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"there's So Many Fabulous Butts In Derby": The Skating Body In Women's Flat Track Roller Derby

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**”THERE’S SO MANY FABULOUS BUTTS IN DERBY”: THE SKATING BODY IN
WOMEN’S FLAT TRACK ROLLER DERBY**

by

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THESIS

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of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

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Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to every skater who gears up and puts their body on the jammer line, every ref and official who tries to make the game safe and fair without catching a break, the coaches and managers who keep us calm yet motivate us to skate our guts out, the countless others who spend hours promoting, producing, and supporting our baby, the derby widows and widowers who love us even when we cheat on them with derby, the little girls and boys whose eyes light up when they ask for our autographs and photos, the women internationally who are moved enough to create leagues back home, and the fans who believe enough to help keep our sport alive.

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My deepest thanks go out to my advisor and thesis committee members who believed in me and my work and were willing to explore my extracurricular world with me with an academic lens: Heather Dillaway, David Fassenfest, and Heidi Gottfried. Thank you for having faith in me and for always encouraging me to take that next step further, to go beyond my sociological bubble, and reminding this micro-level scholar to always relate what I see in social interaction back to the macro-level. The road to the final product was, more often than not, difficult and stressful—thank you for seeing me through it all. I could not have done it without all of your support and guidance. (A special thanks to David for coming to watch one of my home team bouts—maybe now after having experienced derby on the ground floor, what I’ve been writing about makes more sense.)

I would also like to sincerely thank the skaters who participated in my project. Thank you for being willing to share your stories and insights with a young quiet rookie still learning the ropes of derby and academia. A special thanks to those veterans from across the league who have nurtured me, given me advice (both derby and non-derby related), challenged me, made me laugh, inspired me, and believed in me even while I fought to believe in myself. I only hope that my work can do justice to your words and experiences.

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CHAPTER 1: (RE)GAINING MY SKATING LEGS: INTRODUCTION

January 2011. My brother Andrew and I sit in mid-level bowl seats at a sporting arena way past its prime. Our section is packed with twenty-somethings with beers in hand, but children and older people alike are sprinkled around the arena. Below us, women on quad skates speed around a makeshift track marked by colorful tape on the cement floor, trying to knock the living daylight out of each other. The most hardcore fans sit at trackside. One team wears purple jerseys and black-and-white checkered bottoms to match their auto racing theme. The second team wears black T-shirts with a flame logo, the bottoms ranging from simple black skirts to explosive tiger-striped leggings, for a devilish theme. Fishnets and tattoos are plentiful.

Two rapid whistle blasts¹ sound and two starred-helmet skaters, the jammers, race like lightning to reach the pack of eight skaters before them. Before I realize what happened, the purple jammer breaks out and she is announced lead jammer as the crowd cheers. My eyes follow her as she glides around the turns. She's built similarly to me: petite in stature yet muscular, except I don't wear fishnets. Meanwhile, the other jammer struggles to escape from behind a wall of her opponents.

This is women's flat track roller derby.

"It's not as bad as I thought it would be. I thought there'd be more hard hits like in Whip It," Andrew says. The film has been out for almost two years, but all I know about it is that Ellen Page plays yet another misunderstood indie-rock teenager—and that it's about roller derby.

"That's Hollywood for you. Always screwing with reality somehow," I reply, not taking my eyes off the track. The lead jammer's just made another pass through the pack, having lapped

¹ Even within the timeframe of this thesis alone, derby rules have changed, demonstrating the constant evolution and flux of the sport. Jams now begin with a single whistle instead of a double whistle (the first for the pack, the second for the jammers).

the other stymied jammer. The crowd roars. Straining to hear the announcers, they say what just happened is called a grand slam. Never have I paid so much attention to a sports event in my entire life.

Word of mouth brought me here. A college activist acquaintance of mine had joined a growing league near her hometown, continually writing Facebook updates about the awesomeness that is derby. I knew it involved roller skating—something I hadn't done since eleventh grade yet was starting to miss in my desire to stay active. And the time I devoted to gaming could surely be spent on a more productive activity. Randomly browsing Ticketmaster, I found out that (a) there was a derby league less than twenty minutes from my house, and (b) they were playing soon.

The purple jammer repeatedly taps her hips. Four whistle blasts end the jam. Checking the projected scoreboard, five points have been added to the already wide gap between the two teams. The skaters exit the track while a new group replaces them, waiting for the next jam to begin.

I can do this. My God, I need to do this.

* * * * *

The feminine norm of bodily restraint conflicts with the nature of sport, rendering women athletes contradictions by definition. Sport requires free movement of the body and heavy physicality in order to secure the most benefits and success. Contact sport, an arena that tends to be men-dominated, encourages using the body in aggressive, strong, and violent ways. These expectations stand in direct contrast to expectations of feminine embodiment, or the ways in which society and culture constructs and influences how feminine (ultimately linked with women within a sex-gender binary) bodies should be presented and used in accordance with the

appropriate gender norms. For example, women are pressured to take up as little space as possible, restrict their movements, present themselves as youthful and able-bodied, and discipline their bodies through constant self-surveillance (Bartky 2010). At the same time as they are expected to fulfill the masculine-coded necessities of sport, women athletes are also expected to maintain femininity in order to avoid being called “mannish” or “lesbian.” They must therefore perform a careful dance between the boundaries of being too masculine or too feminine in order to be taken seriously (Krane 2001). To do this, many perform the female “apologetic” (Rohrbaugh, quoted in Messner 1988), emphasizing their femininity in order to apologize for using their bodies in a masculine-coded fashion.

Research on women in sport often focuses on the gendered embodiment of women in sports such as rugby (Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009), hockey (Theberge 1997, 2003), and boxing (Halbert 1997; Mennesson 2000; Lafferty and McKay 2004). While generally viewing sport as providing a sense of personal empowerment and agency, these athletes often try to reconcile clashing tensions between what is proscribed for their bodies as women and as athletes. For example, in George’s (2005) work on collegiate soccer players, participants attempted to reconcile “performance bodies,” muscular legs built with weight training, with “appearance bodies,” trying to retain what they saw as an attractive (feminine, less muscular) body. On the other hand, Chase’s (2006) study of rugby players demonstrated a more positive outlook on their bodies: as acceptable and useful regardless of size. However, these alternative constructions did not occur beyond the practice space, limiting the encouragement of physicality and self-acceptance of their bodies to the rugby pitch. While private women-only or women-controlled spaces offer opportunities to construct autonomous, self-empowering images (Green 1998), these images often do not translate fully outside to surrounding public contexts when spectators are

introduced, where belittlement, sexualization, and trivialization of women's bodies continues to be the norm. Work on women's bodies suggest that within these women-dominated spaces and the larger social context, women athletes both resist or reject and challenge these ideologies of feminine embodiment, as well as accommodate or perpetuate them (Weitz 2001).

With the exception of Lenskyj's (1994) study on lesbian softball leagues, much research on gender and body negotiation in women's sport examines men-dominated or centered sports, typically designed with men's bodies as the default. One of the few contact sports created specifically with women in mind is women's flat track roller derby, which is considered the most violent contact sport played predominantly by women. Though roller derby was originally co-ed and played on a banked track, flat track roller derby emerged in 2001 specifically as an all-women's sport. Derby leagues are skater-owned and operated local businesses that produce games, or bouts, within their communities as well as at the national level. Emphasizing values such as community, cooperation, and diversity (Storms 2008), derby is often classified as a niche, grassroots sport. Nevertheless, it is a growing alternative space for women-controlled sport within the greater men-dominated institution.

The little research on derby gives limited attention to the derby body. Existing studies have typically focused on constructing or negotiating alternate femininities, with occasional comments about the body (Finley 2010; Carlson 2010; Peluso 2011). Several themes are recurrent in this literature: 1) derby bodies are widely diverse, 2) they are defined by skaters in terms of usage more so than appearance, 3) both injuries and body decoration are normalized, and 4) derby is a safe space in sport for marginalized and transgressive bodies (Peluso 2011). However, is the relationship between skaters and their bodies that simple? Is derby truly a safe space for *all* types of bodies at all times? Do tensions amongst bodies as experienced by athletes

in rugby, hockey, and other contact sports exist in derby? Past research suggests that alternative constructions and critique of gender within derby does not address broader issues of inequality (Carlson 2010)—are alternate constructions of sporting bodies also lost in the transition? With these questions unanswered, the derby body deserves to be explored as a separate topic in order to provide a more complex picture of the sport. Thus, my analysis contributes to the literature by complicating the initial findings on derby bodies, exploring the more nuanced tensions buried beneath the surface of the unwritten derby philosophy of diverse body acceptance. Because the previous literature focuses heavily on gender, for the purposes of this thesis, I have focused on an analysis of bodies with less attention given to gender in its own right. To be clear, I acknowledge that bodies are socially constructed as gendered, but the lines between what is being resisted or accommodated as a gender norm, a body norm, or even a derby norm often intersect or are blurred.

The purpose of this study is to examine how derby skaters make sense of their bodies and experiences in relation to the sport. I pose the following questions: How do skaters define the derby body? In what ways do skaters resist and/or accommodate conventional bodily norms and those within derby? I draw from literature on women and sport, gender and resistance (Hollander 2002; Weitz 2001) and embodiment (Bartky 2010) to guide me in this analysis. I argue that women's roller derby is a space in which skaters simultaneously resist and accommodate the cultural norms for women's bodies while also juggling ideals and realities of the sport with regards to the skating body. I use a qualitative, ethnographic approach to gain a rich understanding of derby girls' experiences and the meanings by which they define their lives and bodies, relying on participant observation, in-depth interviews, and autoethnography in the form of vignettes from my personal experience as a skater.

CHAPTER 2: LEARNING THE RULES: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gendered Sporting Body²

Over the past decade, interest in philosophical and sociological analysis of the body has grown, especially among feminist and sport scholars (Chase 2006, 2008; Bartky 2010; Hartley 2010). The work of Michel Foucault often serves as a theoretical starting place, particularly his discussion of disciplinary practices in the creation of docile bodies: “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, quoted in Chase 2006:233). The ultimate success of imposing discipline on the body depends upon self-regulation without external force (Hartley 2010). When individuals learn to regulate their own bodies in accordance with norms, then the imposed power becomes invisible.

These rules can apply to the construction of gendered, sporting bodies. The currently favored construction of femininity requires that women take up as little space as possible (Bartky 2010). Generally, women restrict themselves more than men in their movement and spatiality, walking with smaller strides, moving out of the way, or avoiding certain areas out of fear for safety. The “tyranny of slenderness,” as Bartky calls the ubiquitous pressure for women to be thin, holds that women should keep their bodies small, citing diet and exercise as modes of bodily discipline. Not only should women’s bodies be small, but they should also be made youthful and erotic (yet modest) through beauty regimens. These disciplinary actions assume the female body lacks something, but it is impossible to create the perfect body. Although no one physically forces women to conform to beauty ideals, therein lies the problem: the pressure is “everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular”

² Although I review literature specifically pertaining to gender, I present findings that focus primarily on bodies more broadly, not necessarily only about gender. However, I find it necessary to briefly cover this gender literature (especially with how it relates to women athlete’s bodies) before moving onto my discussion of derby bodies.

(Bartky 2010:88). Without an easily identifiable source, femininity can be construed as inherent, natural, or voluntary. Even more problematic is that virtually every woman is held to the same standard, with failure resulting in “the refusal of male patronage”—severe stigmatization and sanction.

Sport can be interpreted as a disciplinary mechanism by which bodies can be properly disciplined and reshaped to fit a “proper” sporting body. Intense physical training, practice, competition, and fitness testing “contribute to the construction of athletic and docile bodies,” especially at elite levels of competition (Chase 2008:134). Athletes monitor their bodies in terms of caloric and nutrition intake, work-out schedules, and weighing. Using Chase’s work on Clydesdale runners as a specific example, she posits that the running body may be seen as a “site of control where dominant notions of what a runner looks like and what constitutes acceptable running bodies are reinforced” as well as a site of resistance (Chase 2008:134). Those who are considered unacceptable, such as Clydesdale runners and other corpulent bodies, perceive disgust and a lack of resources, getting the message that their bodies are aberrant. However, communities surrounding these athletes offer social support and serve as a resistive niche to normative standards for runners. Similarly, an analysis of professional golfers John Daly and Laura Davies illustrates athletic and corpulent bodies that refuse to retreat to the margins (Jamieson, Stringer, and Andrews 2008). These deviant bodies force the question: can one be fat *and* athletically elite? Their presence disrupts the notion of a normative sporting body, but possible bodily critique is limited as many corpulent athletes still try to attain it. This limitation has led some scholars to question sport’s emancipatory potential: “will the tyranny of the body built for sports be any less punishing—or any healthier—than the tyranny of the body built for fashion?” (Brubach, quoted in Schultz 2004:197).

Women/Athletes: A Contradiction?

For women athletes, having a “normal” sporting body is central, as the acceptance of their bodies in sport is questioned. Women athletes and their bodies are considered “contested ideological terrain” (Messner 1988, p. 198), their very existence a paradox (Krane et al. 2004). Socially constructed conventional norms associated with “woman” stand in opposition to those associated with “athlete.” Traditionally, the (white, heterosexual, middle-class) feminine ideal rewards passivity, weakness, helplessness, and dependency, always defined in relation to what the (white, heterosexual, middle-class) masculine ideal is *not*. Boys and men are socialized to value traits rewarded through hegemonic masculinity, “the currently most honored way of being a man” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 832), such as physicality, aggression, strength, and dominance. Girls and women are socialized toward behaviors that involve cooperation, passivity, and a low risk of danger (Schell and Rodriguez 2000). Contact sport is symbolic proof of male superiority because the use of force and tolerance of risk, pain, and injury are celebrated as masculine behaviors (Young and White 1995). Thus, sport is coded as masculine, leading to the traditional discouragement of women from participation. Potential damage to reproductive capabilities and men’s “natural” superior strength have traditionally been used as rationales to keep women from sports or physical activity (Dowling 2000).

The entry of women and girls into sport can be interpreted as a threat to hegemonic masculinity. While women have historically always played sports, an influx of women athletes occurred after the passage of Title IX in 1972 (Dowling 2000; Messner 2002). The legislation outlaws sex discrimination in educational institutions that receive federal funding, most visibly affecting school athletic programs. Numerous women have personally benefited from playing sports, experiencing greater self-esteem, body satisfaction, physical and mental strength, social

support, and confidence (Blinde, Taub, and Han 1994; Russell 2004). Other benefits include education through scholarships, fame, and money in the professional ranks (Roth and Basow 2004).

Receiving said benefits, however, comes at a hefty price. While liberating, sport also constrains women. They must walk a fine line between presenting themselves as too feminine, risking not being taken seriously as an athlete, or too masculine, risking doubts about their femininity and sexuality (Krane 2001). In order to prove their femininity (and by extension, heterosexuality), women athletes will often engage in the “female apologetic,” where they “apologize” for their bodily transgressions by emphasizing femininity either inside or outside of the sporting space, typically by wearing curve-accentuating feminine apparel, donning make-up and hair styles, and limiting muscular development.

Because muscles and physical strength are often equated with masculinity, women athletes find themselves negotiating a difficult tension. Competing, contradictory discourses state that women cannot or should not acquire muscle mass, yet they still do. A certain level of muscularity has become part of beauty standards—now women must be thin *and* fit. Yet this has its limits, as women are often afraid of getting “too big” or “getting huge,” often viewing muscle mass as unattractive and unfeminine, even within sports such as soccer that require greater muscularity for success (George 2005). Thus, it is common for women to structure their training so that they hold back in gaining body size while still acquiring some muscular strength (Dworkin 2010). This gender paradox is most visible within the realm of female bodybuilding (St. Martin and Gavey 1996; Shea 2001; Boyle 2005; McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009). By definition, bodybuilding requires building substantial muscle mass, but when bodybuilders “go too far,” their hyper-muscular bodies are considered “freaky,” “gross,” and too masculine. To be

most successful, women bodybuilders are expected to perform femininity (looking like a typical woman) *and* masculinity (muscular and strong) at the same time. Because few women have enough power and status to outright ignore beauty prescriptions, navigating these tensions is an everyday battle. To fully develop physical power may make a woman less attractive to men, losing under a patriarchal system.

