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Violent Femmes

Women are tired of watching rough sports from the sidelines

By Sara Smith

Amy Spears competed for space at the mirror in the crowded women's locker room of Battelle Hall. The quiet, lanky 29-year-old put on her makeup, fixed her hair and took a few deep breaths. Her short black skirt and red-and-gold top went on quickly. Black-and-red striped knee socks and a pair of bruises on each leg finished the look.

She was about to celebrate Mother's Day by roller skating in circles and trying to knock the hell out of other young women.

The Battelle Hall floor was a blurry rainbow of tattoos, bandanas and long, flowing hair of every color as Spears and the rest of the Ohio Roller Girls skated and snarled in their short skirts, throwing elbows and otherwise roughing each other up during something they called the Mother's Day Massacre.

At the end of the event, they went home bruised, tired, unpaid and generally happy.

Roller derby is just one sport attracting a small underground of Columbus women who sometimes surprise even themselves with their willingness to mix it up in organized, full-contact aggression.

They're choosing football and boxing over yoga and spinning classes.

You might expect them to be grownup tomboys, and some are. But many acknowledge—and even revel in—the fact that they're carrying around an odd assortment of identities.

"For there to be a contact sport on skates is the perfect blend," said Spears, a web designer by day and a skater with the alias Alii Catraz by night.

"And my girlie side appreciates the cute outfits."



Continued on page 3

From page 1

'I guess we are role models'

Like the Roller Girls, the Columbus Comets—an equal-opportunity employer as long as you're carrying two X chromosomes—like to knock people on their tushes and aren't afraid to break a nail.

And there's even some wiggle room on the nail thing. Some of the Comets' football players wear gloves with their shoulder pads and helmets, less to improve their grips than to keep their nails from chipping—or becoming lethal weapons.

"This is just like NFL football," said Shirley Miller, co-owner of the franchise. "The only difference is we play with smaller balls."

The National Women's Football Association is no powder-puff league. These ladies growl, spit and hurl insults across the line of scrimmage.

By and large, the NFL's rules apply. That means, for instance, that you're welcome to let hair flow from beneath your helmet, but at that point it becomes part of the uniform and can legally be grabbed.

Leyla Yurchick, a Comets linebacker, has been playing professional football for three years. Her long red fingernails, even longer blond hair and carefully applied makeup would make a stunning impression on any man at happy hour. But she really turns heads on the 5-yard line when it's fourth and goal.

The statuesque beauty said she always wanted to play football in high school but it wasn't an option for girls. She settled for cheerleading instead.

Even now, when she's stuffing a run at the line of scrimmage, Yurchick is in touch with her inner cheerleader.

"I've been harassed by the other girls because of my appearance," she said. "My nickname is Lipstick. But this is my escape from having to be a girl. I can get down in the mud and tackle."

And she loves shocking fans, particularly the new ones, with the contradictions.

"People think they're going to see something frou-frou," Yurchick said. "People are looking for a stereotype."

Melvin Hopkins, who coaches the Comets' defensive backs, said the biggest challenge for women is their lack of familiarity with the rules and strategy. While boys grew up actually playing the game, girls were watching from the stands or, in Yurchick's case, the top of a human pyramid.

But when it comes to aggression and athleticism, Hopkins said he doesn't see any difference.

"There's a beast that comes out when they get on the field," he said. It's a phenomenon fans at the Comets' home games at Dublin Coffman High School notice, too.

"You get groupies—a lot of high school guys," Hopkins said. "Guys love to see girls playing sports."

"Some guys find themselves in awe. Some guys weren't tough enough to play football themselves, and these women are. It's admiration."

Hopkins has watched the women take hits on the field, and he's seen some tears—but no more, he insisted, than he's seen from men during his coaching career.

"You wouldn't have tears if you didn't have desire."

Amy Spears hates the gym, so she was looking for a different way to keep her New Year's resolution to get in shape when a friend gave her a Roller Girls flier.

"A lot of my friends thought I was too girlie to do it," she said. And for nine months, they were right. It took Spears that long to summon the nerve to subject herself to a practice.

Kristen Thompson, another Ohio Roller Girls skater, said the initial reticence is common. Part of the appeal of the sport, in fact, is how nasty the hits and spills can look.



"The thought of getting hit is 10 times scarier than when it happens," said Thompson, who skates as Mia Slamm. "There's people on my team that have never played contact sports. Newbies worry about getting hit for the first time. It is aggressive, but that's fun."

Sexed-up, in-your-face roller derby is such a contrast to Spears's usual corporate persona that she was hesitant to tell anyone about it. In fact, she still has a few co-workers she hasn't told.

"I questioned whether I should say anything at work," she said. "I only told my boss because I didn't want him to see the bruises and start asking questions."

She hates violent video games and has no inclination toward other sports, or even camping. She tried a co-ed hockey league once but promptly quit because the guys on the team would yell when plays weren't perfectly executed.

But roller derby feels different to her.

"Ohio Rollers Girls don't get paid to play," Spears said before Sunday's bout. "The women do it for the love of the sport and the sisterhood."

Barbara Jean Thompson, who fought as Da Bronx Bomber in tough-woman competitions, coaches several young girls as the city's first and only African-American female boxing coach.

Barbara Thompson said the first time she hit another woman in a bout and saw blood, she literally stepped back. But after hitting and being hit enough times, her emotions morphed from shock to awe.

"I love the physical contact," she said as four young girls in red jerseys and matching red boxing gloves sparred behind her. "When I was growing up, for girls, it was: Don't fight. Don't get dirty. Be c good. Sit down," she said. "Now it's a § whole different world. It's: Get up and o participate."

Dianne Butler, a 12-year-old student of Thompson's, participated in the youth boxing competition at the Ohio State Fair last year.

Pulling her second-place medal out of her gym bag, Dianne smiled and said she was tougher than most people at her school, especially the boys.

"Boys always challenge me in boxing," she said. "But I only fight if I have to."

Dianne said boxing gives her self-control and keeps her off the streets.

"I got hit in the nose once and started crying and quit," she said. "But I came back because I know I can be tougher."

Shaking off the shackles of traditional femininity appeals to these athletes, but they aren't completely de-feminizing themselves. For the Comets, covered in standard-issue football uniforms, that might mean only protecting their nails under receivers' gloves. For the Roller

Girls, there's less subtlety; their skimpy uniforms are designed to remind the fans these aren't guys.

Some of those fans are girls. Little boys have long idolized male jocks capable of delivering bone-crushing hits, but for female athletes, seeing admiration in little girls' eyes is a welcome novelty.

Kristen Thompson said she has met young girls who have come up with their own derby names. It's not uncommon for Comets to be asked to autograph programs.

"I guess we are role models," Thompson said. "We don't just want to make cookies."

"Not that there's anything wrong with that I make cookies."

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