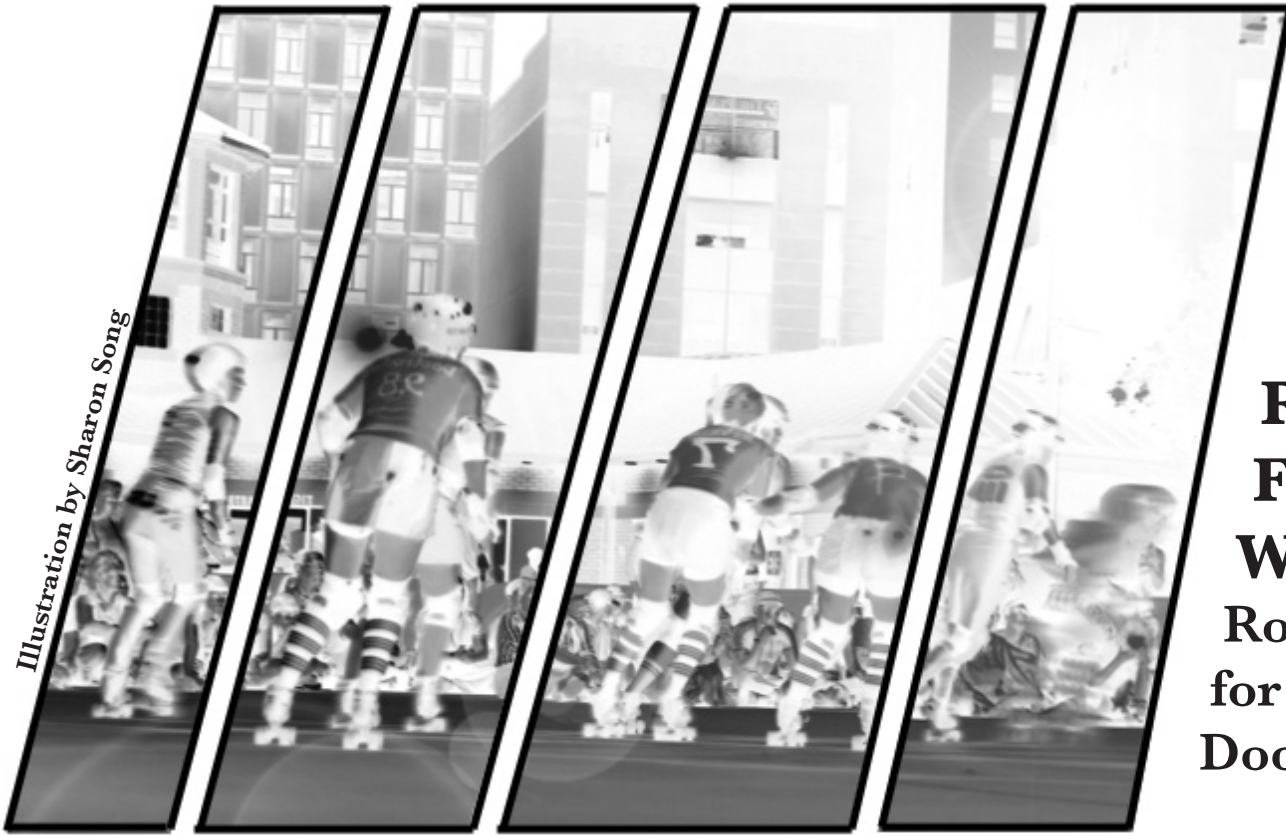


Illustration by Sharon Song



Reckless, Feckless and Wrecking This Roller Derby Returns for Another Season of Doom and Vendettas

by Shawn Wen

I hate skating in this rink," Julietta Vendetta complains. "It is so dirty and so slippery." The floor is kelly green linoleum, coated with soil, dust, and the sweat of derby girls. The walls are lined with water bottles, one ice pack, and the occasional asthma inhaler. The women skate nonstop. Occasionally some of the players who have recently suffered injuries sit out on a certain exercise. Hips, shoulders, and knees are the most common injuries. "Our first scrimmage, I twisted my knee and had to go to the emergency room for the first time in my life," says Julietta Vendetta. But the injury did not discourage her. Asked if she ever second-guessed playing the sport, Vendetta responds, "No, I didn't even think about it."