The association with sex appeal can easily overshadow accomplishment and hard work. Both mainstream and sports media contribute to the sexualization of elite women athletes by framing them as objects of heterosexual desire, underplaying the very accomplishments that make them famous (Messner 2002; Schultz 2004). As an oft cited example, Brandi Chastain, one of the athletes of the 1999 Women’s World Cup U.S. soccer team, became more famous for her “sports bra” moment than her work in winning the World Cup. Most often, women’s sports are ignored, trivialized, or sexualized, thus neutralizing any possible threat that women athletes bring to the normative order.

(Gendered) Resistance through Sport?

In Weitz’s (2001:669) work on women’s hair, she argues that women are neither docile bodies nor free agents; they combine “accommodation and resistance as they actively grapple with cultural expectations and social structures.” Weitz (2001:670) defines resistance as “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by *challenging the ideologies that support that subordination.*” She defines accommodation as “actions that accept subordination, by either adopting or simply not challenging the ideologies that support subordination.” Rather than polar opposites, these concepts coexist so that any action has elements of both. Due to their intertwined natures, any power gained is likely to be fleeting, limited, and bittersweet. However, resistance becomes easier when socially supported by others, if an alternate ideology exists, and

if individuals have power and status unrelated to the norms being resisted. Khan (2009) especially highlights this last point in her autoethnography on urban skating: playing organized sports requires a certain amount of cultural capital, such as the time, resources, access, the ability to fit in socially, and often the acceptance of a winning-at-all-costs philosophy. Even if playing sports is resistance, this resistance is limited to who have access to sports. Furthermore, using strategies that rely on physical appearance further equates women's identities with their bodies: "using the body as a political tool continues to place women's bodies at the center of women's identities" (Weitz 2001:680).

Women's participation in contact sports, often viewed as the last masculine holdout of sport, poses a special threat. Boxing (Halbert 1997; Mennesson 2000; Lafferty and McKay 2004), hockey (Theberge 1997, 2003), and rugby (George 2005; Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009) have been studied extensively as sites of gender and body negotiation. In contrast to the use of apologetic behavior, Chase's (2006) work and Russell's (2004) on rugby suggest that as a result of playing the sport, ruggers began to view their bodies as acceptable at any size and were valued as strong, powerful athletes. Ruggers actively tried to *gain* weight or be bigger and did not attempt to conceal their strength, thus rejecting the slender body ideal. The rugby space allowed athletes to recast their bodies as powerful weapons and boost their confidence. These findings parallel studies of women's leisure as sites of empowerment and resistance (Green 1998) and women's self-defense courses (de Welde 2003). Within women-only contexts, opportunities arise for resistance to normative roles and images, personal power, self-determination, and alternate identities that can challenge socially accepted behavior and provide "a crucial forum for self-empowerment and autonomy" (Green 1998:177).

Despite the influx of women into sport, challenges to gender inequality have been

limited. While women gain strength and new appreciation for their bodies within the sporting space, this does not typically lead to change of the greater social norms outside of it (Foley 1990). This leads to a differentiation of embodiment within private space, whether it be the pitch or a self-defense class, versus public space where expectations of normative gendered embodiment are strongly entrenched. Even when alternative narratives of bodies are constructed in the private sporting space, remnants of normative gender and body ideals remain, further constraining or complicating what is acceptable. Furthermore, some feminist scholars argue that the normalization of injury and aggression in women's contact sport suggests an incorporation of the dominant model of men's sport, reproducing instead of resisting the masculine sport model (Young and White 1995; Theberge 1997; Lafferty and McKay 2004).

In sum, women athletes face tremendous pressure to negotiate conventional feminine standards with athleticism, confronting the notion that their bodies are unsuitable for sport. They experience these tensions and contradictions both inside and outside of their private sporting spaces. While these contradictions open small pockets of resistance, they have not yet translated to the greater social structure. Much research on gender and body negotiation in women's sport is written about sports that are men-dominated or centered, with the exception of Lenskyj's (1994) study on lesbian softball leagues. One of the few contact sports created specifically with women in mind is women's flat track roller derby.

"Roller Derby Saved My Soul"³: Women's Flat Track Roller Derby

Women's flat track roller derby is a revival of the original co-ed banked track roller derby that began during the Great Depression, commonly referred to as "old school derby."⁴ The

³ Song by Uncle Leon and the Alibis, recorded 2006.

⁴ Ironically, old school derby allowed women and men to be on a level playing field for the first time in an era when women in sport was more questionable (Mabe 2007). However, it was a trade-off: Leo Seltzer, a promoter known as

modern version was rebooted in 2001 in Austin, Texas as an amateur sport that borrows values from punk rock and third wave feminism, such as individualism, a do-it-yourself ethic, cooperation, community, and celebration of diversity (Storms 2008). Unlike its choreographed and staged past, the modern version is authentic and skaters do not receive financial compensation for participation. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) serves as the sport's international governing body with over 250 leagues recognized by the organization (WFTDA, "Member Leagues").⁵ While men can and do serve as support staff, officials, and other volunteers, the governing philosophy of WFTDA leagues is "by the skaters, for the skaters.' Women skaters are primary owners, managers, and operators of each member league and of the association" (WFTDA, "Mission Statement").

Flat track roller derby is played on quad-wheel skates on a flat surface, the track boundaries created usually by tape or rope. Games of derby are called bouts. Two 30-minute periods are divided into jams, races between two teams to score points. A maximum of five skaters from each team play in a jam. For each team, one skater plays as the jammer, who scores points for her team. Blockers help their team's jammer get through the pack of skaters while stopping the other team's jammer by impeding her or knocking her out of bounds. The pivot is a specialized blocker who typically serves the last line of defense and can become a jammer in special circumstances. In each jam, the first jammer to get through the pack legally earns the status of lead jammer, which gives her the strategic advantage of ending the jam at her discretion. After the initial pass, jammers earn a point for every opponent blocker legally passed.

the creator of roller derby, used the inclusion of women as a selling point (Messner 1988). Women are widely considered the main reason for the sport's success, both historically and in modern times.

⁵ Examples of other roller derby governing bodies include USARS (USA Roller Sports) Roller Derby Committee, WORD (World Organization of Roller Derby) for banked track leagues, OSDA (Old School Derby Association), MRDA (Men's Roller Derby Association), and JRDA (Junior Roller Derby Association). Each group has their own rule set, although those of WORD and MRDA are heavily influenced by WFTDA rules.

Players who commit fouls, such as illegally blocking or skating out of bounds, are given penalty time.

Due to the sport's youth, there are few published studies of derby, most of which analyze the construction and performance of gender within the sport (Cohen 2008; Storms 2008; Finley 2010; Carlson 2010; Peluso 2010, 2011). Finley's (2010) ethnography examined mechanisms of gender maneuvering in the sport, describing derby as a space in which conventional gender norms are simultaneously mocked and reproduced. To this end, skaters often juxtapose markers of hegemonic masculinity (physical strength, risk of danger, and aggression) with those of exaggerated femininity (pink bows, mini-skirts, and fishnets). Skaters also alternate between gender performances throughout the course of a single bout: performing the encouraged bad girl or "pariah femininity" when posing for fan photos, the "tough athlete" while skating, and the "feminine supporter" by promoting other skaters and their league. Similarly, Carlson's (2010) work focuses on the female "signifiant", exploring how skaters negotiate the requirements of emphasized femininity within derby. She found that derby is rife with contradiction and tension: while attempting to create a safe, women-dominated space based on a philosophy of community, practices such as policing conventional femininity, disparaging shows of emotion, and emphasizing aggression uphold the masculine sport model. Carlson also notes that a focus on athleticism counters the sport's grassroots, do-it-yourself origin, suggesting "limits to derby's potential critique of athleticism" (2010:437). Regardless, similarly to the skater girls in Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly's (2004) study of skateboarders, skaters in derby feel enabled and encouraged to challenge conventional femininity through this act of "embodied resistance" (Peluso 2011).

Within this work, some attention is given to the derby body. It is already documented that

bodies in derby represent all shapes and sizes and are defined more by their uses, albeit with some residual attention to appearance (Carlson 2010; Peluso 2011). Carlson dedicates a section of her work to bottoms and how skater discourse transforms them from “trouble zones” to weapons on the track. Injuries are often considered badges of honor, a testament to a skater’s toughness, hard work, and skill. Women with larger builds are often admired for their ability to deliver and absorb powerful blocks. While it is tempting to funnel new players into certain positions based on body size, skaters are wary of reifying this divide between body types (Peluso 2010). Many skaters with various body decorations (tattoos, piercings, etc.) feel a sense of belonging among like-minded others. Overall, Peluso (2011) argues that derby creates a safe space in sport for marginalized and transgressive bodies.

The findings from Carlson and Peluso build a foundation for further examination of the derby body. While an excellent start, Carlson’s and Peluso’s findings are set within the context of a more general theme of negotiating femininity, limiting their findings to generalizations that may not demonstrate the more complex realities of derby bodies. Existing findings are also merely stated as fact without exploring further possibilities for tension and contradiction. For example, Carlson suggests that skaters of all body types donning sexy punkish uniforms reflects an embrace of bodies: “While there is an unspoken feminine-punk dress code to which virtually all skaters conform, *all* skaters—not just those with skinny bodies that fit the mold of mainstream femininity—appear comfortable in exhibiting their bodies” (2010:434). Also, Peluso (2011) states that all body types and ages are accepted without ridicule; no one was pressured to lose weight in order to play. What is missing from the literature is a more focused analysis on derby bodies that explores these tensions that are present within skaters’ relationships with their bodies and the relationship between bodily norms inside and outside of the derby space, and the

comparison of different body types within the derby space. Do tensions exist among derby bodies similarly to those experienced by bodies in rugby, hockey, and other contact sports exist in derby?

What is known so far is that women's sports can hold potential for resistance and accommodation of bodily and gender norms simultaneously. Women athletes' experiences are riddled with negotiating tensions and contradictions within and outside of their sport. My analysis adds to the various literatures on derby, women and sport, and gendered bodies by exploring the tensions between resistance and accommodation of bodily norms in derby and in the outside culture, as well as between the ideologies and realities of embodiment within the sport. Beyond previous derby literature, this work adds to the overall women in sport literature in several ways. It explores an anomaly within the sports world: a women-dominated contact sport slowly gaining mainstream attention. Experiences of an age group beyond the typical college-age sample are explored. A specific, complex focus on bodies in relation to group norms and larger social norms also adds to the literature on women's bodies beyond a simple analysis of gender performance and construction, topics that have been heavily covered in sports literature. As a final note, this work also adds to the gendered bodies and resistance literature by investigating another women's space of leisure that may be considered a pocket of bodily empowerment and resistance.

CHAPTER 3: LACING UP MY SKATES: METHODS

The current study is part of a larger work on gender resistance in women's roller derby. It focuses on one central theme I found during my analysis, the construction of the derby body. This work is considered a feminist ethnography (Buch and Staller 2007) and uses data collected from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and autoethnography over the course of ten months, including the league's 2011-2012 home season (December to June) and the overlapping 2012 travel team season (February to September).

The league under study was chosen for several reasons beyond convenience of location. The city in which the league is based is a highly diverse and heavily-populated metropolitan area. The league is the oldest and largest operating league in the state; partly because of its lengthy existence, it is highly organized and stable in ownership and operation, with over 100 skaters, staff, and volunteers. It is also a long-standing member league of WFTDA that consistently ranks among the top leagues in its geographical region.

* * * * *

A Saturday in June 2011, shortly after the league's championship bout. It's Day 1 of the league's weekend seminar on what you need to do to become a member of the league, aptly titled "Derby U." After navigating throughout the underbelly of the giant arena, I walk onto the concrete floor, gazing at the stadium seating that encircles the space. Derby girls before me had treaded here. I was on the same floor as the women I had been watching since January. We would be skating on the same neon-taped track. It's an amazing derby nerd moment.

I sign my life away in a waiver that Daisy gives each of us while sitting with her broken ankle propped on a chair. How fitting. I see a large grouping of other women, noting the direct contrast in their attire from the veterans. The noobs [new recruits] are wearing tights, fishnets,

shorts, leggings, colorful knee socks—your basic stereotypical derby girl. Like they'd dressed up for this. Meanwhile, the vets wear regular plain workout clothes, maybe derby shirts with their names on them. It reminds me of what Donnelly and Young (1988) said about the show of naïveté among new members of a group. Those mountain climbers piling on all of the gear in order to try and fit in—"look at me, I'm a climber!"—when the veterans knew they didn't even use half of it in reality. Ironically, trying to fit in makes them fit in even less.

We are soon introduced to the skaters who will be training us for the next two days. They look so different without their gear—hardly recognizable as women who don't want to hip check you into a wall. Claire, the head honcho, wears a whistle and a stopwatch around her neck, items she will "use to torture us with" later. The first words out of her mouth to us: "I'm Claire, and I'm going to be an asshole for the rest of the day."

I smirk. At least she told us up front.

* * * * *

This project and my identity as a skater were born simultaneously. As I prepared to try out for the league in my home city, I decided to capitalize on the opportunity I had to study derby as a brand new recruit, making this "opportunistic research" (Riemer 1977). I felt that in order to best understand derby, particularly the bodily changes and sacrifices, I must play derby (or get as close as possible had I not made the cut). I tried out for the league in the summer of 2011, participated in a twelve week training program or "boot camp" to learn derby skills and rules, passed a final skills test, and then was drafted to one of the league's home teams as a rookie. Similarly to Carlson (2010), I did not involve myself in league politics but kept my distance. Though I belonged to a committee within the league, I did not hold a leadership position and stayed out of larger discussions on the league online forum due to my inexperience, shyness, and

desire to merely observe. In winter 2012, I became a member of the A travel team, which plays sanctioned bouts at the national level. From a research and personal view, becoming a travel team skater allowed me to gain a new and different perspective of derby than I would have had I only skated for a home team. I was able to travel around the country to play on a national level—to experience new places, new people, and new derby.

Upon obtaining human subjects review approval in early 2012, I began recruitment for interviews by posting a notice onto the league forum. Every other month, I would repost my ad as a reminder. However, this initial method of recruitment may have limited the sample of potential participants if they did not frequently check the forum. Because most of the skaters I interviewed were juggling their own work, home, and derby lives, I almost always had to reschedule an interview at least once and sometimes had to stop and restart the interview at a later time. I found that scheduling interviews before and after practices was the best mode of action, given the wide geographic spread of the skaters' homes. There was only one skater who contacted me but was then unresponsive to attempts to schedule. I suspect this occurred because of this skater's work schedule, family commitment, location, and inconsistent availability for league practices. I interviewed 13 skaters from the league for this project between March and August 2012. Interviews were audio-taped and ranged from 1 hour to 3 hours in length, most of which took place at restaurants located near practice spaces. Other places included the actual practice space, skaters' homes, parks, or restaurants closer to my home if convenient for the skater. Most skaters interviewed were single or in serious relationships and had no children, but they represented a range of occupations (e.g. law, health care, academia, caregiving, administration, service, applied or performing arts). A table of skater profiles is included (see Table 1). All participants, other league members, and identifying locations were given

pseudonyms. Although derby names are pseudonyms to non-derby folk, names can be easily recognized within the sport. One only need Google a skater's derby name and her home league will likely appear in the results.

