



ON A ROLL

Grand Junction Roller Girls skate through adversity

By LEVI MEYER

dlmeyer@mavs.coloradomesa.edu

Photos by CHRIS CLARK

AMMUNITION ANNA sounds like an action-film mercenary. “I do have a love for firearms,” she said. “I have a 12-gauge Remington 870, a 45 ACP Taurus, a 357 Magnum, and an AK-47.” AK-47 isn’t just a semiautomatic weapon. It’s Anna’s personal brand, her alter ego and the number on her jersey. Ammunition Anna, also known as Anna Wells, is a sophomore English Education major at CMU and the captain of the Grand Junction Roller Girls.

“The cool thing about roller derby is that it’s completely physical,” Wells said. “On the track, you’re fierce competitors and there’s a sense of violence. You want to be the best and the meanest and the biggest and the strongest and the scariest.”

Four years ago, Wells promised herself that if Grand Junction started a roller derby team, she would join. Then, she received an email about a general interest meeting. When roller derby became a reality in Grand Junction, she immediately ordered her first pair of roller skates.

Now, the Roller Girls have approximately 15 members, but the turnover of skaters is constant. Practices are held in the Lincoln Park Barn, a space normally used for elderly dance classes, craft fairs and cake-walks. They haven’t fared well in competition, losing several bouts to well-established Colorado and Utah squads.

According to Wells, the GJ Roller Girls are in their “baby stages,” working to become an official squad registered by the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). It’s a professional league and a professional sport—one that’s on the docket for the Olympics.

But it’s not the roller derby that’s portrayed in the movies.

“No back shoving, no tripping, no elbowing, no clotheslining, no eye-poking, and no hair-pulling,” Wells said. “If that does happen, someone is getting thrown out of the game.”

While roller derby began in the early ‘20s as roller skate racing, the emergence of television turned the sport into a violent entertainment spectacle set upon an incline track. People gathered in droves to see bloody noses, broken teeth and flying elbows.

Around the year 2000, roller derby was placed on a flat track, and violence was replaced with regulations. The flat track removed the need to have million-dollar incline tracks, and new regulations promoted a safer, more accessible sport. The WFTDA created the legitimate sport that the GJ Roller Girls participate in today.

However, that doesn’t mean there aren’t any bone-crushing hits.

“Your teammates are your friends,” team member Holly Corbin said. “You don’t want to break their nose, and you don’t want to make them bleed. But you want to knock them out with amazing hits.”

Corbin, a 24-year-old Grand Junction native, is the team’s “skater advocate,” the human resource department of the roller girls. She’s been a team member for one year and is in charge of guiding new skaters (“fresh meat”) and handling personnel conflicts amongst team members.

“As with any group comprised of girls who hit each other for fun, there can be a lot of friendly aggression,” Corbin said.

Corbin’s alter ego reflects her role of responsibility: Sweet Gouge Ya Peaches.

“It’s more of an ironic nickname than anything else,” Corbin said. “It’s because I’m so sweet.”

With Wells and Corbin at the helm, the GJ Roller Girls practice weekly in preparation for bouts against other derby squads. While some girls spend their time flying around the track, the “fresh meat” spend much of their time flailing on the floor.

“My first time on roller skates was a really big joke,” Wells said. “I crawled around the track. I was like a baby giraffe.”

And when the fresh meat finally begin to skate smoothly, they’re going to get hit hard.

“You get hit, you fly through the air, then you hit the floor,” Corbin said. “More often than not, you’re just worried about trying to get back up. You have to be back

up on your feet in three seconds or less.”

Wells was a brand new skater years ago, and she believes getting pummeled is part of the sport.

“Sometimes, you get the wind knocked out of you,” Wells said. “You handle it with poise and grace, with fierceness and fire.”

When Corbin joined the team, her teammate, known as Brawler, taught her how to hit. Corbin learned firsthand what it was like to be hit—Brawler bashed Corbin for several months. It was instrumental in Corbin’s development as a skater. But in her first bout, she faced Brawler—and gladly returned the favor.

“I hit her hard, and she flew pretty good,” Corbin said. “But the only reason I know how to do that is because I spent my first six months flying.”

Ultimately, becoming a better skater heals the pain.

“It’s full of little victories,” Corbin said. “You can do something wrong 100 times and then do it right one time.”

But Corbin reminds herself daily that roller derby is never easy.

“Once you celebrate your little victory, you’ll be back on the floor.”

In addition to the struggles faced by the Grand Junction Roller Girls, they lost one of their founding members. On Feb. 2, 2013, co-founder Salina Ritchie died after a two-year battle with brain cancer.

“It was very, very difficult to lose someone like that,” Wells said. “It’s not fair.”

Ritchie was known as a “terror” on the track, bringing a lot of energy and fight to her team.

“The first time I met her, she was drawing on her eyebrows,” Wells said. “She always had a knack for drawing them on angrily, no matter if she was in a good mood or not. It didn’t matter what look she was going for. She looked like she was going to punch you in the face. She scared the sh*t out of me.”

Known by her roller derby colleagues as MMM Bop Ya, Ritchie was a fierce competitor on the track. But her teammates knew her as the sweet and sassy Salina that they grew to love.

“But as you get to know Salina and you realize she’s a human and not a tiger, she’s a wonderful and beautiful person,” Wells said.

Struggles burden the team, but they continue to fight—there is too much to fight for. They fight for legitimacy as a sport, they fight for their lost comrade, they fight because they love each other.

“We’ve finally begun to grow as a family,” Corbin said. “Sometimes, we’re fierce with each other, but the fierceness is dissipated because we care so much about each other.”

It hasn’t been an easy bout for the GJ Roller Girls. They’ve lost a member of their ranks, and they’ve struggled to recruit fresh meat. They practice at the city’s motherland for elderly activities, and they’ve lost bouts to other teams by almost 400 points.

It’s something to be angry about.

“Some girls may ask, ‘How do I deal with the constant anger that I feel during my daily life?’” Wells said. “They should try roller derby.”

No back shoving, no tripping, no elbowing, no clotheslining, no eye poking, and no hair pulling.



(Top left) Holly Corbin (aka Sweet Gouge Ya Peaches) attempts to shed the block of teammate Amber Deboer (a.k.a Internal ComeBustYa) during Wednesday’s practice at Lincoln Park Barn. (Middle Left) Liz Wergenter prepares for a jam.



Liz Wengenter, a.k.a. Axe’em up (front), and Mercy Wernhoff, a.k.a. MRSA (back), take a break in between jams at practice Thursday.



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