Vendetta has not always been the type of girl to remain unfazed by a twisted knee. Until she joined roller derby, it had been a while since she had last laced up a pair of skates. "I had skated as a kid; I went to the roller rinks and whatnot. But I hadn't gone skating in ten years." But six months ago, the girl who would later call herself Julietta Vendetta attended the Mayday Bout, a public roller derby game. "I saw it and thought, 'Hey, I can do that.' And I went to an open practice. I've been doing it ever since."

An unlikely bedfellow

Julie Taitano did not play sports growing up. She is twenty-four and drives a Volvo. She has a degree in psychology from Reed College and currently works eight hour days at the E.P. Bradley Hospital Sleep and Chronobiology Research Lab. After college, she married her high school sweetheart. She then left her hometown of Portland, Oregon to be with him through his time in medical school at Brown University. She complains that people in New England are too uptight, and she confesses to being homesick for the natural beauty and laidback attitudes of the West Coast.

Roller derby and Julie Taitano seems an odd match. But Taitano—when in the rink and with the team—becomes Julietta Vendetta. "I've never really been 'in shape,'" she says. "This is the first time where I really feel like I'm an athlete. I'm basically in the best shape of my life right now."

For the girls on the team, picking a name is a big event. "You get a nickname once you're placed on a team," Vendetta explains. "Part of the initiation process is

[to be] able to get your derby name." As Taitano says, she picked the name Julietta Vendetta because "it sounds girly and it rhymes." The girls also use the names consistently, on and off the rink. "Every once in a while it'll slip out that I'll call someone by their real name," Vendetta says, "but usually it's derby names." The concept is not particular to Providence Roller Derby; there is a national roster of derby names, and these names cannot be repeated. "There are a ton of Vendettas out there, I'm sure, but if someone else wanted to be Julietta Vendetta, they couldn't do it. The names need to sound different enough, because if we play an interleague bout against someone else, we can't have the same name."

La bella mafia

The history of roller derby blurs the boundaries between sport and entertainment. It first began during the Great Depression as a spectacle created by sports promoter Leo Seltzer. It was originally intended to simulate a roller race across the distance of the United States, with skaters circling the rink thousands of times. Occasionally, accidents and crashes occurred. Seltzer caught onto the marketability of the sport and decided to change the game to maximize the potential violence. With the rise of television in the 1950s roller derby went through a wave of national popularity. It declined in the 1970s with high overhead costs and loss of public attention.

In the early 00s, roller derby revived itself again, this time as a grass-roots movement. In the United States, there are currently over 50 amateur leagues, mainly organized around cities. Most leagues are all female, self-organized and non-profit. Providence Roller Derby was started by a girl who goes by the name Sarah Doom. Doom, who currently lives in Boston, had been a derby girl in Tucson before moving to the East Coast to pursue a PhD at Harvard. She put up fliers all over Providence, seeking girls to join her on an unusual endeavor—the formation of a roller derby team.

One of her recruits was Samantha Gerlach, who is currently a leader on the team. "There are a lot of would-be athletes who never had a chance before," she says. Before finishing her comment, she interrupts herself, "Then you have girls like Hysterica and da Silva Bullet," Gerlach laughs. "They both used to figure skate."

"I tell everyone I meet about it," Gerlach says. "The other day at the grocery store, I tried to get the cashier girl to join."

Gerlach is known as the Godmother, and she wears her title well. Newbies can be intimidated by her at first. "I mean look at her," says Ashley Holt. "The girl has piercings coming out of her neck." Her body, though only of average height and medium stature, is a powerhouse. During practice, she glides around the rink with agility and vigor. Tufts of dark curly hair stick out of her helmet and fall around her face. Her bold make-up makes her every facial expression—each

grin and grimace—visible even from a distance. She commands the practices—screaming instructions and words of encouragement to the other girls. Every time she tumbles to the ground, but Gerlach seamlessly pops back up. She has been lucky in the sport, with no serious injuries to date. The girls do not simply respect Gerlach for her athletic prowess. Gerlach moves with assuredness, and she talks to the players with disarming openness and kindness. She devotes much of herself to the team.