I used a semi-structured interview format with several broad topical questions with related probes for elaboration, not necessarily keeping the same order each time but following the interviewee's train of thought. Questions included their overall views of the sport, how their lives had changed because of derby, experiences with team(s) and the league, their identity as a skater, and views on gender and power within derby, followed by demographical information. In most interviews, skaters talked at length about their views of the sport, its positive benefits (especially with respect to their bodies), and derby's ideologies of empowerment, diversity, and acceptance without probe. Questions that asked about gender proved the most difficult for respondents, particularly their definitions of femininity and masculinity. I reassured them that the others I had interviewed needed extensive time to think as well. For some respondents, who had either studied gender or worked in male-dominated fields, talking about gender in derby came easier to them. These questions also proved the most troublesome for me to probe further, especially if respondents were more reticent, and thus took the least amount of time to complete compared to the other sections. It was not until my last interview that I was able to conduct the entire interview without referring to the guide except as a checklist at the end.

Observation took place during the same time period. Sites of observation included the league's "home" skating rink for practice sessions, the league's bout venue, promotional events for the league in the surrounding metro area, and team or league-based social gatherings. I was able to write about my own experiences as they occurred rather than relying on retrospection, but due to my involvement as a complete participant (Thomson 1977), I waited

until returning home from the field to type up my observations and personal reflections. At any derby-related event, because of my membership skating duties preceded sociologist duties. I could not stop in the middle of practice or working at a bout to jot notes in a private area.

Coding was done alongside transcription and writing field notes. I used both open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) to mark recurring themes in each sets of data, whether or not they were immediately relevant to my research questions. As I continued to read and reread my data, I began to create files for the major recurring themes that would directly answer my research questions and place any relevant quotes in the respective file. Originally, my analysis centered around skaters' gendered experiences and how they resisted or accommodated gender within and outside of the sport. However, I realized that the theme of skaters' bodies emerged strongly from my data. I decided to follow this path in my analysis because of the sheer amount of data, my comfort level with writing about this topic, the need to narrow my focus, and the opportunity to add something new to the literature by emphasizing body tensions over gender negotiations. With this new plan of analysis, I further broke down my "skating body" theme file into the four categories with the most recurring data and evidence that highlighted tensions within the sport: body size, public vs. private space, athleticism, and "others" in derby.

Because of the nature of my participation, reflexivity was crucial throughout the research process. As Haenfler (2006:25) remarks on his study of straight-edge subculture, "my insider status was invaluable to my work but I had to maintain constant vigilance against potential bias." While I ventured my way through the league from fan to fresh meat to rookie to travel team skater, the ability to critically observe and acknowledge potential biases became more important. Although I love derby, I do not believe it is infallible. It is neither a social movement nor the solution to all women's problems. Even my original research question of the potential of

resistance in women's roller derby was influenced by my standpoint as a feminist sociologist (and my naive, academic feminist's dream of empowering women and girls to make the world a better place). Noting this, I have tried to match my passion for the sport with the critical analysis and rigor that is expected of my training.

As such, I recognize that my sample of participants may be biased in several ways. First, the project attracted skaters who were familiar with the trials and tribulations of writing a Master's thesis and were eager to assist. Second, some participants were skaters from my home team who wanted to help. My status as a new recruit, the social connections I made within the league, my place in academia, and my home team affiliation surely influenced who stepped up. Keeping this in mind, I tried to select a range of skaters in terms of home team affiliation, age, sexual orientation, race, and occupation that would stay true to the diversity of the sport. Unfortunately, given that the sport is played overwhelmingly by white, heterosexual, college-educated women who can afford the time and financial commitment, this was not entirely possible.

In addition to observation and in-depth interviews, I include autoethnographic vignettes. Autoethnography is defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2010, paragraph 1). This method challenges traditional modes of doing research, mainly by acknowledging and exploring subjectivity, emotions, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than trying to maintain an "objective" standpoint and hiding all traces of subjectivity. My personal data comes from journal entries and reflective notes that detail my participation and emotions from my experiences as a skater. Richardson (2000) recommends journaling as a way to practice writing

as a method of inquiry and knowing. I use a layered account which relies on vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection in order to offer multiple perspectives on the same topic (see Ronai 1996). My own experiences are placed alongside other data and are separated by asterisks.

Juggling my skater and sociologist identities became (and still is) one of the main struggles I encountered during this project. On several occasions, I would miss part or all of a practice time due to coursework. Conversely, on bout days I had to temporarily put derby ahead of coursework or try to do both simultaneously. For example, part of this thesis was written while I was out of town with my league's travel team to play in a major regional tournament. I cannot count how many times I thought that I had lost a weekend of school-based productivity to derby, or that I could not attend practice or events because I had school work to finish. Either way, I felt guilt, a sentiment that I also heard from other skaters. The struggle intensified when I joined the A travel team, which represents a higher level of commitment in terms of increased athleticism, practice time, and financial investment but with the benefits of travel and bettering my derby skills. Needless to say, in addition to qualitative research, multi-tasking was another skill I tried to improve during this project.

Table 1. Interviewed Skater Profiles

Skater	Age at time of interview	Team affiliation	Years played derby	Race
Chell	33	Home, A travel team	3	Hispanic
Daisy	28	Home team only	2	White
Frankie	32	Home team only	1	White
Joy	31	Home, A travel team	5	White
Lara	33	Home, pick-up team	6	White
Leia	27	Home, A travel team	2	White
Linka	34	Home, pick-up team	3	White
Minerva	46	Home team only	2	White
Phoebe	26	Home team only	3	White
Starfire	29	Home, A travel team	3	White
Storm	39	Home, B travel team	2	Black
Wendy	33	Home, B travel team	3	White
Zelda	36	Home, B travel team	2	White
Avg. age	32.8			
Avg. derby career (in years)	2.8			

CHAPTER 4: “THERE’S SO MANY FABULOUS BUTTS IN DERBY”: THE SKATING BODY

As a white, young, American woman, finding a space where rail-thin women do not tug at their stomachs and call themselves fat is something akin to a miracle. In my league of study, as well as the sport overall, skaters range from petite to plus-sized, barely scraping five feet to a towering six foot frame. Minerva, a 46 year old two-year veteran of the league, states, “It doesn’t matter if you’re 60 pounds or 360. So long as you can do the skills test, you’re in.” However, the reality of the skating body in derby is more complex than the preceding quote would suggest. I argue that derby is a space of both reproduction and resistance to normative body ideals for women. Furthermore, in addition to reconciling these greater norms from outside of the space, different bodily norms are created that are not mandated but nonetheless influential throughout skater discourse, sometimes at the contradiction of espoused derby philosophy. Skaters attempt to negotiate conventional *and* derby body norms, resulting in various tensions.

I present several recurring themes of the ways in which skaters talked about bodies, either in general or their own, within the space of derby. First, I discuss the tensions constructed related to body size and athleticism. I then discuss the tensions between how bodies are viewed within the skater-controlled derby space and how they are viewed in the public eye. Finally, I briefly discuss bodies that do not readily fit into women’s derby, specifically those of men and transgender skaters. Throughout each section, I use personal vignettes to highlight examples of themes, give my own perspective as a younger rookie skater, engage in reflexivity, and to link my individual-level experiences to my data and the greater literature.

“Big Bertha Bitches”: The Stereotypic Derby Girl

Derby is among the more violent contact sports played predominantly by women. Hitting

other bodies with the intent of stopping them, all done while moving on wheels, is a risky activity that thousands of women do daily. Many skaters receive surprised or shocked reactions when they reveal they play derby, particularly if they do not look the “type.” Several skaters in my sample, including myself, reported these reactions with rationales such as being “too quiet, too small” (Storm), “too skinny or I’m not aggressive enough” (Wendy), or “I don’t have tattoos and piercings...I’m quiet” (Chell). My own participation has confused outsiders because of my shy demeanor, lack of body decoration, and derby’s brute nature. During one of my first informal home team outings, the husband of one of the captains jokingly asked, “How’d you get into derby? You look...normal!” Not having tattoos or piercings is considered “normal” yet deviant because the expectation in derby is that women will have “alternative” bodies and appearances.

Storm, a 39 year old two-year veteran in my own study, elaborates on this expected look:

S: I kinda feel like if you play derby, people kinda have a certain idea in their head of what a derby girl should be, and the ideal in their head is probably a more masculine woman. ... So I think they’re surprised when they find out tiny little [skaters are] playing derby. ... So I think we kinda break social expectations, maybe, because I would say 95% of us don’t look like what people think the typical derby girl looks like.

AD: What do people think the typical derby girl looks like?

S: I think they think they’re like female linebackers on skates or something. That are like all tatted up or whatever, you know? Big bruisers. Big Bertha.

Storm suggests a number of external expectations of skater identity. First, skaters should look “masculine,” fitting better with the violent nature of the sport. Second, skaters should be large—the sport involves big hits, so larger-sized skaters are expected. Third, skaters tend to have tattoos, matching the alternative, punk-rock roots of the sport. The descriptive phrases “female linebackers on skates” and “big bruisers” combine masculinity, corpulence, and aggression into one image, creating a parallel between derby and football. Skaters who appear more feminine with a smaller body size, devoid of tattoos, do not fit into this stereotype. Possessing more feminine traits—being quiet, small, and not aggressive—lead to confusion, bearing hints of the

“female athlete” paradox: if skaters are going to play, they had better look the type (masculine) or they will be questioned. Yet Storm is quick to point out that this ideal is not the norm, pointing to the diversity of bodies in derby.

Stereotypes about derby players also loom over skaters, especially ones who do not match. These norms can seep their way into the expectations for potential derby recruits. When looking to recruit or to join a league themselves, qualities such as being “athletic, tough, like they wouldn’t take any crap,” “rough around the edges,” and knowing how to skate were part of initial impressions of derby. Linka, a 34 year old transfer skater now veteran, reflects on her thoughts when she joined her first league:

I remember going to the first derby practice thinking, “I am not a bad ass enough chick for this.” Just as far as, you know, these girls are gonna be really tough, it’s gonna be all fishnets, I’m not cool enough, I don’t have tattoos, like these girls are gonna be crazy.

Again, toughness, having tattoos, and wearing fishnets fit into the stereotype of what derby skaters should be. Linka adds coolness and craziness, hinting at the aggression required. Viewing herself as not having these qualities, Linka initially believed that she would not fit the role. Realizing the actual diversity of the sport forces redefinition of the old stereotypes, yet the illusion of what constitutes a proper derby skater is present.

Body Size: “Use What You Got” vs. “Fat Bottomed Girls”

Roller Derby was the first time ever that being referred to as a “big girl” was a compliment. As a blocker, broad shoulders and hips can be advantage, and it was pretty awesome when a tiny fellow rookie looked at me and said, “You’re a big girl. Lucky!”
–Melissa “Melicious” Joulwan (Joulwan 2007:29)

A positive element of derby frequently noted by skaters is an absence of judgmental attitude about appearance or behavior: “no one judges.” Skaters feel that there is no internal pressure to appear, act, or behave (or not to) in a certain fashion. Storm makes this point:

I think that's the great thing about derby. There's no pressure to look any way, to act any way...yeah, I haven't felt any pressure personally. But. . .my impression as a whole, there's no pressure to look a certain way or act a certain way. ... However you are, I feel like people respect it. Like if you don't have tattoos, people don't give you shit about not having tattoos. If you'd rather wear, like, spandex pants or leggings over fishnets. . .I just think people respect everybody else's choices.

As far as Storm is concerned, there is no pressure from inside the derby space to conform to a certain look or behavior, particularly with regards to the looming derby stereotypes. Women who do not fit the alternative look often promoted—wearing tattoos, fishnets, and so on—are not marginalized but instead respected for their individuality. Individual choice regarding attire and behavior (and having that choice respected) is a fundamental element within the derby space.

Skaters in my study also make it clear that a variety of body types find a home within derby spaces as well. Skaters often compare derby to other sports in which participants must conform to one body type. Typically, more feminine-coded sports are cited as encouraging thin, petite bodies. Lara, a 33 year old six-year veteran, states, “Derby’s definitely not figure skating. It’s not ice skating. It’s not anything [like] ballet where you’re looked down upon because you’re not a size 2 and you’re not 5% body fat.” Wendy, a 33 year old three-year veteran of the league, also talks about her experience in ballet compared to derby:

Doing ballet for so long, I sorta got lucky having a high metabolism and being tall and skinny, and I fit that image. I was never pressured, but I had friends that were pressured for their body type. And so [what] I really love about derby is that you can come in with what you got and figure out how to use it.

She elaborates on the idea of “use what you got” and echoes Storm’s perception of non-judgment within derby:

With derby, I don't feel like anybody's there to kinda judge what I look like or. . .how I act or anything. I feel a lot more accepted in that way. Or that I could just bring a lot of different things to the table for the sport. Somebody isn't gonna look at me and say, “Oh, she's skinny, she's not gonna be able to play derby.” It's like, “Oh, well, you have this certain body type. You should find someone with your body type and figure out how to be the most effective,” which I think is really kinda nice.

As a “skinny” skater in derby, Wendy feels her body is accepted, stating that no one would bar her from playing because of her smaller body type⁶. Instead, her physical contributions to game-play, whatever they might be, are valued. To skaters, building effectiveness based on unique body types means that skaters are not forced into a specific body mold—each body is just effective in different ways. Skaters are thus encouraged to “work with what they have” or “use what you got,” instead of receiving messages to change their bodies as in other activities. Wendy also suggests that it is relatively easy to find someone who has a similar body type, hinting at the diversity of body types within this league.

Due in part to acceptance of diversity, some skaters have improved relationships with their bodies through derby, such as Zelda, a 36 year old two-year veteran:

I do have a history of anorexia and bulimia. And I have had weights on the scale—I’m 5’8—from 107 pounds to 187 pounds. And. . .at 107, I felt fat. I felt like I could not get thin enough. And now. . .my body is 149 pounds or something like that, and I feel like that’s small enough. I don’t need to be smaller. Because I’m more concerned with how healthy I am, how functional I am, how fit I am, and what my body can do than what size it is because I see women of all sizes being very competent on the track.

Upon joining, skaters battling with their self-images are introduced to a world where skill and competency on the track are not wholly determined by body type or size. Seeing different bodies all hitting, sprinting, leaping, and performing other stunts helps these skaters construct alternative images of their bodies. Beyond skill, skaters may grow enough confidence in their bodies to move out of their comfort zones, as Lara notes: “Girls who probably would never have been caught dead in public in fishnets and booty shorts [are] out there owning their bodies. And being proud of them. ... I’ve watched girls [who were] very self-conscious about their bodies just owning it, embracing it...” From out of the shadows may emerge a new, more positive image of

⁶ As far as barring skaters from participation, if a skater passes skills testing every season, she is eligible to skate for a home or travel team. However, according to league policy, a travel team skater may be removed if her ability declines without initiative to correct.

the body. Leia, a 27 year old two-year veteran, shares such a story:

I was really super heavy in high school, and then I lost a bunch of weight the last year of high school. And then I was very self-conscious about my body because I didn't wanna gain all that weight back. So I was just kinda being stupid and had a really negative body image. And I was like that for a really long time. ... And then when I joined derby, and I saw all these women that are a bunch of different shapes and sizes, and I see [*sic*] how those different shapes and sizes can actually work to their advantage. . .so it's just like every body type seems to have a purpose and. .it wasn't wrong either way. ... It was good to see that, and it helped me a lot. I stopped being super conscious about what I ate and looking in the mirror and being like, "Oh, I don't like this part of my body" or "I don't like this part of my body."

Through her story, Leia illustrates a turn-around in her self-image, which she attributes to joining derby. Losing weight caused her to be "super conscious" about her diet and her physical appearance in order to maintain a thinner body, creating a negative self-image. Joining the league allowed her to see a myriad of body shapes and sizes, none of which are "wrong." The variety in shapes helped her realize that there is a space for her body type within the sport and that she would not have to be "super conscious" to fit one ideal mold. With that realization, she started to view her body more positively.

The nature of derby allows for flexibility and playing to one's strengths. "Because derby can be accomplished in so many ways, there isn't really an ideal derby body," says Zelda, describing further:

When I look at gymnastics or swimming, it just seems like you're lookin' at a lot of the exact same body. From sport to sport. ... Among the same sport, it seems like their bodies are kind of similar, where derby totally varies. And our league especially is like that. Like when you look at our travel team playing other travel teams, we're not very cookie cutter. [laughs] And I think it's good.

