



Benefits of Roller Derby: The Roller Girl Perspective

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Abstract

Roller derby consists of two teams vying for points played on a flat oval track wearing quad skates. The specific research questions asked were: What are the characteristics of roller derby league members? What are the motivations of women who join roller derby leagues? What are reasons for continuing to participate? Do roller derby participants identify specific characteristics of the sport that distinguish it from other sports? Are there specific benefits from roller derby women seek and receive? An on-line survey was used and qualitative data were analyzed (n=1597). Based upon the data, a typical respondent is Caucasian, 20 to 40 years of age, heterosexual, in a married/domestic partnership, and has a post-secondary degree. Reasons for joining included looking for a new way to get exercise, add something new and different to my life, and roller derby might fit my personality. For continuing, the following reasons were ranked as important; roller derby adds richness to my life, I like the idea of overcoming obstacles as a team, and I like the social interaction. Because of participation, they benefited several ways including a positive opinion of self, health improvement, increased relationships, and an added outlook.

How to Cite

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INTRODUCTION

Roller derby originated in the 1930's as roller skating marathons. By 1937, roller derby had evolved into a physical competition between two teams with associated media and spectators. Roller derby has had many boom-and-bust cycles with its popularity peaking in 1949 with 55,000 fans watching a competition in Madison Square Garden (Coppage, 1999). There were several short-lived attempts to revitalize the sport since that time through theatrical television programs, which were short-lived. In 2003, the Texas Roller-girls league gained media attention and launched league formation in other towns (Coppage, 1999; Kearney, 2011; Mabee, 2007). In 2006, Roller Derby Worldwide (2012) had 160 leagues registered on its database. Today, Roller Derby Listing reports 1,917 registered leagues (Derbylisting.com, 2018).

The main purpose of this research was to increase understanding of why roller derby members are attracted to this sport and continue to participate. The specific research questions asked:

- (1) What are the characteristics of roller derby league members?
- (2) What are the motivations of women who join roller derby leagues?
- (3) What are reasons for continuing to participate?
- (4) Do roller derby participants identify specific characteristics of the sport?
- (5) Are there specific benefits from roller derby that women seek and receive?

Most of the current research findings about roller derby are found in feminist literature, which contextualizes the meaning of the sport for women. Storms (2008) suggests that roller derby is another window through which to understand the evolution of feminism in America as women seek alternative ways to experience their bodies and gender. Peluso (2010) concluded that roller derby threatens the gender order status quo due to the formation of a league identity of shared values creating solidarity to the point of having the members "guard the boundaries of the community from outsiders" (p. 132). Roller derby is empowering and has a diffusion effect wherein empowered women empower others, improve self-confidence, sexuality, and empowerment. (Peluso, 2010 p. 76). Carlson (2010) revealed that roller derby provides a venue for women to emphasize femininity whilst also being aggressive. Authors (Eklund & Masberg; 2014; Strubel & Petrie, 2016) found that body image and self-esteem improved with involvement. Neverthe-

less, others point out that size does matter as the attitude toward size or bigger is better changes based upon the level of competition of the roller derby team (Draft, 2017). Injuries and the "willingness to play through" mentality is prevalent in roller derby for a variety of reasons, to not let down their teammates, playing time, and so they do not appear weak (Madrigal & Robbins, 2017, p. 185).

Pavlidis (2012) states that roller derby is ". . . an enabling space where female subjectivities and collective belonging can be played with" (p. 173). In Cotterill's ethnographic study, seven themes emerged regarding the reasons for participating in roller derby: "outlet for aggression, escape from daily constraints, camaraderie, exercise, empowering women, self-fulfillment and love of the sport" (p. 33). Rowlette (2015) supported these themes with her results that identified areas that were important when participating in roller derby: "(1) intimidation during the initial skating experience, (2) challenges of learning new skills, (3) developing and maintaining relationships, (4) feelings of strength, and (5) relieving built-up stress (p. 42)".

Finley (2010) offered the idea that intra-gender relationships developed through roller derby may provide an impetus for "gender maneuvering" in other settings. The interactions between women seem to transform women to "athletes and supporters of other women activities as teammates" (p. 381). Finley (2010) viewed the roller derby subculture as something that "challenges the gender relations of sport (p. 380). Using the do-it-yourself (DIY) organization and being "by the skater for the skater" causes struggles with the amount of time required for bouts and management as well as the financial expense (Beaver, 2012). However skaters choose to continue to be self-managed in order to have control over their league. Other research addresses roller derby and media exposure that points out that through the broadcasting of roller derby there are other models of empowered women. (Kearney, 2011, p. 297).

