?
17. How do problems or tensions get solved if they arise?

Identity

18. How have you changed in your journey with roller derby?
19. Tell me about these strengths you have developed. (I hear you describing mental and/or physical)
20. How has participation in derby helped these strengths develop?
21. Can you describe this connection of mind and body?
22. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the derby community/communities you have been involved with?
23. Is there anything I should understand better or anything you would like to add to the interview?
24. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Demographics

25. Age
26. Race
27. Gender
28. Sexuality
29. Education level
30. Occupation