The body diversity present in derby is not present in other sports because there is not one "best effective" body established, leading to a greater flexibility. In this league, body shape does not always predict the position for which a skater is best suited. Smaller skaters do block and larger

skaters do jam, or skaters of any size perform both roles⁷. As Leia notes, “Even some of the really big girls are super fast on their skates and really agile.” Zelda also suggests that this body diversity varies even between derby leagues, stating that the bodies of skaters on the A team look less similar to each other than the bodies of skaters on other leagues’ travel teams—that other travel teams look more “cookie cutter,” which to Zelda is not as desirable as is uniquely shaped bodies. Therefore, there may be different opinions across leagues as to what an “ideal” body is.

While derby’s unwritten philosophy seems to facilitate acceptance of all bodies, however, there is still a suggestion that certain bodies are greater valued in the league—in particular, larger bodies. On the positive side, derby is a space where corpulence is a valued and even desired characteristic. Linka illuminates a difference between how larger women are viewed in derby spaces and “normal society”:

Being a bigger girl isn’t as stigmatized as other places. Just because it’s one of those things where it’s like, you got a big ass and that’s hard to get around. And. . .you’re hard to knock down.

Daisy, a 28 year old two-year veteran, suggests that valuing larger bodies in derby can help bigger girls develop confidence in their bodies:

I think it’s really great that we have something that. . .does help inspire confidence in those that may be bigger and not a size 2 or size 4, you know? I mean, in derby, it’s not a bad thing to be a bigger girl.

Getting bigger is not a message commonly given to or taken by women. In other sports, women athletes will often limit or hide musculature development in order to avoid looking “too big” and being viewed as unattractive or unfeminine (George 2005; Dworkin 2010). The skaters in my

⁷ I recognize that the language I use to describe skater size is dichotomous: “smaller” and “larger.” These descriptors do no justice to the diversity within the sport. However, comparing groups limits my word choice.

study, however, embraced their larger muscles, as Zelda describes below:

Typically, women don't wanna be big. I look at my giant thighs and I'm like, "I have giant thighs. I'll just go buy some new pants and put a belt on so it fits my waist." [laughs] Like, my biggest giant thigh complaint is I can't find pants that fit my giant thighs! [laughs] But I'm like, they're kind of awesome! They're enormous! It's more powerful. I like feeling more powerful. The bigger they get, the more powerful I feel. Like a cartoon superhero.

In this passage, Zelda contrasts herself to "typical women" who avoid gaining muscle mass in order to maintain a feminine look. She presents an alternative stance, viewing her "giant thighs" as a source of physical power gained from having played derby. The amount of training and practice she has invested into derby is visible to others and herself through her larger muscles. Her musculature increases with more practice, thus increasing her feeling of power. She is proud of her thighs and does not alter them. The only downfall is the difficulty in finding properly-fitting pants, to which she adapts by wearing a belt or buying a larger size. In other words, this skater changes the *pants* to fit her *body* rather than changing her body to fit the pants.

As these quotes suggest, larger bodies are valued for their advantages that are derby-specific: more power, more space taken up on the track, and a greater likelihood of staying on one's skates after taking a hit. Rather than feeling stigmatized due to size, larger skaters find themselves in a sport where their size is, in many cases, relied upon. As Daisy says, "it's not a bad thing to be a bigger girl," which may instill confidence inside the derby space. Linka gives a specific example of a hypothetical reaction to weight loss in "normal society" and on her team:

I feel like in "normal society"—we'll put that in quotes—in "normal society," it's like I come up to you and I'm like, "Hey, I'm gonna go on a diet and lose weight." And you're like, "That's fantastic! How much pounds are you going to lose?" And it's like, as a captain, someone comes up to me and they're like, "I'm going on a diet," and [I'm] like, "You better not lose that ass!" ... We need that ass on you! Like don't you get skinny on me. ... I don't give a shit how much you weigh, I want you to take up space on the track! [laughing] I mean, obviously, you want people to be healthy and stuff like that, and I feel like people are. . .supportive of people losing weight, but I feel like. . .it is OK to be big because we need big girls. And if you're not big, well, then who are we gonna have to fill

up the spot?

Reactions to weight loss are very different in “normal society” and the derby space. In the former, a woman’s weight loss is positively encouraged. In the latter, it is supported on the principle of respecting individual choice, but there can be pressure to actually keep the weight and to not drastically change one’s body. At the same time, to some skaters, players who take up more space on the track are desired, especially for the current style of game-play at the national level. Jams most often begin as a “scrum-start,” borrowing the term from rugby, in which blockers line up directly in front of the jammer line in a tight pack. Jammers must push their opposing blockers forward to somehow create a space and escape. For petite jammers such as myself, trying to push through a line of larger blockers can be very tiring and nearly impossible, depending on the opponents’ skill. In these situations, greater size is very valuable.

Size can become so integral to strategy and game-play that losing weight is sometimes viewed as a detriment. Larger skaters who have lost weight may struggle to adapt their changing bodies to a different playing style—to “use what they have,” or more specifically, what they are left with. Daisy describes a fellow skater going through this process:

Isn’t it odd that derby’s like the only thing where you start losing weight and you’re like, “Oh my God, I’m not gonna be as good! I’m not gonna be able to hit as hard!” [laughing] I was walking in with Missy yesterday, and Missy’s lost a lot of weight. And she’s like, “You know, I’m gonna go to hit somebody and throw out my hip and think that I hit ‘em and I’m gonna miss ‘em [laughing] like three inches, ‘cause I’m gonna be like, ‘My butt *used* to be there!’”

Linka describes larger skaters losing significant amounts of weight as going through an “identity crisis” because one of their advantages has shrunk or is no longer present, leading them to ask themselves how to adapt:

...[M]any of the people who’ve lost tons of weight after they’ve played derby kinda go through an identity crisis because [they realize] “people can move me around now!” And they become more agile and they become more fit, but they also miss the bigger part of

themselves. ‘Cause they’re just like, “It used to be anyone could hit me and I wouldn’t budge an inch! But now I’ve lost 70 pounds! And I get blown over by anybody!” And [they have] sort of this pissed-off-edness about being. . . *lighter and less effective*. And they have to relearn how to play derby because they can’t rely on their weight anymore to keep them like solid and planted [where] people bounce off of them and fall to the ground. [emphasis mine]

Derby is a rare space in which losing weight is considered a detriment to sporting performance. Thus, an ideal skating body stands in contrast to an ideal gendered body. Being lighter may cause a skater to think that her performance will be negatively affected—she will not be “as good,” meaning that she will not be able to hit opponents with the same force that she was once able to with greater size. Losing size means losing the space taken up on the track which, as Daisy suggests, can result in less effective play until the skater learns to reorient her body with the lesser space she now takes. This leads to a contrary view to the previous observation that effectiveness is not determined by body size. In both Daisy’s and Linka’s passages, size *is* linked to being effective, so much so that losing it causes skaters to temporarily panic and figure out how to change their style of play. Formerly large skaters may get frustrated with the loss of their solidity on skates—now instead of opponents bouncing off them as they attempt to hit, they are the ones being moved around.

Ultimately, one body type may be favored in derby—at the least, this league. In derby, being bigger has definite benefits. For blockers, especially, more weight means more space for a jammer to avoid or sneak around. In any role, more weight also means stability and solidity, being able to take hits from other skaters without falling down. During practices, it is always a humorous yet endearing highlight whenever a skater moves in to produce a big hit on a skater twice their size, and they end up bouncing off of her, with the most laughter resulting from league-mates if that skater falls. “She bounced right off!” For the person on the receiving end, as my personal vignette below demonstrates, larger skaters are difficult obstacles to evade and thus

become dangerous thorns in one's side.

* * * * *

Combined team practice and scrimmage. Our manager calls out a line and hands me the jammer helmet cover for the third time tonight, which I eagerly slip on over my helmet. Lining up to take my spot on the jammer line, I see that I'm up against one of my fellow rookies, and both of us are similarly matched in speed and agility. I can take her, I think to myself. One of my opponent blockers is Helena, a combination of speed, agility, brains, and one of the most dangerous asses in the league. The jammer whistle sounds and I sprint towards the back of the pack, looking for any type of daylight that I can sneak through to break free. I get lucky and find an opening, busting through the pack on turn three, thinking that I've gotten out and already start to focus on coming back around for my second pass—when Helena catches up with me and nudges me with her hip, promptly knocking me to my knees. Where did she come from?! The next two minutes is hell. My determination to get through is so focused that I lose track of the other jammer (Was she in the box? Behind my blockers? Out in space?). Every time I try to dodge, duck, or even think about getting through the pack, Helena is there with her bulk (and ass) to take me out. I keep fighting, but I get nowhere. After the jam ends, I come back to where my team is huddled, panting for breath. I say to Wendy, slightly exasperated: "She takes up half the track! How the hell am I gonna juke around that?" to which she laughs in sympathy and tells me, "Way to fight."

* * * * *

One area of body size that receives a lot of attention (and envy) in derby are skaters' buttocks. Joy, a 31 year old five-year veteran, defines derby as being made "for big butts." Naturally, much talk in derby centers around this body part: how much trouble certain ones are

to avoid, how to use them in game-play, and so on. The league even gives a “best ass” award, acknowledging the skater with the best buttocks. In many cases, the best buttocks in derby are not the toned, sculpted ideal as promoted by fitness ideals, but those that are bigger and rounder. It can even be an ideal characteristic, as Minerva describes when I ask her about what qualities make a skater:

M: For a perfect derby girl, if we could take Claire and put Helena’s ass on her...I think that’s it! I do think that’s it. [laughing]

AD: *So. . .breathe and live derby [ideology]. . .with a bigger butt.*

M: Yes. [laughs]

Phoebe, a 26 year old skater with three years of experience, expresses her slight frustration with her lack of this quality:

I really wish I had more of an ass. ... You’d think that between field hockey and derby for a combined six years now, you’d think I’d have some butt. But no, nothing. I can’t even wear a belt. It’s really embarrassing. I have the muscle. Like it’s there. ... Like it does what it’s supposed to do. It’s just I just can’t find it. I don’t know where it went.

She then goes on to explain that wishing for “more of an ass” is something specifically influenced by derby:

P: I didn’t really want a bigger butt before I played derby.

AD: *Really?*

P: No. Uh-uh.

AD: *What made you change your mind on that?*

P: ‘Cause there’s so many fabulous butts in derby, you know? Like those are some glutes, man! I want some glutes. I want some real glutes.

Both Minerva and Phoebe’s quotes above help support the centrality of larger buttocks in derby. Next to a passion for the sport, large buttocks may be a skater’s best friend. While it is tempting to conclude that bigger buttocks automatically means a better skater, this is not always the case. To be sure, plenty of highly skilled skaters lack this asset. However, the result is similar with weight—larger buttocks are valued, to the point where it becomes a coveted quality among skaters. As Phoebe starts to suggest, they can also be a source of physical attractiveness within

the space. This mindset is a significant contrast to the myriad of fitness magazines that proclaim that their products and exercise regimes can tone and slim one's buttocks, shrinking it into an ideal state.

Larger skaters may have bulk, but smaller-framed skaters have advantages of their own. For example, many have bony shoulders and hips that, when hit in the correct spot, cause the receiver to wince and rub the point of contact. In these instances, those hit will accuse the initiator of "sharpening their shoulders" or the like. During my first fresh meat practice that worked on hitting, two smaller skaters in my cohort worked in tandem hitting Leia during a drill. Rubbing her thigh after being hit by both of them, she called out, "You and your girlfriend suck!" Another veteran, Mara, had a similar but more pointed reaction: "You guys are bony, man! Eat a cheeseburger!" Encouragement to increase size is sometimes heeded by smaller skaters. Lara uses two skaters as examples:

Bumblebee. . .she'll be the first to be like, "Man, I *wish* I could put on 10, 15 pounds!" ... [And] Vamp was like the queen of "I gained three pounds this week!" Eating pizza and drinking beer every day, not that that's a good way to put on weight. But you know, just her [saying] like, "I'll eat whatever I want and I cannot put on weight!"

As Wendy states, "Eat more is not the message that's given to women a lot," upon which she elaborates based on her own experience:

I can eat a lot more, and that's really exciting. I can eat a lot more and I'm not quite as. . .stocky as I used to be. I finally put some mass on me. ... Like at first, the person who sees a billion advertisements for skinny women every day was feeling a little panicky, and I was like, "Shit, this is all muscle mass! This is great!" I feel a lot more substantial, so that's been pretty great, too.

Initially, Wendy continued to battle with the thin ideal, as she describes as "feeling a little panicky" when thinking of her growing body in relation to the thin ideal, demonstrated by ubiquitous advertising featuring super-thin models. However, her weight gain was actually muscle mass, which translates into power in the derby space. This led her to feel more substantial

(less fragile and small) and view getting bigger—and the opportunity to eat more—as a positive, resisting against the messages of “be smaller” as constructed by the ads she references.

The disadvantages for being smaller are more often cited than those for being larger. In some cases, while it may not produce crowd-pleasing big hits, being smaller can be more painful, both to the skater herself and to others if not controlled. During the league’s annual skills testing, a small and very agile skater, Nina, was delivering hip checks to a line of moving skaters when she lost control and accidentally ended up taking out another skater in the line, injuring her hip in the process and unable to move without pain. After she was safely transported off the floor, Ursula, a larger skater, jokingly stated, “And this is why you should all gain weight! Us bigger girls only get a bruise!” Because of this, smaller skaters may also unwittingly end up being associated with fragility—or at the least, similarly to Nina’s case, identified by their smaller size. During an intra-league bout, Wolf, a very petite yet tenacious skater, was transported to the hospital after receiving a powerful hit to the chest and falling to the track. While everyone in the arena watched with bated breath and hoping she was not terribly injured, a league-mate working the bout commented, “She’s so fragile.” Despite wearing layers of padding under her uniform, the skater still ended up with a bruised sternum. In this case, similarly to the one above, weight is likened to a safety measure: the more of it a skater has, the less likely she will be taken out.

In a contact sport, fragility is a negative characteristic, something to be avoided. It also reeks of the traditional stereotype of femininity—and by extension, women—as fragile (Dowling 2000). Here, smaller means potentially more fragile. Larger women are not typically associated with fragility when injured. Other attributes (or lack thereof) become the culprit. For example, a potential derby recruit broke her ankle at one of the league’s training seminars by losing her balance while standing on skates. In this case, fragility was also viewed negatively, but it was

instead attributed to lack of experience. In short, while derby attempts to resist against notions of women's fragility through building strength, fragments of that mindset remain as smaller skaters are sometimes viewed as more fragile, reproducing the idea of smaller, feminine bodies as fragile, even within a sport that claims to accept all body types.

It should be noted that casting bodies as "large" or "small" can give these types precedence while overlooking bodies in between. My first travel team practice involved several team-building exercises, one of which required us to divide into pairs—"smaller" skaters matched with "larger" skaters—for it would involve lifting and carrying another person. Some pairs were easily formed, but the rest of us with similar bodies had more difficulty deciding with whom to pair. Jane, a long-time veteran of the league, voiced our frustration with this poignant comment: "Those of us in the middle are screwed." Though more skaters are in the middle of the body continuum, these bodies are rendered invisible in discourse compared to "large" or "small."

* * * * *

As a more petite skater, I am constantly surrounded by more corpulent bodies in the derby space. At a height of 5'2" and 130 pounds, my thighs and legs are thick, my stomach squidgy and round. Compared to others, though, I am among the smaller skaters in the league. I recall looking at a photo from my second home bout, a candid shot of my teammates and I standing in a huddle. My first thought upon seeing this shot: "I didn't realize I was so tiny!" Bout footage from my first travel team bout further drove this point home to me. Watching myself standing at the jammer line, sizing up the pack in front of me, I realized how tiny my body was (especially my legs when held back by leggings and Under Armour shorts), and how truly David vs. Goliath it must have appeared when I began pushing against a wall of much larger blockers. I do not

wish to get bigger, though I sometimes feel a bit jealous whenever more substantial jammers merely blast their way through walls because it makes the job of getting out of the pack much easier. Yet the fact that my relative small size shocked me to the point of feeling infantile (something that my young age does on its own) makes it clear that in my head, larger bodies are normal in derby—the small seem even smaller by comparison.

