

The Big Easy Rollergirls

By

Sally Asher

“Keep your butts down! Your butts down!” A redhead, dressed in full protective gear, effortlessly weaves in and out of a pack of female skaters at Airline Skate Center. Skating low, with her eyes on the skaters and her hand on her whistle, Kate Parker a.k.a “Cherry Pi,” the trainer for the Big Easy Rollergirls, yells out commands to the group of women who make up New Orleans’ only flat-track, roller derby. “Come on! Push it!” Parker hollers in the direction of a skater, who is coasting during one of the team’s many endurance drills. “If it doesn’t hurt, it’s not worth it.” Parker’s last shout could easily be the Big Easy’s mantra.

Founded in the spring of 2005, The Big Easy Rollergirls (BERG) is one of the many all-female roller derby leagues that are popping up around the country. This year, over 20 leagues gathered in Tucson, AZ for the first ever Dust Devil National Championship. The three-day event, filled with high-charged skating, fast-played music and riotous entertainment, only cemented roller derby’s meteoric rejuvenation in popularity and exploding fan base.

Almost all of the teams are owned, managed, and operated by their female players, following the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) governing philosophy: *By the skaters, for the skaters*. The roller derby leagues, like any grass-root organization, are all bound by their identical struggles: recruitment, training facilities, sponsorship, bout places, volunteers. Yet, in typical New Orleanian fashion, in the city’s

uncanny pattern to distinguish itself from other cities, the BERG holds claim to their own dubious honor; none of the other roller derby teams had to start from scratch twice.

In the summer of 2005, the 30-odd members of the BERG were holding regular practices at West Bank Skate Country and endurance drills in Audubon Park. With their eye on a debut bout around Mardi Gras 2006, the team was quickly moving toward their goal, until Katrina came along. Hurricane Katrina wiped out over 80% of the original team; the former members were either unable to stay in the city, or unable to commit to the practice schedule. This left only Kate Parker and Laura Mogg (little maSCARa), two of the remaining founders, and a handful of original members scrambling to keep BERG alive. After numerous phone calls, emails and text messages, Parker and Mogg, along with the five or six remaining members, started the formidable task of rebuilding the team.

With their skate rink in the West Bank damaged, Parker found a temporary home at Airline Skate Center. The original practices only contained a few skaters, and with the high rink cost, the team's already vulnerable reserve was quickly depleting. Undeterred, the women started an information assault on the city with seminars, flyers, radio spots on WWOZ & WTUL, appearances at One-Eyed Jacks, car washes at Vaughan's in the Bywater and Liuzzas By The Track and, of course, the invaluable word-of-mouth.

Their efforts paid off. Slowly, more skaters started showing up for practices until it resulted in a citywide try-out, May 9, 2006. Almost 30 skaters made the cut. Parker, pleased with their results, still hopes for at least 50 active members. Mogg, the membership manager, feels optimistic about this goal, as she still actively accepts inquires about those interested in joining the team.

Grateful for the helpfulness and support of the other team members in assisting those who log onto the team's website message board with questions and concerns, Mogg knows she still has an uphill battle. "Katrina definitely threw a wrench in the recruitment because everyone's schedules and living situations had been so drastically altered. Now things take a million times longer to get done, and there are a million more things that are clearly more important than derby in people's lives." Mogg tightens the laces on her skate as she prepares to compete in a team scrimmage. "It's a testament to the women who are coming out to skate." Yet, for some skaters, their biggest obstacle wasn't the scheduling or time commitment, it was fear.

"I will say that I was on the fence about joining BERG before Katrina because I feared I would end up like Million Dollar Baby," Dana DuTerroil (Illegally Blonde), the team's bout production manager, admits. "However, post Katrina, I figured since I was lucky to get a second chance to skate and kick ass on wheels, I was going to take it."

Many skaters echo DuTerroil's sentiments. Some, who haven't been on skates since they were 12, credit Parker for rapidly improving their skills. Veronica Russell, an accomplished local actress, who skates by the name Vandal O'Riley, laced-up after a 15-year skating hiatus. Originally attracted to the performance element of derby, Russell, who claims as a child to have always been picked last for all organized sports, is now one of the dominating members of the league. "Who knew that, finally, my misspent childhood would account for something?" Russell laughs.

Artist, Jeannie Detweiler (Galaxy Grrl), still glowing after finishing her speed laps, brightly exclaims, "I'm getting in shape, I get to hang out with fabulous women, and I have a healthy outlet for my post-Katrina stress,"

Lisa Rahon (Sugar Raye) who owns the Bywater's Lookout Inn and plays in the band, Dirty Rotten Shame, also credits the resurgence of roller derby for putting her in the best shape of her life at age 39. Rahon, certainly an anomaly for her age in most competitive sports, is not entirely unique in the roller derby world. Its members range in age from nineteen to mid-forties.

The Big Easy Rollergirls are an amalgamation of bartenders, artists, architects, real estate agents and bankers. They come from all over the city to train and compete. "You'd be surprised how many women here spend their days in court and their nights on skates," DuTerroil says, commenting on the number of lawyers that are skating, herself included. Still with membership partially accomplished, the BERG still faces a number of challenges.

While other flat-track roller derby teams enjoy skating to sold-out crowds, the New Orleans Roller Derby bounces between Airline Skate Center, the warehouse section of the Contemporary Arts Center and Audubon Park just to practice. As grateful as they are to the businesses willing to rent them space, the team would still like to find a place to call home. They need at least 10,000 square feet of climate-controlled space with 6,000 continuous square feet, with no pillars and a smooth, crack-free floor. The track and rink-side seating calls for a space no smaller than 110'x83', as well as bathrooms and space to accommodate at least 1,000 spectators.

"We have a dedicated bunch of women who are ready to provide the city with exciting and rousing entertainment," DuTerroil points out. She also cites the frequent hits to the website and notes the number of people signing up daily to get the team's email newsletter. "New Orleans is ready to support its own roller derby league."

While New Orleans may be ready for its very own roller derby league, the BERG is still actively seeking sponsorship to help assuage some of their costs and allow them to form their own travel team to compete with some of the other 30 roller derby leagues. BERG already has a bout scheduled with the Las Vegas' Sin City Rollergirls in January of 2007. BERG offers many sponsorship packages ranging from logos on penalty boxes, uniforms, program ads, and banners. "It's a great way to get your message across," Rahon mentions. "We already have a broad fan base." Mogg recounts the group of men who came to the car wash at Liuzzas, armed with photos of team members from the last car wash, hoping to get autographs. "It's starting," she says.

The clashing of skates and blur of tattoos endure as the team continues their practice. Two girls, one dressed in short nylon shorts and a white tank top, the other wearing tight leopard-spotted shorts and a sports bra, engage in a blocking drill. Their goal is to skate quickly around the rink and try to knock the other one down, or at the least, push the other one out of bounds. After watching this drill, DuTerroil whizzes by on her skates and shouts, "Roller Derby - It's like therapy with an edge and lip gloss!"

Next, Parker has the team line up to practice running on skates from a standstill position. It's necessary in recovering from a fall and regaining speed. One of the skaters, dressed in striped knee-high stockings and a short black skirt, lurches forward and takes a tumble on the rink floor. Parker blows her whistle and shouts, "You fall down. You get up." A fitting motto for the city of New Orleans and its roller derby league.

Appeared in Where Y' At, July 2006