

BIG EASY ROLLER GIRLS

By Sally Asher

Photos by Sally Asher and Angelina Jordan

Frivolity in a Forgotten City



During one of our carwash fundraisers for the Big Easy Rollergirls, a man came up to me as I scrubbed the hubcaps of an old Ford Fairlane. "Roller derby in New Orleans? Isn't that a bit frivolous right now?" He didn't give me time to respond, disappearing into the throng of customers. I was relieved, because at the time I didn't know what to say.

The Big Easy Rollergirls joined the roller derby resurgence in the spring of 2005. With our eye on a Mardi Gras 2006 debut, we skated at a local rink and ran drills in Audubon Park. August 29, 2005, altered everyone's plans. After Hurricane Katrina, with our rink damaged and more than 80 percent of our league displaced,

our e-mails that once possessed a dauntless determination had an almost timid tone to them. How could we could persuade women who were busy gutting their homes, looking for jobs, trying to find schools for their children, and waiting in long lines for supplies, to spend at least three days a week training for a competitive, full-contact sport on roller skates?

Most of our members relocated, and those who stayed claimed that they just didn't have time for roller derby. I didn't blame them. I was living without heat and hot water, and dealing with FEMA and my insurance company was like a part-time job that only paid in aggravation. My commitment was indifferent at best.

Exercise has always been a way to calm my mind. Pre-Katrina, my typical morning routine in City Park consisted of dodging power walkers, bicyclists and dog lovers. I longed for solitude. Weeks after the storm, my wish had been granted. I jogged around the once majestic live oak trees that now lay fallen among debris, dangling power wires, and abandoned cars. The silence was cacophonous. It was mid-November before I even saw another person in the park, and it came just at that momentous time when I was beginning to wonder if I would ever see anyone again. Standing in the middle of the public running track was a woman in her mid-60s. She had bright red hair, was





wearing shorts shorter than I would ever dare, and was diligently practicing her shot-put. We waved greetings to each other, and after my initial sigh of relief at seeing another human being, my first thought was, "That woman would have been kick-ass in roller derby."

The Big Easy Rollergirls went back to basics on recruitment: handing out fliers, begging local radio stations for airtime and asking neighborhood haunts if we could set up card tables outside their businesses to hand out information. The response wasn't what we expected. Many of the women who had reservations about roller derby before the storm now looked at it as their second chance to take a chance.

Kathryn Hobgood (aka Trixie la Femme) celebrated the exhilarating effects that came with pushing her body to its limits. "Women might not know this about themselves, or have forgotten, because there are so few opportunities for adult

women to participate in truly challenging and competitive sports," she said.

Hobgood, like most of the women trying out, had not been on skates since junior high school, but quickly gained her "skater legs." The Big Easy Rollergirls include lawyers, architects and bankers. These women viewed their stiff muscles and newfound bruises as diplomas from the school of roller derby. This transformation was even more dynamic to watch when Trish the Dish and Ivanna S. Pankin from the Sin City Rollergirls flew out from Las Vegas this year to assist in our training. (Being in a wheelchair from a recent foot surgery did not detour Trish from her power and dedication to the sport... and to us.) Their continual message to all of us was that, wherever we went, we would always have a home with a roller derby member. Their resolve gave us inspiration. Still, I wondered where roller derby stood in the new New Orleans. Heroes have emerged from our wounded

city. Becky Zaheri, who founded the Katrina Krewe, coordinated thousands of local and national volunteers to pick up the trash that covered our city like a shroud. Wendy Laker restored the Mid City Art Market, allowing artists a venue to sell their works. Laura Maloney, executive director of the Louisiana SPCA, organized the rescue of countless stranded animals. These women were making a real difference in the city's rehabilitation. I felt selfish wanting to skate.

This conflict was always in my consciousness until I recently spoke at the New Orleans Concierge Association Meeting. Dressed in my Big Easy Rollergirls tank top and a plaid skirt, I sat in a room of immaculately dressed men and women. When it was my turn, I looked out at the array of professionals and decided to start my speech with a disclaimer. "Please forgive me if I slur my words or drop my paper," I nervously stated. "I'm not drunk." I pointed to the large bruise



The city of New Orleans' main source of income is tourism. Currently, the city is on shaky ground. Nicknamed the Big Easy by musicians because of the relative ease in finding work, New Orleans has lost many of its celebrated musicians, artists, chefs and other performers to other cities. That, coupled with residents existing on the bare minimum of city services amid landlord-versus-tenant issues, potholes, broken traffic lights and miles of debris, has left us tired but not lethargic.

Christy Wood (aka Crusty McKnuckle), who admits to having experienced a range of emotions since Katrina, believes that roller derby not only brought her more focus but purpose. "We find support and solace in one another while at the same time acting as role models for other women and young girls, while providing them with something enjoyable to watch."

But that is what entertainment does: it alleviates our afflictions and gives us a diversion in which to revel. Roller derby, in its equal mix of sport and spectacle, is the quintessential form of alternative recreation, just like New Orleans. Entertainment is not only part of our city's heritage, it's our lifeline. It's an admission to ourselves that it is OK to rejoice and take pleasure in the luxury of distraction.

In our city's current state, the ability to enjoy oneself is even more crucial. As George Cornwall Lewis so eloquently stated, "Life would not be tolerable were it not for its amusements." If the same man from the car wash approached me again, I still doubt I would have words. I, along with the other women who make up the Big Easy Roller girls, would be too busy. Our premiere bout in September sold out. According to Cherry Pi, one of the founders of The Big Easy Roller girls, "The best word I got was from my friend, who remarked that she felt she was in another time and place, without any memory of the hurricane or things that anger us on a daily basis. We helped people forget their troubles and have a wonderful evening. I love that what we do makes other people feel good, not just ourselves."

All of our proceeding bouts at Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World, where "every

accentuating the tattoos on my right shoulder. "I'm recovering from a minor concussion and damaged tendon from last week's scrimmage."

Instead of scowling or checking their watches, the members of the audience clapped their hands and laughed. Leaning

forward in their chairs, they asked questions, yelled encouragement and shouted out suggestions. Afterward, an elegantly dressed woman came up to me, not only to shake my hand, but to inquire where she could buy season tickets for herself and her three sons. I had forgotten the value and power of entertainment.



day is a parade," have sold out as well. Fans come as early as three hours in advance for tailgating parties in the parking lot. Bands play, restaurants cater, bars serve, taxis shuttle people to and fro, but above all people are entertained.

Because of this knowledge, when I lace up my skates, strap on my protective gear, pull on my fishnets and apply my fire engine-red lipstick, I feel confident that my fellow roller derby sisters and I are taking part in the restoration of this wonderfully unique city. But I must admit, knocking someone down after slamming into them going full-speed on skates feels pretty good too.

The Big Easy Rollergirls would like to offer their heartfelt thanks and appreciation to all of the sister leagues who gave us so much love and support.

Please visit www.bigeasyrollergirls.com for more information on the team and their city.