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Within this league, derby's philosophy of acceptance of bodies at all sizes coexists with the reality that larger bodies are often more highly valued, to the point where skaters are encouraged to make their bodies more substantial, or to retain that quality. Positively, derby is a space where larger sizes are not as stigmatized as in "normal society—being a "big girl" can be a source of pride. However, the stereotype of derby skaters as "big bruisers" can cause conflict or confusion if skaters do not match that expectation. Outsiders to derby may question their participation, which can affect how prospective skaters view themselves in relation to other established skaters. This hints at a subtle influence of society beyond the derby space as intruding within it.

The label of "big Bertha bitches," not typically meant to be a put down, serves two purposes. From a skater perspective, it is an acknowledgement and/or compliment that the opponent will be more difficult to move and maneuver around. At the same time, the fact that these skaters are being singled out by their size and not by other attributes, such as speed, underscores its positivity. While all types are accepted, size is still very salient as a marker of difference and bodies themselves are still a focal point. Despite derby's diverse bodies, it is faulty to conclude that size truly does not matter.

Private vs. Public Derby Space: "Let the Fat Fly" vs. "That Person with the Cellulite"

In the derby space, conventional norms of femininity are not cast off but continue to be

negotiated within the context of the contact sport. What is acceptable bodily behavior in the space is not necessarily accepted outside of it. Throughout the study, I observed skaters using derby as a space, to use Green's (1998) term, "to let their hair down" and use their bodies in ways that are not considered appropriate for women. However, these usages and appearances are limited mainly to the private practice space itself. Underlying social norms are always present in the background, but when derby bodies become public, those background norms become much more salient.

As previous work on the sport illustrates, derby plays with both masculine and feminine characteristics, often juxtaposing or blending the two elements. Skaters in my study noted their awareness of this trend, sometimes explicitly noting how the sport falls in line with gender norms, such as Wendy: "It's weird that you're either breaking gender norms and being kind of messy, aggressive, whatever, or you're kinda dressing up in your short skirt and your fishnets and like, that's attractive." Joy also connotes derby with building strength through the physical nature of the sport:

I think it makes you feel really strong and powerful, because you get to be out there and you're hitting people. You're knocking them down, and [you're] like, "I can take care of myself, I'll just knock you down!" So it makes you feel that sense of empowerment, I guess, from being able to do something not only physical but also very tough. Not like you're trying to hurt people, but you're taking them out. And you're like, "I'm the one standing. You're not."

Storm also chimes in, stating that derby breaks social expectations regarding women and strength: "If the stereotype is that women are meek or weak or whatever, [derby] totally encourages women to be strong physically." As both quotes suggest, strength-building can translate into an increased sense of power for the women who play, transforming themselves. Using one's physical strength to effectively block someone and remain standing can build a sense of pride, particularly if the skater blocked has a greater skill level or size. Joy also suggests

that a sense of self-reliance is also nurtured. Skaters are able to take care of themselves on the track and defend themselves against oncoming opponents. They learn through play that they can be tough and physically powerful which, as Storm suggests, can produce an alternative narrative for women in contrast to passivity and weakness.

In contrast to Wendy, Phoebe comments on the gender play not as an “either or” state but more flexible:

I was really inspired by [skaters] on the track being this example of really strong women kicking ass, and kind of like being sexy while they were doing it, but that wasn't the forefront of it. It was like, they had their womanhood, and then they could also be ass kickers at the same time without having to compromise that.

Strength and sexiness are not mutually exclusive but are part of the same entity. More to the point, uniforms with sex appeal do not dampen skater's strength, nor do skaters' strength and aggression compromise their femininity. To skaters like Phoebe, not having to choose can be an inspiring draw to join the sport themselves.

However, for some women outside the sport, physicality is a turn-off. When asked what keeps women from getting involved in derby, most skaters in my study cited injury or the aggressive components of the sport as the top factors. Starfire, a 29 year old transfer skater, points to socialization as a reason why some women are reluctant to play derby:

I think they're scared because we're taught as youths to not hit at all. We're supposed to be the cowering female and there's a lot of societal pressure to be that. Which is why the idea of being tough, it's like, “Oh, well, you must have been a scrappy youth.” Randomly as a female, so therefore that must have been how you got to do this, not 'cause you worked your ass off.

Derby in its standard form involves hitting, an action “you're not really supposed to do as a girl.” Girls and women are socialized not to use their bodies in violent or aggressive ways. For many women, it is scary to resist societal pressure to conform to the “cowering female” norm and use their bodies for physical sport, and not all are up to that challenge. For those that are willing, the

mental and physical toughness required of skaters is a quality that can be attained through hard work and training. However, this produces a conundrum—women exercising their bodies instead of expectedly restraining them. In order to pardon the transgression, in Starfire’s view, toughness is excused as inherent to the offending woman’s personality, something she retained from her youth, when tomboyish behavior is something that one is expected to grow out (Carr 1998). To Starfire, this excuse devalues the hard work put into creating one’s body as tough—and it also reinforces socialization as it stands.

Because hitting is not encouraged for most women, it can be difficult to fully accept this as normal within derby. Massive hits and take-downs, both legal and illegal, are part of the sport, but skaters sometimes apologize for hits that take an opponent or teammate temporarily out of commission. Yet as the title of Storms’ (2008) work suggests, “there’s no sorry in roller derby.” Skaters sometimes find it necessary to remind themselves of this expectation, as Linka describes:

In my old league, the big thing was, “Don’t ever say you’re sorry.” Don’t hit somebody and be like, “Oh, sorry!” Because that’s a very female thing to do. And there’s definitely pressure to “don’t say you’re sorry! Keep skating!” Don’t sit there and look back, like, “Oh, is she OK?”

Although Linka only mentions this mindset with regards to her former league, many times have I heard this same philosophy espoused at practices, particularly for travel team. Yet no matter how many times it is said, an illegal hit or accidentally tripping someone also brings about apologies, which can be excused in those circumstances. For legal hits, it can be unacceptable to apologize for exerting aggression and violence. The better response is to compliment someone on an excellent hit. Bumping skates and causing someone to fall is brushed off with a shrug—“It’s all right, it happens.” On one hand, this attitude can allow women to feel that using strength and physical power to accomplish a goal of the game—blocking someone—is acceptable and celebrated. On the other hand, as other sports scholars have suggested (Theberge 1997), this

reproduces the glorification of violence and aggression within sport. Despite advice to the contrary, apologizing as “a very female thing to do” is still present.

One behavior that was not met with much apology, however, was the scatological. Skaters had no qualms openly admitting how badly they needed to defecate, urinate, or pass gas while at practice. On bout day or skills testing, nerves tended to increase the frequency of all of these, leading some skaters to complain of “gas babies” or “poop babies” in their digestive systems. A drill commonly used in practice is called “the fart line,” which according to a vet was named for a specific skater “because she farts in everyone’s faces and then takes off.” Talk of menstrual pain and periods was also present. Loud, lengthy belches were more likely to be complimented than chastised in disgust—sometimes they were even followed up with a teammate smirking and saying, “Sexy.” One occasion at practice, a skater had passed gas and did not identify herself, leading my teammates and I to question who was responsible. A veteran, Hermione, stated that she was embarrassed that it was *not* her because the stench was magnificent. Skater odor, on the other hand, did not work in the same direction. Certain skaters were known throughout the league to smell foul during or after practice. The league even gives an annual award for the smelliest skater, aptly called the “Derby Stench” award. Thus, not all bodily emissions were completely forgiven or made benign. On the other hand, Frankie, a 32 year old former staff member turned skater, sees derby stench as inevitable and, more importantly, a symbol of hard work:

If I’m sweaty, oh well. I’m sweaty. We all stink at the end of the day. I mean...that part gets kinda funny too, because the smelly aspect, where girls are supposed to smell pretty and nice all the time? Not in our world. I don’t even see that as a bad thing either. ‘Cause I know my bag smells terrible, but oh well. You’ll survive. [laughs] I work really hard to make that bag smell. So I’ll take that.

Here, she explicitly notes the social expectation that women are not supposed to smell

malodorous and how this is broken in derby. More to the point, this is an expected outcome of athleticism, clashing with the “pretty and nice” image of conventional femininity. Frankie’s words suggest that being sweaty and stinky is not a negative but a normal part of the sport. Furthermore, if skaters or their equipment do not smell by the end of practice, then they are not working hard enough.

The sheer frequency and frankness of the scatological suggests a comfort with this use of bodies so long as it is contained within the derby space and within sporting activity. Skaters consider derby as a “counter space”—meaning counter to other spaces such as work, school, or other social arenas—where, as Wendy puts it, “I can show up in whatever the fuck I want and smell bad and hit people.” The women-dominated nature of the space enables, and perhaps encourages, this type of bodily talk and behavior (with the exception of smelling foul). The talk continues even when men are present in practice situations where they serve as managers, coaches, or officials. Most of the time, they do not join in the conversation and refrain from chiming in, leaving it to the skaters. In some cases, they appear uncomfortable, as illustrated by this example from Wendy:

Heterosexual men seem to wanna be fascinated with the sport ‘cause we’re all dressing up and hitting each other. But then we have our refs and our managers who actually come to practice, and they hear us making fart jokes, and they’re like, “Oh my God, I did not need to know that women actually do this.” So I don’t know, maybe that isn’t the stereotype and we do all this counter-stereotype stuff that makes the men who are involved in the sport scared of us. ... I think of Hermione talking about back zits, like whatever gross thing. . .as a young girl you’re taught not to talk about. . .and Colonel [manager] just being like, “Oh, my God. I’m gonna pretend I never heard that. I don’t think girls should act that way.”

Again, Wendy notes that girls and women are socialized not to discuss bodily functions, which are typified as “gross” and unclean—and something on which men have the claim. While it is considered normal for boys and men to use crude bodily humor, for women (especially middle

class white women, whose purity has most often been protected historically) to use it can be unsettling. She suggests that there may be some fear involved as well on the part of men who may not be used to seeing women actively using and discussing their bodies, even in the most crude ways typically reserved for them. However, there is no chastisement for the transgression: within the space, nobody says “that it’s unladylike” to make fart jokes or talk about back acne. As Minerva puts it, “Face it: most women don’t walk around playing roller derby and farting and burping...and celebrating as such.” Leia jokingly suggests that with the amount of burping and passing gas that goes on, the league should be referred to as “teenage boys” rather than “girls.” Her remark further underlines the scatological as expected behavior for boys and men, not for girls—and especially not women in their thirties. Indeed, the acknowledgments from both women and men inside of derby that “normal” women do not celebrate this type of behavior, or that “normal” women are even capable of acting this way, reaffirm norms of acceptable conduct for gendered bodies.

When surrounded by teammates and league-mates, derby is a safe place to relax several social expectations: of women restraining their bodies, bodily functions or the discussion of them and of smelling aesthetically pleasing. In the space, women are allowed to do what society strongly suggests they do not, even while men who are accepted into the space are present. As a final thought, when asking Wendy her thoughts on pushing against gender boundaries within derby, she offered this point about the freedom of choice:

It’s more about feeling like you have a choice. Like a real choice. Like you get to decide if you’re gonna wear hot pants or not. ... I’m in an environment where I get to make that decision and not feel like it’s because I’m either expected to or not expected to wear it. So that’s where it feels like a real resistance to me. . . a resistance to expectations, and you get to kinda do what you wanna do.

Other skaters report a notion of “live and let live” within derby, allowing others to behave in

whatever ways they feel free so long as they have the same freedom. What is often neglected are the social constraints against which these choices are situated—social norms outside and even inside of the space. Personal preferences and practical considerations of finances and time constrain who gets to play the sport in the first place, dictating who has enough cultural capital in other life arenas to resist gendered body norms through derby, as has been suggested in other work on women’s resistance (Weitz 2001; Khan 2009). The notion of “real choice” is still haunted by the expectations of what “most women” do and what most derby skaters do, especially with the knowledge that these are being resisted on the individual level. The least constraining choices made about uniforms and behavior—the bodily transgressions that “scare” men within practices, for example—are mostly limited to the private practice space itself.

Choice constraints can even come from league- or sport-wide norms and fashion trends on what is acceptable outfit choice. As my personal vignette below demonstrates, skaters can wear what they want, but not *whatever* they want.

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My first bout for the league was an exhibition bout that showcased the fresh meat before we were drafted to home teams. I felt a gnawing sense of pressure to dress up according to what derby girls “should” wear: hot pants with tights underneath. Plus, I’ll admit it—I had been wearing workout clothes to practice and I wanted to set myself apart. Put my normal tomboy tendencies to rest for a moment and try something new—girly, even. (I was lucky enough that a veteran offered to lend me her hot pants.) However, I felt a bit uncomfortable having to keep pulling down my shorts to avoid wedgies and showing my butt to the audience, the other skaters, and the refs. After having seen photos of myself during the bout, I decided I would never wear hot pants without some kind of leggings underneath again. I was not comfortable with showing that much

of my body. Yet I had (temporarily) bought into the norms for dressing up. For a non-conformist group, we're pretty conformist. What other norms are there in the league? If physical appearance doesn't matter, then why the make-up for home teams? Why the matching uniforms? Why the control top tights? Then I remember that we're a business. We have a mission statement, a vision, and a public image to uphold. A product to sell. Fans to entice back. More importantly, this is an outlet for most of us, our non-work life. Maybe that's why I like uniforms for travel team—conforming to a more athletic image so that we all look the same, in spite of whatever that implies about the professional trajectory of the sport.

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Derby does not take place within a social vacuum. While skaters join derby to have fun and to escape from other aspects of their lives, individual leagues are operated as businesses in which the goal is to market a product for local consumers. In these circumstances, the derby body becomes public and is subject to scrutiny from outsiders. In addition to producing public bouts for audiences, photos of each bout are available for public browsing on the league's website and related social media outlets. The impression set by the league and its players is greatly important for attracting fans and potential sponsors. The reminder that skaters are public community figures that are part of a brand also reminds them that conduct that is acceptable inside the derby space may not be in the public eye. More to the underlying issue, conventional norms for gendered bodies, including body type, and behavior constrain what resistance to these there may be within the derby space.

Although non-“typical” bodies are accepted and viewed for their usage within derby, a focus on external appearance still permeates for some, existing alongside and sometimes in conflict with the perception of their bodies or body parts as powerful. Zelda recalls her thoughts

on a uniform she wore for a home team bout:

We were told to wear green bottoms for St. Patrick's Day, so I had these ridiculous green bottoms that no one told me that I should have been wearing control tights under... because I have a lot of cellulite showing in the pictures. And I'm like, "No, why didn't someone tell me? Someone was supposed to tell me!" 'Cause I never wanna be that person with the cellulite showing in the pictures!

Earlier in her interview, Zelda had commented that her large thighs made her feel powerful. Here, however, she shows a different side that produces tension with this image.. While physical strength may be apparent in a photo of a skater taking down an opponent, appearance still comes to the forefront. While wearing hot pants is acceptable in play, the realization that one may be constructed in the bout photos as "that person with the cellulite" suddenly casts regret. Zelda suggests having visible cellulite is negative, stating that she never wants to be "that person with the cellulite" and was shocked that no one had informed her of this issue. This suggests that, for some skaters, ambivalence about appearance in private practices has tried and failed to transport to public bouts, leading skaters to voice their distaste in private or lighten it with humor.

