

ROCK N' ROLL

Talk Derby to Me

Gainesville Roller Rebels

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FORGET EVERYTHING YOU THINK YOU KNOW ABOUT ROLLER DERBY. DESPITE BEING AN intense, fast-paced, full-contact sport between two opposing teams who score points while attempting to keep their balance on skates, it's not the knock-down, drag-out brawl it's often exaggerated to be.

Every game, or rather, every bout as they're referred to in the league, pits two 15-member teams against one another for a series of scrimmages (AKA jams) with five skaters—one jammer and four blockers—from each team competing on the track at any given time. When the whistle blows to signal the start of a jam, the designated jammer from each team—identified by a star-embellished helmet—attempts to score points by passing members of the opposing team while making their way around





Skater #42 and team jammer Queen Slayer, aka Chelsea Tobias, embraces her Swamp City Sirens teammates during a 2019 bout against Palm Coast's Beachside Brawlers. The Swamp City Sirens are the Gainesville Roller Rebel's B-Team, which means the bouts they play are for fun and don't contribute to their ranking with the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA).

the track. Assisting them are four blockers who simultaneously take offensive and defensive measures to help their jammer through the pack while preventing the other team's jammer from doing the same.

"It's an extremely athletic activity that requires a lot of endurance, strength, and agility," said Chelsea Tobias, the league president of Gainesville's own batch of derby experts: the Gainesville Roller Rebels.

Tobias, better known by her teammates as Queen Slayer, joined the Gainesville Roller Rebels in 2013, and while her childhood background in ice skating was certainly beneficial on the track, joining the nonprofit was her first introduction to lacing up a pair of quads. As if competing in a contact-based sport wasn't challenging enough, roller derby amplifies the level of difficulty by adding a set of wheels into the mix.

"If you're looking at a football game and thinking about how much footwork and juking those players have to do, you know, we're doing the same thing—except on roller skates," Tobias said.

New members to the league, which was founded in 2007, are dubbed "fresh meat" and are taught the basics of skating and how to maintain safety on the track. After passing a basic skills test, they graduate to vet skaters—a position that makes them eligible to compete in bouts either with the All-Stars team, which contributes to their league ranking with the Women's Flat

Track Derby Association (WFTDA), or through the Swamp City Sirens, their B-Team that competes for the sheer joy of derby.

"At its base, roller derby is the [most fun], most insane thing I have ever done in my life," said Ashley Flattery, who skates under the moniker Clea DuBrawl.

"It is something where you go and you get to try out crazy stuff and be messy and fail and then come back and do it all over again and you get to do it surrounded by people who are excited for you to be there and excited for you to try and fail and do it again," Flattery said. "It's just this extremely positive force in my life."

Like most newcomers, when Flattery joined the team in 2012, she had zero experience using quad skates.

"Derby is so unique because almost everyone is a newcomer when they come to it, and it makes it so that we have this big emphasis on going for it, trying, and accepting that you're going to fail—that you're going to suck for a while and that that is both a very normal experience and it's literally an experience that every single person on the team has had," said Flattery, who serves as the legal liaison for the league's Board of Directors.

"I think that people when they look at roller derby, the thing they think about is that it's flashy and crazy-looking, and for me, the part that I love about it is the 98% of what happens outside of the day of the game," Flattery said. "Like the game itself is so fun and having that adrenaline is so fun, but also the thing



that makes it great is the time that you get to practice with your teammates.”

Another facet that attracted Flattery to join the derby team was the fact that the Gainesville-based league is run by skaters, for skaters. They also operate on the mission of inclusivity along with their three core values: athleticism, community, and empowerment, which come into play on the track and off as they participate in multiple areas of community involvement—from engaging in Active Streets, Adopt-A-Highway, and Gainesville’s annual Pride Parade & Festival to their support of several local charities.

“Everything that we do, every decision that we make, every event that we have, it happens because the people on the team want it to happen and because they have put work into making it happen,” said Flattery, who works as a professional counselor and volunteers with a local suicide hotline when she isn’t filling the role of a long-time blocker.

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When they aren't on the track, members of the Gainesville Roller Rebels take part in various community events like the Gainesville Pride Parade and Festival.

It's been over a decade since the Gainesville Roller Rebels introduced aspiring skaters to the world of roller derby, but the interest in this unusual sport has yet to slow down.

"What really appealed to me was just like becoming tough and being cool at first, you know, and I was like, 'oh, I'd be so cool and so confident if I had roller skates.' And then, you know, that turned out to be pretty true because I did gain a lot of confidence being on the roller derby team," said Pauline Bickford-Duane, who joined the team in 2019 and was two skills away from moving to the vet side when the pandemic hit.

Besides encouraging teamwork and community, roller derby can give players an overall mentality of courage, determination, and strength.

"I don't feel like a different person when I'm on the track but I feel like the confidence I've gained playing roller derby has kind of leaked into the rest of my life," said Bickford-Duane, whose derby persona, Sic O. Spellcheck, was inspired by her English major and her current work with the UF George A. Smathers Libraries.

Regardless of its positive impact on its members and community, the sport of roller derby is often clouded by misconceptions.

"I think some people—especially if they grew up watching it on TV in the '80s—definitely have this perspective that it's this really violent punching and elbows and kind of a drama-filled catfight sort of thing that's just for show and it couldn't be further from the truth," Bickford-Duane



said. “We wear bout makeup, yes, because it’s fun, but there’s so much more to it than that, you know? We really train so hard to be the best we can be in a bout and I just wish, I guess I wish folks knew more about the athletic component, that it’s not just for show—it is a sport.”

That training includes everything from intense warm-ups and stretching to strength and cardio exercises, which lay the groundwork for practice drills held twice a week. Though the pandemic canceled their regular season, the absence of bouts and regular meet-ups haven’t shaken the team, who continue to keep in touch, work out together virtually, and meet in smaller, socially distanced groups—proving the community they’ve built is stronger than any virus.

“It’s just such an amazing environment to be in and it’s, I mean, we like to say ‘if you fall, it just means you’re trying.’ I love that. I love that idea that you’re just always learning and you’re always trying your best and you’ve always got people to support you,” she said. “It’s really something that anyone can try...it’s just a matter of doing it.” **OT**



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