"Derby takes up all my time," Gerlach says. "It's my whole life. My poor roommate has to listen to me talk about it all the time, and I'm sure she's sick of it—but really, it's all I think about." But Gerlach's life is full of other forces. She is a sculpting major at the Rhode Island School of Design and a member of a local female rap group, Neon Vomit.

"I feel like right now, it's really popular to be reserved, to be almost unconfident. Derby is about being strong and kicking ass. You can see that in the players. Newbies come in and they can be shy and quiet and not speak up for themselves. Within weeks even, their skating is better, sure, but their posture is better, they laugh louder, they say what's on their mind."

Wheels, thunder and asunder

"We set a good example for girls," said Gerlach. "All the time after practice, little girls—especially young ones—approach us for autographs. Dolly Rocket said once that a little girl came up to her to tell her that she was beautiful. When she said that, DaSilva replied, 'That's happened to me too! Twice, actually.'" But young girls are not the only ones to approach the team. "Young women come up to us all the time. A lot of them are very excited to join. And an older woman came up to me to say, 'There was nothing like this when I was younger. Girls could never have done this when I was younger.'"

As practice continues, the newbies and the veterans break up into separate groups. Before the newbies are allowed fully participate in derby, they need to master certain skills. They spend much of the practice skating along the outer edges of the rink. They work on their posture, agility, and speed. They practice falling safely, picking themselves up without putting their hands on the ground, and weaving between cones.

Meanwhile, veterans in the middle of the rink practice a full-on scrimmage. Two teams of five skaters skate in a pack. Each team has a player called the jammer. In the two minute "jams," the jammer's job is to lap as many players as possible. For each member of the opposing team that she passes, she scores one point. The jammer tries to break ahead by any means possible. She literally has to fight her way ahead as blockers on the opposing team try to stop her. Though punching and tripping are illegal, the girls body check, shove, and elbow one another without hesitation.

Even though this is only a practice, the scrimmage is fast-paced and forceful. The pack moves as a brisk, nebulous mass. Players crash to the ground in messy tangles of arms, legs, and wheels. The sound of their skates whooshing over the rink floor is nonstop, but constantly overpowered by screeching wheels, screaming, yelling and swearing.

Sexy, schmexy

Roller derby is often referred to as "the new burlesque." In the late nineties, burlesque saw its own revival, but emerged as a genre of adult entertainment. Contemporary burlesque traded Abbot and Costello's hat and wig for Dita Von Tease's corset and garter belt.

"We are nothing like burlesque," Gerlach says. "Not to knock burlesque, but they're doing their own thing. We are athletes." To the critics, miniskirts and fishnet stockings do not seem to be the most conducive outfits for athleticism. "There are practical purposes to what we wear," Julietta Vendetta says. "When you're skating in a concrete rink, and more of your skin is left on the concrete than on your flesh, the fishnet stockings help ease those brushes. And skirts make for less, um, less chafing."

While the girls defend the authenticity of the sport, media outlets tend to play up roller derby's sex appeal. Journalist Brian Balthazar's article for MSNBC makes note that a player wears "a shorter than short skirt" and that the "fanbase consists of men thirsting for a 'catfight.'"

"For me, I'm definitely not someone who tries to be sexy," says Vendetta. "But playing roller derby makes me feel sexy. It is a sexy thing. Just strong women doing what they want to do and playing a really hardcore sport that a lot of guys would be afraid to play. That's pretty sexy."

During the practice, the girls don't pay attention to the men from the hockey and soccer teams that share the athletic complex who gawk at them. They are much too concentrated on their skating to succumb to distractions. They certainly don't appear to be skating to pander to the attention of men. "I was at a fundraiser, and I noticed that it was all girls on the dance floor," said Gerlach. "I asked someone, and she said she left boyfriend behind. It was more fun just being us girls. We could dance the night away ourselves."

SHAWN WEN B'09 got knocked down, then got up again.