While describing her uniform choices, Leia gives more examples of being "that person" with the awkward appearance in publicly displayed media:

I've tried skating in tights and shorts, which it's not that bad, but I don't like skating in a bunch of different layers 'cause it's too hot. And I feel like I can't move as much. And I don't like super-super short-shorts because I'm constantly tugging stuff down or pulling stuff up. ... I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, is my butt hanging out?" ... I see myself on tape adjusting my uniform like every two seconds. I don't wanna do it any more than I have to. ... I wore [spanks] one time, and I saw how big my vagina looked on that stupid poster board of me, and I said, "I will never *ever* wear those again! My crotch looks way too big!" I can't wear those.

Being comfortable, not feeling constricted or overheated, and, to use Storm's words, "protecting modesty" were all cited in skaters' descriptions of their uniforms. Function and fashion are priority at varying degrees depending on the individual, with an attempt to combine both. The pros of comfort are clear, according to Leia: "I'm not worried about bending over and flashing

my crack to anybody or constantly like tugging on my stuff trying to fix it.” Yet skaters often notice themselves picking wedgies or otherwise adjusting themselves on the league-produced bout video. Behavior like self-adjustment that is perfectly normal in practice is noticed on bout footage film and can make the offending skater feel self-conscious, worried about whether parts of their bodies are slipping out in front of the audience. Bodies fit the uniform pieces differently—while some bodies are attractively accented in a pair of Derby Skinz (i.e. “spanks,” hot pants, “booty shorts”), other bodies like Leia’s do not fit as well and result in a negative view and a choice to never wear that piece again after having seen what the public views.

Chell, a 33 year old three-year veteran, voices a similar complaint beyond home team uniforms to those of the travel teams:

I’m so glad that we didn’t have to wear spanks anymore for travel team. They were so terrible. ... I was always worried about like pulling them down and out of my crotch. I was like, “This fucking sucks.” Like why can’t I just wear workout pants? And I don’t wanna wear these socks, leg warmers, whatever. I don’t need them. They’re gonna make my legs hot.

At the national level, individual style is traded for conformity, building an image of team unity. As Chell notes, the required uniform pieces are not always the most comfortable for each skater. It is odd that it is the skaters decide on these uniform pieces amongst themselves, a decision which may be constrained by league and individual funding, as well as majority opinion. This begs the question: if derby apparel (often specifically made by skaters *for* skaters) interacts with their bodies during play to produce discomfort or constant fidgeting, should not the uniforms themselves be changed or discarded? To use Chell’s words, why *can’t* skaters just wear workout pants? Is mobility made better with tight-fitting clothing—or is it made worse? An odd tension is thus produced: athletic bodies that require comfort in movement to focus on performance are in reality often constrained, worrying about whether body parts are revealed to the crowd or feeling

discomfort from poorly fitting items. Thus, the practice of being athletic can be limited, the very point of participation—even when skaters state their preference for more comfortable, breathable attire that allows freedom of movement.

Frankie suggests a continuum of presentation among the skaters. For home team bouts, some skaters spend time applying bout-day makeup and preparing their uniforms in order to make themselves “look good when they skate.”⁸ Meanwhile, other skaters are comfortable without such glitz. Frankie sees herself somewhere in the middle: “I don’t wanna look crappy. But at the same time, I’m really not there to look pretty. My objective is to skate and play the game well and do what I need to do as a skater, not to impress somebody else with the way I look.” Balancing a public appearance, a task unnecessary for closed practices, and optimal performance for bout day is a dance for each individual skater to figure out what works best.

Frankie’s casual perspective on “smelling bad” is limited to, to use her words, “our world,” meaning the practice space. Chell offers a different scenario, when post-bout skaters leave the track for the after-party, usually at a bar or another venue offering food and alcohol:

I went to my bar one time after a bout—like we’d gone to the bar and then we went there later to go eat, and I was still in my [bout] clothes—I think it was the day of championships. And it’s funny ‘cause I was in the bar and I’m holding my food over my head ‘cause there was a bunch of people coming in, and there’s guys looking at me, and I’m like, “Oh, I’m sorry, I know I smell really bad.” He’s like, “Jesus, did you put on deodorant or anything today?” I was like, “I just got done playing a bout. If you tell these people to move out of my way faster, I can get my arm outside of your face way faster.” [laughs] This other girl’s like, “Tell him to fuck off. You can smell however you wanna smell.” I was like, “I don’t really wanna smell like this. I just do. Bad right now.”

After playing a bout, skaters go directly from the venue to the after-party without stopping to shower or change clothing in between, an exception being to put on a pair of jeans over their tights and leggings if desired. Uniforms, sweat, bruises, Sharpie-drawn arm numbers, and even

⁸ This routine is not limited to skaters. Officials may also spend time putting together bout-fits, some much more elaborate than others. Similarly to the “Best Dressed Skater” award, the league also gives a “Best Dressed Ref” award.

body odor remain for the public. In the private derby space, a certain degree of odor is tolerated, but as Chell's story illustrates, it reappears as a point of disgust in public. Notably, in her vignette, it is a man questioning the transgression, while another woman stands up for her right to "smell however you wanna smell." In the end, however, the underlying social norms win in public. Although Chell explains that her bodily transgression is from a championship bout—an athletic venture, which could be excusable—she apologizes for it.

As noted by Wendy above, most men with access to private practices are respectful of the skaters and their bodies, even to the point of being "scared" of them for having seen this less bodily constrained view. Outside of practice and into bout scenarios for an audience, however, not all men are as respectful. There is a difference between the officials and coaches who are granted privilege into the private derby space and some "heterosexual men" who enter the public derby space as fans. Leia recounts an experience with the latter:

I do think that some of the male fans might look at somebody that's dressed a little bit more skimpy—'cause I've been walking through when I'm [working] fan crew and they're like, "Look at that hot girl!" ... They're there just as a first-time thing or they've come and they're like, "Man, that girl's hot. Let's go watch her play again." I think that maybe they pay attention for other reasons. ... I wouldn't say that's on average, that the fans will value somebody different [for dressing sexy]. But I've heard it when I've been walking through, people saying certain things about certain skaters. Like Bumblebee when her butt's hanging out, they're like, "Oh yeah, I like when that girl bends over, heh heh heh." I'm like, "Oh my gosh."

So appears the dilemma of reconciling both the "safe space" of derby with the reality of the sport under the public eye. Relatively speaking, the safest space in which skaters feel the most freedom to engage in bodily or gendered behavior contrary to expectation is within a *private* derby space, most often practice, closed scrimmages, or locker room warm-ups and meetings. When the practice space becomes open to a public audience where photos and video are taken, it becomes a *public* derby space. Within private settings, gendered body norms are merely an

apparition in the background, present most clearly when skaters reaffirm the differing behavior expectations for “normal” women and derby skaters. However, within public settings, skater behavior is under more scrutiny. Skater odor and uniforms, taken for granted by skaters privately when deviant, become focal points for the public. Some spectators are not shy about voicing their distaste or their pleasures, as the case may be. While skaters feel that they dominate the space, reaffirming these norms through spectator comments may usurp this notion of power and the safety of the public space. Furthermore, though not an overwhelming presence, these comments can neutralize the strength and athleticism displayed by the skaters and reduce derby to a spectacle. Indeed, some skaters such as Leia are aware of widespread sexualization in women’s sports and attempt to avoid dressing overly sexual:

I don’t want it to become like super-super mainstream because then I think that it could have the potential to become. . .more sexualized in a way. . . I think that when you see girls that play sports on the cover of magazines, [they’re] half-naked most of the time. . . I mean, I already know that like what we wear and play in bouts is kinda skimpy, but I wouldn’t wanna have that be the only appeal to people that really don’t know that much about it.

The hope is that the audience and new fans will be drawn by the sheer athleticism, “when people aren’t just watching you because they think that you look good in a pair of short-shorts. They’re like ... ‘Oh my God, she can bounce up off the floor in a second! And she can spin off the back of people!’ That’s what you want people watching you for.” Leia worries that with the sport already toeing the line between strong and sexy, playing the sexy angle might be the only hook used to bring derby more widespread popularity and that skaters become primarily known not for their athleticism, despite the years of grassroots promotion to the contrary. In this case, the women of derby would join other women athletes in facing this risk of sexualization.

Derby may still be a niche sport, but skaters’ bodies are slowly beginning to creep into mainstream media. Gotham Girls and Team USA skater Suzy Hotrod posed for the 2011 *Sports*

Illustrated Body issue, which features tasteful nude photos of athletes in action poses (for example, Suzy wears nothing but her skates in a crouched skating stride). In interviews, she considers the opportunity as a way to advocate for derby as “genuinely athletic” and for the sport to gain exposure: “I want people to know that we are athletes, and we live our lives like athletes. We train hard, like anyone else posing for this magazine. It's not exactly the same as the Olympics, but it's legitimately a sport” (Ain 2011).

On one hand, a skater’s inclusion in *Sports Illustrated* among other mainstream athletes is a sign of recognition of the sport. At the same time, whether or not those non-derby readers of the issue will become interested in derby and learn to recognize the sport as legitimate, as is Suzy’s intent, remains to be seen. What makes the debate more complex is the third-wave feminist notion that the body can be used and viewed as a source of empowerment (a nude body does not always equate sexualization) brushing against underlying power relations: who has the power to determine what discourse on women’s bodies is prominent? What is that dominant narrative, and who does it work for and against? As women have traditionally been considered the Other, do they really have the power to take ownership and positively promote their bodies outside of their alternate spaces? These results suggest that only within the private practice space of derby do skaters maintain a strong sense of control (albeit with limitations); at this point in derby’s history, this positive construction does not completely translate beyond this arena.

Athleticism: Purer Bodies (“The Good Old Days”) vs. “You Must Take Care of Your Bodies” (Legitimacy)

One of the things I’ve been saying since day one is if you’re going to do roller derby, you’re going to be an athlete. And the thing that everyone said is, “No, it’s not really like that. We’re gonna skate, we’re gonna have nice outfits, we’re gonna have cool nicknames.” And I’m like, “No!” You are going to work out, you are going to work hard, you are going to be an athlete.

--Laurie “The Wrench” Rourke, former BGGW and TXRG skater (Ray 2007)

The struggle to define the nature of derby—is it a sport? Is it spectacle? Is it super competitive or is it more relaxed?—has existed since the inception of the sport, as the above quote suggests. Most skaters will agree that derby is a sport, where some level of athleticism is required to compete. Because of this, by definition, all bodies in derby are athletic bodies, regardless of size. However, skaters have noticed a definite shift from the early partying days of derby to the present focus on athleticism and its effect on bodies, as Frankie describes:

I do think the partying thing has faded away a lot. ... I remember when [Ursula] first started, one of the main things she said was these girls could really party. So it wasn't that she would point out the sports aspects of it, it was the social aspects of it and the partying aspect. It was a big part of it. ... I think it's gone away a little bit, though. Because...I think there's more focus on the athletic aspect of it. I think that's kind of all shifted over, even with the bout-fits and the make-up and the attitude. It's kind of all gradually shifting over. I see a definite shift in the image of derby being more athletic.

Daisy gives a more specific example of the shift in terms of the uniforms changing over time:

[D] I mean, even look at the way our teams dress. In 2009, when I started coming to bouts, people's bout-fits were really outlandish. And now. . .our outfits are more for movement, and you don't see a lot of people dressing for show. You see them dressing for sport and wearing what they need to [in order] to be most effective on their skates for movement and agility.

[AD] *Like what things were they wearing back in 2009? This is before my time.*

[D] You'd see like a lot of fluffy skirts and plastic vinyl skirts and stuff. And. . .a lot of different socks. A lot of people still wear fishnets and stuff like that, but it was just a lot more prevalent back then. You see a lot more girls just wearing like athletic tights and leggings and stuff.

In this league, even on the intra-league level, I observed that skaters tend to dress more for sport than appearance, in a way that optimizes their athletic performance. Clothing items that may have been more costume-like to draw crowds have been phased out as ineffective for playing the game, which has become the main focus more so now than ever.

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As I note in my interview with Daisy, my derby career is just beginning. I came to derby post-

Whip It, when women beyond the immediate scope of alternative punk rockers began to realize

that derby existed and it was cool. More to the point, I came in the latter days of the league's transition to a more athletic image. While the colorful, pun-filled derby names was certainly an attractive point that lured me in, it was the fact that derby was a sport dominated by women—and that it involved skating, an athletic venture that I'd always been pretty good at—that first opened my eyes and made me want to join. Something about watching women do contact sport, whether it's mixed martial arts or rugby, stirs a feeling of "I can do that, too" within me. In fact, in my mind—and other skaters have told me that they agree—watching derby bouts in a historic arena that hosted other sporting events legitimized it as a sport for me. The skaters' uniforms did that as well—identical jerseys, leggings, athletic shorts, and only a sprinkling of fishnets. Perhaps it's because of my late entry into the sport and my own competitive, athletic mindset that I like "dressing up" less than this streamlining—identical jerseys and color schemes, UnderArmour shorts, a real sense of team conformity as one unit. Had I come into derby at an earlier time and gotten used to elaborate bout-fits and alternate egos as the norm, I might be mourning the shift, too. Then again, the partying might have been a complete turn-off for a shy, socially awkward, and alcohol-abstinent person like me. Where derby is now might be the ideal for me.

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Regardless of the image constructed by outsiders, most skaters consider derby a sport and, because of this, they must meet the physical demands of full contact play in order to continue forth. It is still acceptable for skaters to have a wide range of bodies. Using derby's body diversity as an example, Zelda argues bodies can be fit no matter what size:

Regardless of what anyone says, I can say without a doubt that weight is not related to health or fitness. So...when people start equating that, I feel like I have a valid argument in roller derby to say, no, you cannot tell me that arguably our best skater, because she's not thin isn't fit. You just can't. 'Cause you're wrong. [laughs] Then I'll make you do a

plank with her and see who lasts. I think she can do a three minute plank. . .

This quote points to the reality that athleticism and skill is not limited to those possessing the ideal thin body. Equating corpulent bodies with unfit is an assumption often made, but untrue in this instance. In fact, some larger bodies are more athletic than thinner but more socially acceptable bodies. Lara uses herself as an example to combat this thin image: “Yeah, I’m a size 16, but I can knock the next girl down and I can jam and I can skate laps and I’m in better shape than the girl that’s on the sidelines who might be a size 4 and has never worked out a day in her life.” Regardless, the underlying caveat is that these diverse bodies *should* be fit bodies.

At higher levels of play, athleticism becomes a mandate. While no outside workout is required for any of the teams, the A travel team members were tested on their overall fitness levels. Throughout the season, captains and management consistently told the team that skating at practice by itself was not enough to get into shape; we also had to train individually by doing cardio, strength training, and agility exercises. The question, “What are you doing outside of practice to get better?” was posed at various points as a reminder of this expectation. One of the travel team managers specifically insisted on this new standard, stating that some skaters for the league digressed in their athletic training over time while other leagues had stepped up their game. In his paraphrased words, skaters in higher ranked leagues are *athletes* who decided to be *derby girls*, while this league consisted of *derby girls* trying to be *athletes*. Other skaters echo this thought, pointing to top-ranked leagues as comparison points—travel teams that consistently compete at national championship tournaments have scheduled gym time as a team. It is made clear that the expectation is to take derby seriously as an athletic endeavor, not merely as a hobby for fun, when competing for national rankings.

Not only should bodies be fit, but they should also be able to take a fair amount of abuse

without complaint. Within derby, skaters often feel an expectation to stay tough even in the face of injury. During boot camp, Rochelle explained to my fresh meat class what happens if someone is injured on the track: “Nine and a half times out of ten, the girl gets up, and everybody claps while the girl says, ‘Don’t clap for me, I’m fine.’ ... If you’re truly hurt and can’t move, don’t try to get up. But yeah, the temptation is there to prove to everyone that you’re tough and get right back up.” Like other contact sports, the derby culture often presents pain to the body as normalized or displaced (Young and White 1995). Skaters differentiate in terms of severity. Being hurt, or coping with everyday pain, is not the same as being injured, which means a skater is unable to skate. Phoebe views skating in pain as a cost/benefit analysis: “I won’t skate on something that hurts. Unless it’s important, you know? I evaluate how much am I willing to get injured for this.” Existing alongside an understanding that injury is not shameful (because it is expected within derby) is the expectation that one will be strong and not weak in taking pain. Excuses are neutralized with two words: “Derby hurts.” Thus, if a body cannot take pain or discomfort, derby may not be the right sport for that body.

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Due to my youth and late social development, I already feel like the little girl that got lost in a rainstorm whom the league adopted, put on skates, and—once they realized how quick and agile her footwork was—gave her the star and taught her how to jam. Making the A team made me feel that even more so. I’m surrounded by all of these skilled skaters who have proved themselves worthy, my brain and body soaking up their knowledge like sponges. Sometimes I wonder if I can keep up, and being a perfectionist makes me push twice as hard. I think about the hell that I and other skaters constantly put our bodies through. The violent yet normalized contact of the sport. And yet, if it’s enough to reach Nationals again. When Helena asked me to set goals for the

season, one of mine was to bust my hump at every practice. To make that more concrete and measurable, we decided on this: if I don't feel like I'm going to vomit at some point, I'm not working hard enough.

That was my suggestion. Not hers. But she accepted that. That's twisted. Why is pushing your body to that limit any kind of OK? Why do I feel compelled to put my body through the Insanity program for endurance so that I don't start gagging during ladder drills? Why do I willingly pay for an extra two-hour speed class on Sunday mornings only to drive across town right to a three-hour A team practice? I'm not the first one to think of derby as an addiction.

Theberge (1997) talks about women exposing their bodies to violence through sport and how that reproduces the "masculine model." Sometimes I wonder if she and other sociologists (myself included) are overanalyzing things. There has to be a benefit to all of this cost. I see them all the time in derby: friendships, social support, an escape, confidence. It must be worth all of the bruises, the sore muscles, the risk of broken bones. In the long run, Roth and Basow (2004) push the idea that a physical feminism is what we need to get rid of strength-based privilege and the notion of women's vulnerability. Other times, I wonder if Phoebe was onto something when she said she must be a bit of a masochist: "I'm terrible at this! I should keep doing it."

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Derby injuries as "badges of honor," the normalized idea that "derby hurts," and the influence to not apologize for hitting are examples of incorporation of "the dominant model of men's sport" as seen in previous literature (Young and White 1995; Theberge 1997; Lafferty and McKay 2004). Serious, professional looking uniforms reflect the serious levels of competition, yet witty derby names and non-standard numbers remain as a holdout from "the good old days." As derby grows more legitimized, danger lies in more scrutiny and maintenance of the body by

skaters themselves to earn a spot among top-ranked teams. Skaters now more than ever are typically held accountable for their fitness and health. Within the sport, and especially within this league of study, is tension between two main camps: those who want to retain the non-serious “fun” from “the good old days” and those who see derby as a serious athletic endeavor on a national level where winning becomes the goal above all else. Where the line becomes murky is when skaters try to have it both ways—trying to be serious and not-so-serious simultaneously—and there is a lack of a stable identity. Starfire comments on this, noting the difference between her former and current leagues in terms of this focus:

[My former league]. . .they have defined themselves as athletes. And I don't, with [this league], I don't feel that we've really been able to do that yet. And. . .it's not a bad or a good thing, but I don't know. That's something that is very interesting about this league is there hasn't been really a draw for, if they wanna pick sides or not.

The struggle to determine the degree of athleticism is a current battle of identity for the league and derby as a whole. As of this writing, the trajectory of the sport is unclear, but two factors hint toward a more serious, professionalized path for derby. First, the International Olympic Committee is considering roller sports, including roller derby, as an entry for the 2020 Olympics (Grohmann 2011). Including the sport as an Olympic event would no doubt legitimize derby as a sport in its own right, dispelling doubts of its status. Second, in 2011, Toronto hosted the Roller Derby World Cup, the first international flat track derby tournament with thirteen countries represented⁹. The overwhelming success of the event has spurred plans for a second World Cup in 2014.

While some skaters are excited about this opportunity for derby to make the transition from niche to legit sport, they express the concern that the sport will lose its foundational principles as it becomes more mainstream, similarly to other niche subcultures such as punk rock

⁹ While WFTDA was a partner in the World Cup, the actual event was conceived and produced by *Blood & Thunder Magazine*, a major derby publication that supports derby of all types.

or straight-edge that become co-opted with greater exposure (Haenfler 2006). Wendy speaks specifically to this issue: “I see us saying, ‘Well, they do that in football, so we should do that.’ ... I don’t mind us drawing from other sports, but I wanna make sure that it’s not fundamentally changing what we love about women’s roller derby.” While there are positive aspects of streamlining derby—a cohesive team image with identical uniforms, more recognition of derby as a serious sport—the danger lies with following too much with other established sports, causing derby to lose its unique qualities and become integrated into what Theberge (1997) calls “the masculine model.” Particular to bodies, the loss of body diversity amongst its players is a concern. Wendy voices her thoughts on the issue:

I think the more streamlined the sport gets, you might look for a more streamlined body. Where you think, “Oh, this particular body is best for this, and this particular body is best for that.” ‘Cause it seems like there are a lot of sports where you start to get a standard or an ideal of what would be the best body for that particular thing. I don’t like that.

For most sports, an ideal type of body—a runner’s body, a swimmer’s body, for example—is easily recognizable, especially at elite levels. Among the highest ranked derby players, there is already evidence of a less diverse body population. “Mostly thinking Oly,” Zelda says, describing one of the highest ranked WFTDA leagues that consistently plays in the National championship tournament. “They’re all kind of the same.” Skaters themselves are aware of the correlation between higher levels of play and slimming bodies, as taken from an article from *Hellarad* (2012:34)¹⁰: “While Derby people in general like to say that we play a sport which ‘embraces all body types,’ as your team or league progresses up the competitive food chain, you’ll notice that the skaters tend to shrink.” This statement highlights the tension between derby philosophy of accepting all (read: larger) body types while exposing the reality that skaters’

¹⁰ *Hellarad* is a semi-annual derby lifestyle ‘zine based in California (now as an online blog), produced to remind skaters that “sometimes derby is not about skating” (wearehellarad.com). Written in a tongue-in-cheek style, it is designed to be taken as humor—yet there are reflections of reality within.

bodies become smaller and tighter with greater athletic training. If the sport continues on, derby at its highest level runs the risk of losing a quality that sets it apart from other sports—the lack of one ideal sporting body.

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When I started watching derby as a fan, two of my favorite skaters were jammers that, from the stadium seating high above the track, had similar builds to my 5’2” height and 130-pound weight (with most of it in my legs). Seeing an abundance of average-sized women playing a full-contact and high-intensity sport, especially women with whom I could personally identify body and ability-wise, definitely helped give me the confidence that I could play alongside them. “If they can do it, I can do this,” I thought. With that notion, I decided to try out.

Almost a year later, I watched Team USA dominate at the World Cup from the streaming Internet feed on my computer. I couldn’t believe how similar the skaters’ bodies were (for the most part). It could have been the feed quality or a matter of quick foreclosure, but they all pretty much looked the same to me. True, the amateur level leagues may still retain the diversity, but there’s always some kind of trickle-down effect. With the increasing skill level we keep setting to join our league, I worry that people like Leia, who learned how to skate just to play derby, or me, who decided to try derby without any prior sport or skating experience beyond Astro Skate school parties in elementary school, are a dying breed. Looking at the fresh meat class this year, at least four of the eleven rookies either played for other leagues or have other skating experience. This sport’s already evolved so quickly in the past decade. What will we the skaters and others who love derby create as its future?

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Although some skaters have hesitation about losing the derby philosophies of

empowerment, difference, diversity, and acceptance, to some extent these are already at risk. These ideals are ideal for a reason: the reality tries to match but often falls short. I have tried to demonstrate this point by illustrating the preceding tensions of body size at the local and national levels, skater views and behaviors in private versus public derby space, and the push for legitimacy as a sport and desires to keep derby as alternative as possible. In some ways, derby tries to maintain this status as a carved space of resistance, but it does not fare well in other ways, particularly in the following section.

Men and Transgendered Players: The “Other?”

Women’s roller derby is by definition a women’s sport, made for women’s bodies (assuming cisgendered women). So what happens when men or transgendered individuals want to play? Despite the masculine connotations and expectations within the sport as noted previously, these are forgiven if a “true” woman’s body is playing.

Several men’s derby leagues (popularly abbreviated as “merby”) have sprouted across the nation, usually branching off in partnership from a women’s league in the area. Though not as popular or widespread as the women’s version, merby also has its own governing body, the Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA), which closely follows policies set by its big sister organization, WFTDA. Though interviewing merby players was beyond the scope of this research, skaters I interviewed overall expressed a sense of ambivalence about the growth of merby. Some were very supportive and would even be willing to play co-ed derby, but others had qualified opinions relating to women having original ownership of modern derby and being wary of men’s entry into the sport as a protective reaction.

Some skaters did speak explicitly about men’s bodies as ill-fitting for modern derby as played by women. For example, Daisy describes merby as “not pretty to watch when men are

playing it. ... It looks like a free-for-all when big, strong men are on skates. You don't see a lot of grace and finesse that you see when women play the sport." From this view, the grace and finesse of women's derby is a selling point, similarly to the arguments used by women's hockey players to market their sport as superior to the "men's game" (Theberge 1997). Unlike hockey, however, women's derby is considered the "real game."

Starfire cites a mixed opinion of derby, speaking to the nature of modern derby as having inherently feminine characteristics: "I feel like the nature of derby hits. . .has this femininity to it because we use our hips. And. . .we're able to move the ways in which we need to hit better than men. I don't feel that [men's] bodies are necessarily built for the type of hits that we encourage." Hip checking is one of the most basic and frequently used maneuvers in the sport. While training as fresh meat, my fellow newbies and I were instructed to use our hips rather than our upper bodies for a more effective and powerful hit. As also noted in women's self-defense courses (de Welde 2003), the lower body is where women carry the bulk of their power. Broad, shapely hips biologically signify womanhood. When bodies without such hips attempt to recreate these hits designed for them, it can look peculiar, to the point that it appears such bodies are not built for this version of the sport. Joy notes in a similar vein:

I think [men playing derby] look kind of funny. Honestly, they're top heavy, and derby is made for big butts! [laughing] Quite honestly, I think they look a little funny on the track! And. . .a lot of them hit with their shoulders rather than hitting with their hips, which isn't quite as effective. ... They look so funny. I can't even watch 'em.

Modern derby was created with women's bodies in mind. Typically in sport, men's bodies are assumed as the default "athlete," and women who play have struggled to find ways to fit into the mold. Derby is an activity in which the reverse occurs: "skater" is assumed as female, with the sport as a whole tailored best to those with large bottoms. Now it is men who struggle to fit into a role that is centered around women's bodies. As Joy suggests, a non-woman body in play can

be ineffective and even comical, which may discourage outsiders (and even other skaters) from taking an interest in merby. While skaters I interviewed did not go so far as to state men should not be able to play because their bodies are inferior (a rationale historically given to prohibit women's participation in sport), a sense of support clashes with the lack of seriousness grounded in the perceived ill fit of men's bodies. In this sense, there is almost a parallel between the role of women's athletics overall and men's derby. Some women, who now have a small space of their own, may have become gatekeepers to derby, reproducing the restrictive or even exclusive ideologies that they wished to counter, essentially contradicting the derby philosophy of acceptance of bodies of all types.

Body shape is not the only element that can give a comical impression to merby. The flashy, sexy outfits that are still associated with derby to this day are sometimes donned by merby players. Can this reversal be taken as a sign of resistance? Perhaps on the individual level, but the greater impression received is again, one of comedy and parody. Linka explains her view:

Um, guys in Spandex don't work. I'm sorry. ... Even though it's actually really good. It's very athletic. But there's just something about it that seems odd. ... I mean, not really, really odd, but sort of like...I feel like the sport aspect of it isn't odd, but when guys dress up, it ends up being odd. ... Like if a guy wants to wear green Spandex, have at it, but. . .trying to perpetuate the showmanship aspect of derby through the guys' sport seems very artificial to me. ... For the sport aspect, it makes a lot of sense for them. Like yeah, it's a cool sport, come on and play. But there's something in it when it's like, "Dude, you're wearing fishnets?" I mean, that's cool and if that speaks to your soul, then go ahead and wear fishnets. But I feel like it just doesn't come across to the crowd as much as it does like when women play it. So it comes off as more of a parody than it does whatever derby is. ... I mean, it's more comical than it is anything real.

Merby by itself is not odd. The athleticism or the "sport aspect" is encouraged and considered normal, just as in any other contact sport. As Linka says, it makes sense that men would want to play because it is a cool contact sport. However, the line of acceptability is drawn when men start to don uniforms similar to those of women skaters, such as green Spandex and fishnets. For

women, this is an acceptable outfit choice within the derby space, but more questions are raised when men wear them. Linka suggests that the crowd may not pick up on any playfulness or resistance that might be present and instead see men wearing fishnets as a comical parody of the women's version. This type of role reversal parallels powder-puff football in which girls play the game while boys become the cheerleaders—instead of resisting gender norms, the humor neutralizes the threat and turns it a mockery (Foley 1990). Considering that the most support for merby comes from women skaters rather than fans (WFTDA 2012), it makes sense that outsiders would not have the same interpretation. Yet women skaters are both merby's biggest supporters and detractors. The issue is not the threat to women being able to play derby—perhaps merby is considered a threat to derby's legitimacy as a sport. Fans that would be on board with the idea of women skating are turned off upon seeing men playing the same game (in similar outfits). A tension thus arises: skaters want to support their brothers in wheels according to their philosophy of acceptance, acknowledging the aid that men have given in running their own leagues, but they may be overprotective of “their baby” due to women's relatively limited opportunities to control a sport. As Minerva quite bluntly states, “I would much rather watch the female version just because it started as a women-oriented thing. Guys have enough crap.” Again, women skaters may unwittingly become gatekeepers of access to derby, reifying not only bodily norms but also gender norms as to what is acceptable conduct.

Though far and few, men who want to play derby have opportunities to do so within men-only or co-ed teams. Transgendered skaters, on the other hand, have recently been the subject of controversy within women's derby. In 2012, WFTDA implemented an official gender policy stating that any skater who participates in sanctioned inter-league bouts must be female, defined as “living as a woman and having sex hormones that are within the medically acceptable

range for a female” (WFTDA, “Gender Policy”). Beyond this, individual leagues are free to omit or create their own policies for intra-league bouts. This policy was met with substantial controversy, with the Philly Roller Girls most notably detracting from the decision (Caesar 2011), citing the policy was not inclusive enough. The league under study produced two drafts before the second was voted in as the official policy, but not without a hailstorm of discussion. Talking about the issue of inclusion compared to the WFTDA motto, “Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary,” Zelda says:

It just doesn’t feel very revolutionary to exclude so many people. And also, in regards to gender, being able to qualify, even if you’re just talking about transwomen, it only allows them for one kind of gender expression. Where . . . born women have a multitude of acceptable expressions of gender. Where pretty much, if you’re a transwoman, you have to try to look a certain way, dress a certain way, basically try to be a soccer mom. . . . Even changing your name to something neutral. . . . would cause question. . . . As far as that particular policy goes, you have to be on one side of the line or the other.

To Zelda, it is ironic that a sport that promotes inclusion and uses the term “revolutionary” in its description is still limiting. First, those who aspire to compete at the national level cannot live gender-neutrally. Second, transgendered skaters, already under a microscope, are pressured to conform to one mode of gender expression (feminine) in order to avoid scrutiny or doubt that they are women. Meanwhile, “born” women are not questioned about their hormonal make-up and are free to express any mode of gender that they desire. Freedom of expression and non-judgmental attitudes are two factors that skaters and other derby folk often find is what makes the derby space a safe zone for difference in all arenas. This issue, however, points out the fact that the space is not, to use Lara’s words, “blurred line heaven by any means yet.” Joy points out the discord between the ideal of derby as being an open and accepting community versus the reality of “the transgender issue” within this league specifically:

I think that we may have, at least in [our league], interestingly enough, kind of met some people’s limits. . . . with the transgender issue. And I think that it was interesting because

that brought out a lot of prejudice within our league that I didn't know existed before then. Because as far as, you know, gay, lesbian, these people were very accepting. And all of a sudden we got to a transgender individual and those people who. . .were accepting everybody else, all of a sudden, that was their limit. ... It's just a fun sport. You don't have to be so serious. I mean, the whole basis was empowerment. Let's empower everybody rather than just those whom we choose to empower.

Despite the unwritten philosophy of derby to be inclusive rather than exclusive, tensions exist within leagues and the governing body itself as to who will be recognized seriously as a skater—and furthermore, what constitutes as the “true” sport of derby. Though not representative of all skaters, the bodies of men and transgender skaters are called into question as being fully accepted as legitimate participants in flat track derby. Some skaters end up recycling the ideologies of exclusion, trivialization, and belittlement of which they as women athletes have attempted to counter with the growth of derby, applying it to those who have by design less power within the sport in its current state.

The women's version of derby dominates for now, but will it always? Is merby set to skate the same track as women's teams in male-dominated sports and be viewed as the less serious “inferior” version to the “real” women's game? Above all, who can and should participate?

CHAPTER 5: “IT SHOULDN’T BE A REVOLUTION TO BE ATHLETIC, IT SHOULD JUST BE”: DISCUSSION

Overall, as seen in this study, the relationship between derby as a sport, the individual skaters, and their bodies is tremendously complex, full of tension and contradiction. The findings from Carlson (2010) and Peluso (2011) set a foundation for examining the body in derby. Several of my findings parallel those of previous derby research. First, my research supports the overall theme of various shapes and sizes represented in derby that are defined more by uses, albeit with attention paid to appearance. Second, I found a similar focus on skater’s buttocks as weapons rather than “trouble zones” (Carlson 2010). Third, skaters discussed injuries, particularly playing through pain, as a symbol of “grittiness” or toughness, though ill-advised. Fourth, skaters were aware of the temptation to divide skaters into position by body type, noting examples of skaters who did not fit the small jammer/big blocker binary.

I concur with Peluso’s argument that derby creates a safe space in sport for marginalized and transgressive bodies, but only to an extent, amending this to the *private* derby space as being safe. Building on this solid foundation, my analysis paints a more complex picture of tension-filled relationships between skater bodies, social norms, and derby norms. The findings suggest that within derby, skaters engage in both accommodation and resistance of social norms regarding femininity and women’s bodies. The findings also suggest that there are often contradictions between unwritten derby philosophies and the realities of the sport.

Within the league, the common philosophy is a lack of judgment based on appearance or body type. Skaters cite that in derby, one uses her unique body style to her advantage and is not forced to change, suggesting a greater acceptance for diverse bodies and flexibility. Despite the philosophy, however, rumblings of which bodies are most effective or desired for derby seep through. All body types have their advantages and disadvantages, but few skaters cite smallness

as a characteristic that they envy. Within bouts in particular, bigger bodies are more valuable, even to the point that small skaters express the desire to gain weight. To complicate things further, however, a greater push for athleticism often results in more compact and similar bodies, which are then greater valued at the higher levels of competition. For the league under investigation, this produces a unique tension between local league and national expectations. In this sense, derby becomes more like other sports in terms of bodies, which limits the promoted diversity of the sport. Skaters may receive conflicting messages: “Use what you got—especially if you got a lot already. And if you don’t have a lot, it’ll work, but...oh, and you need to work out, too.” The focus on size points to its centrality in defining the derby body and what it can do. More broadly, physical appearance is still central to a skater’s (woman’s) identity—as well as to potential modes of resistance.

When women appear to dominate the derby space, as in the case of closed practices, they feel free to “let their hair down” and act in ways in which “most women” are not expected (e.g. belching, swearing, smelling bad). Yet this self-realization, in addition to the confirmation by privileged male insiders that “normal women” do not act this way, maintains those boundaries in the background. When skaters venture out of the private derby practice space, they are reminded that their bodies are under public gaze and subject to scrutiny under these expectations. No matter how liberated they may feel at practice or around other skaters, the public derby space is not always as kind. The fact that women recognize the risk of sexualization and sanctions for exposing their bodies is recognition of bodily norms outside the space. Exposed body parts or conditions (e.g. cellulite, body odor) are considered undesirable by certain outsiders and sometimes skaters themselves. The sexualized gaze from certain male fans and uniform fashion trends of slimming attire that can even sometimes restrict fluidity of movement also reify

conventional norms of women's sporting bodies. These elements may also be an underlying threat to gendered body resistance that reaches beyond private derby spaces. Perhaps the most disconcerting tension is the between the philosophy of acceptance and the reality of various exclusions, depending on the league. Derby faces a peculiar reversal within sports in that (born) women's bodies are the default mold, which puts the bodies of men and transgender skaters in an odd place as not quite fitting or even excluded, a stark contrast to derby's philosophy of diversity.

On the surface, derby is a women-dominated space in which alternative narratives of bodily capabilities and appropriate behavior are created. Further inspection, however, reveals a complex set of interactions between larger societal beauty and body norms, expectations and values from the sport as a whole, local league attitudes, and individual preferences, all of which impact and reflect one another in some form. Skaters have attempted to carve out and control a small piece of sports space for themselves, which has worked in small ways on an individual level but is much more limited than the philosophy of community and cooperation would put forth.

As found in other literature on women's bodies (Weitz 2001), a combination of resistance and accommodation to women's bodily norms exist within derby. Within the private derby space, skaters challenge the ideologies of 1) the ideal athletic body as a smaller body and 2) bodily restriction and limitation for women. Within the derby space, skaters' bodies are sources of power and strength. Corpulence, whether overall or concentrated within certain body parts, is an envied and positive characteristic. Skaters note that the derby space fosters feelings of personal power, rather than disempowerment, weakness, marginalization, or invisibility that typically comes in "normal society." The ability to take up space on the track is a valued

attribute. Freedom of movement and taking up space is required of skaters, a counter to the “tyranny of slenderness” and restraint of movement that is expected of women (Bartky 2010). In addition to reclaiming size and physical power, women are freer to reclaim their bodily functions as normal without judgment. They can fart, belch, and smell bad without chastisement for inappropriate behavior, not even from the men within the space. Like other contact sports, skaters resist the feminine pressure to look pretty and smell nice in the practice space as a necessity of their training.

Yet as I have demonstrated, these moments of resistance are limited to the private space and become more accommodating in more public derby settings or on the national level. When larger bodies become more agile, thin, and fit through training, these shrinking bodies slowly start to match normative standards for ideal athletic body. Certain fashionable uniform items, some of which are created by derby skaters *for* derby skaters, can restrict movement or cause additional fidgeting when mismatched with bodies that do not readily fit. The act of comparing bodily norms within derby to those outside of it answers what is being resisted, reproducing and, to an extent, adopting the very norms that skaters may look to counter. Even if looking to add or retain mass to their bodies, skaters still are very aware of what culture produces as the ideal body, meaning that this norm is not completely discarded.

Bodily norms also find their way into the sport in small ways. Beyond financial and other practical considerations, the brute physical nature of the sport can potentially turn away players. A gendered discomfort with physicality is also demonstrated by players who apologize for knocking down an opponent on the track, pointing to a negotiation with the clashing expectations of sport and socialization. On a broader level, similarly to Theberge’s analysis (1997), evidence of co-optation of the masculine sports model shows adoption of these dominant ideologies rather

than resistance against them. The realities of exclusions for reasons that ultimately come to maintaining control point to this as well. Derby demonstrates that just because women have the administrative and participatory control does not mean that they will not buy into patriarchal values to some degree, which is evident from the reproduction of exclusion of or the lack of legitimization with regards to men and transgender players. This begs the question, however: is this configuration the lesser of two evils? Are the benefits of derby outweighed by the risks of perpetrating these norms? If skaters feel limited by a public audience, especially if the trajectory leads to professionalization, how much can it truly be *by* the (women) skaters, *for* the (women) skaters? What effect does this have on the role of non (cisgendered) women?

Despite derby space being a safe zone for alternative bodily narratives for women, these pockets of resistance do not translate outside of the space and limits critique of the masculine athletic model, similar to Carlson's (2010) findings. Skaters made no mention of any power their bodies granted them outside of derby or derby-related training, separating their derby and non-derby lives. Women may find a sense of physical and psychological empowerment, but this may be fleeting and temporary. On a broader theoretical level, this limits not only derby's potential for resistance beyond the individual level, but also derby's societal critique related to sporting bodies. Furthermore, pockets of resistance that exist within derby are only available to those who are able to play, further limiting the sport's critique. Beyond physicality, hefty financial and time investments are required for participation, especially at the national level. On average, current skaters spend \$622 on equipment and gear, plus \$656 in travel costs and \$223 in support costs (dues, event tickets, etc.) (WFTDA, 2012). I myself paid \$600 (including a discount from my

local league-sponsored skate shop) for a new pair of skates when I joined the A team¹¹, in addition to league dues, uniforms, fees for additional practice time, wheels, bearings, replacement gear, gas, and numerous other expenses. Practice times are usually set in the evening during the week, benefitting those with 9-to-5 occupations and leaving those with night work schedules or family responsibilities to miss practice. Other league obligations such as committee work, bout production, and promotion also drain time. Thus, this form of bodily resistance is most accessible to those with other avenues of privilege—white middle class college-educated women, who make up the majority of the sport’s players. Furthermore, these privileges allow many of these women to avoid thinking about issues of power or resistance and thus ignore it, a tactic that Weitz argues is a partial strategy of accommodation. Indeed, several skaters who fit this description told me in interviews that they had never thought about issues of gender and power in derby. The path that the sport will pursue and the identity it wants to have is up to the skaters—do skaters want to push for a professional venture, retain the collective grassroots organization, or attempt a real revolution in the sports institution by meshing both for a new model of sports ownership?

A significant amount of research on women’s sporting bodies has been conducted with collegiate athletes, women in their late teens to early twenties. In contrast, the average age of a skater is in the early thirties. The age gap could partially explain why, in comparison to younger athletes, skaters did not attempt to hide their large, muscular bodies or body parts. Young women in college environments may be more worried about emphasizing femininity to attract potential suitors, especially if the dating pool is limited (Ezzell 2009). Skaters, many of whom already

¹¹ Increased financial commitment is often translated into better gear. I originally started skating on a pair of \$200 skates which served me well for my first season. However, it was assumed that I was going to purchase an upgraded pair upon my joining the A team, having been asked if I was going to do so more than once.

have spouses or partners, do not necessarily have this worry. However, this concern with femininity exists across sports, even when using older athletes past the college level. While matching the age range of skaters in my sample, bodybuilders in particular worried about growing “too big” (Boyle 2005). Yet women who participate in the latter are explicitly judged on their femininity, pointing to differences in sport construction.

As this study focused on members of one league, the intent is not to generalize experiences. The league under study may be unique in terms of its attitudes toward and reality of derby bodies, especially considering the relative diversity in the A travel team compared to other travel teams as noted above, and thus my findings may not apply to other leagues. However, themes similar to mine have appeared in other literature on derby and women’s sports. In particular, my findings overlapped with previous findings on women’s rugby (Chase 2006; Ezzell 2009; Russell 2004). First, like the ruggers, skaters in my study also experienced changed relationships with their bodies as a result of playing for the same reasons: within the sport, their bodies were viewed as acceptable and useful no matter the size. Second, skaters also actively tried to gain weight or muscularity for an advantage in game-play. Third, as in rugby, skaters’ positive conceptions of their bodies did not always transfer outside of the derby space, resulting in both a challenge and reproduction of inequality. Finally, for a lot of skaters (myself included), derby is the first team sport they have ever played that expects aggression and physicality from its players. It should be noted that within the league of study, some skaters were former ruggers while other skaters had looked into playing rugby either before or while they played derby. The similar levels of physical contact and team sport dynamics of both could help explain these parallels, but future research should examine these sports and their players in tandem to elaborate: what is it about both rugby and derby (or the women who play them) that encourages

these attitudes toward bodies? Noting the parallels of derby and rugby, does skaters' ownership and control of derby really make a difference if the end result is the same?

Future research should also continue to examine derby as it evolves. Since the sport was reborn in 2001, the nature of the game has changed rapidly. Derby at this writing is not the same derby that Finley, Carlson, or Peluso examined in their work, and derby in the future will not be the same as this work. Themes or modes of gameplay that recur now may be rendered obsolete later, such as the fighting and tutus-as-boutfits that were once commonplace in Cohen's (2008) work. Research should go beyond exploring women's derby and begin to look at men's derby and junior derby as these avenues grow to explore the experiences of men and girls in the sport. As men are often considered the "other" in derby, it is imperative that their perspectives be examined. Other forms of play, particularly renegade or derby-lite¹² that have different rule sets and expectations than flat track derby, should also be examined in comparison. In addition, scholars should begin to look at the international impact of derby, especially in non-Western countries or cultures with more restrictive gender roles. Finally, a glaring limitation of this study was that it focused mainly on the gendered body experiences of white middle-class women, giving paltry attention to class and race within the larger project. An intersectional approach is sorely needed to examine derby and its players through a lens of race, class, gender, and sexuality. With the exception of gender, the remaining factors have been left largely unexplored.

Women's flat track derby is promoted by WFTDA as "Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary." The sport is *real* in that it is no longer staged, differentiating from derby's past. Women who play often become physically and mentally *strong* as a result. Being *athletic* again differentiates from derby's staged past, making it clear that while skaters toe the line with

¹² Renegade roller derby uses no referees and no rules, resulting in a "no holds barred" game. Derby-lite is a less taxing version that is promoted as a form of fitness exercise, not for athletic competition.

sometimes sexually provocative uniforms and names, the sport is truly an athletic endeavor. *Revolutionary*, though, brings a mixed reaction. Though derby is spreading internationally, it is still a niche sport, making it difficult to define it as a revolution in the traditional sense. A quote from Starfire is appropriate here: “It shouldn’t be a revolution to be athletic. It should just be.” The fact that it is considered revolutionary for women to play and, by majority control, a contact sport implies that women still have a long path to travel before the playing field becomes truly level. Until then, they will continue to strap on skates, create small businesses, build their bodies and build themselves in the safety of the practice space.

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ABSTRACT**“THERE’S SO MANY FABULOUS BUTTS IN DERBY”: THE SKATING BODY IN
WOMEN’S FLAT TRACK ROLLER DERBY**

by

AMANDA DRAFT**May 2013****Advisor:** Dr. Heather Dillaway**Major:** Sociology**Degree:** Master of Arts

Women’s flat track roller derby is a growing niche sport that has gathered much attention from media and academics alike. Previous research has analyzed the sport from a gendered view with limited focus on bodies in the broader sense. I attempt to fill this gap in the literature by asking: How do derby skaters define the derby body? In what ways do skaters resist and/or accommodate conventional bodily norms and those within derby? Utilizing an ethnographic repertoire of observation, interviews, and autoethnography, I examine the experiences of women derby skaters for a local flat track league located in the Midwest. Drawing from literature on gender and sport, resistance, and embodiment, I argue that skaters engage with a series of tensions and contradictions between societal norms and derby values, specifically those related to body size, athleticism, public versus private spaces, and the role of non-(born) women in the sport.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Amanda Draft is a Master's candidate in Sociology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, specializing in gender inequality and qualitative methodology. She previously received her B.A. in Sociology and Women's Studies from Central Michigan University, received her M.A. in May 2013, and is currently working toward her Ph.D. One of her many research interests is gender and embodiment within sport, particularly women's roller derby. While she juggles academic work, she finds time to play derby on the local and national levels.