Involvement and relationships are shown to be integral motivators for joining and continuing in the sport. The culture experienced by current participants may be different from future participants as the sport settles on operation and management norms (Filip, 2016)

Roller Derby Basics

Roller derby is a high contact sport played on a flat or banked oval track wearing four wheeled roller skates. Each team is composed of Blockers, a Pivot, and a Jammer. Each game or

bout is comprised of two 30-minute periods of play and each jam is 2 minutes long. Points are earned when the Jammer passes each opposing player. A Pivot keeps the pack together and directs play. Blockers either block opposing Jammers or assist their own Jammer through the pack. There are four main types of blocks: (a) the booty block uses the derriere; (b) the shoulder check, a hit to the side of the body using the shoulder and ribs; (c) the hip check; and the (d) sternum check, using the back of the shoulder to hit the sternum. Hitting or using the lower leg, forearm, elbow, or head to block is illegal. (Coppage, 1999; Deford, 1971; Finley, 2010; Mabe, 2007; Peluso, 2010).

The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA, 2018) has established minimum skill requirements and other standards for the sport. Every skater is required to wear a helmet, wrist guards, elbow pads, knee pads, a mouth guard, and quad roller skates (Delano, 2010; Mabe, 2007; Peluso, 2010; WFTDA, 2018;)

Starting out interested women recruit others and seek volunteers to be a leader or manager, and others to serve on committees. A league may have 10 to 130 members. Each league has bylaws and policies, which may include practice and bout-attendance requirements, codes of conduct, new skater policies, skating and bout rules, dismissal policies, and insurance requirements. (Beaver, 2012; Mabe, 2007; Peluso, 2010).

New members are called fresh meat and train for 60 to 90 days to learn the rules and how to move on skates. Fresh meat are tested on their skating ability and knowledge of the rules. They then join league practices and are placed on a team (personal communication, May 28, 2012).

Roller derby requires considerable time commitment. A typical weekly schedule could be made up of two to four practices, one scrimmage, a league committee meeting, and a bout. Most leagues have an attendance requirement, attendance at 75% of practices, or 12 out of 16 practices in one month (Barbee & Cohen, 2010).

METHODS

The investigators developed an on-line survey. The survey instrument contained closed-ended and open-ended questions. Roller derby members both reviewed and pilot tested the survey instrument. A final draft was created, and was published to Qualtrics for data collection.

This research used cluster sampling. A mailing list of roller derby leagues was obtained through Roller Derby Worldwide (2012). At the time of this study, 615 leagues were listed in the

United States. This list contained links to either a league Facebook page, or a league website. Phone numbers were used to obtain e-mails. Leagues not included were junior or coed leagues or had invalid contact information.

The implementation process involved sending 583 e-mails with a request to pass along the request to their league members. Respondents self-selected and 1,597 league members from 481 leagues responded to the survey. Demographic data and closed-responses were analyzed using SPSS software. The responses to the open-ended questions were coded to identify patterns (categories and themes) in the data (Saldana, 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 outlines the demographic characteristics of the respondents. A Roller Girl is Caucasian/White, Heterosexual, between the ages of 20 and 40 years, has earned a degree from a college or university, is married or in a domestic partnership and has one to two children living with her. Respondents were members of a league located in every state in the United States and the District of Columbia:

The length of time as a member and the number of bouts revealed the participants' involvement (see **Table 2**). The highest portion of respondents (35.7%, n= 570) were members for one year or less. The number of bouts in which they had participated reflected fresh meat, zero bouts, (21.9% n=349) and a very well-seasoned member who had more than 15 bouts (24.3% n=388). Respondents rated their skating ability before starting roller derby and then rated their current skating ability on a 10-point scale from 1-low ability to 10-high ability. Skating ability before starting roller derby and their current skating ability, mean score of 3.75 (SD=2.30) and 7.18 (SD=1.57) respectively.

Respondents were asked to rank a list of reasons for initially deciding to join roller derby (1= most important), **Table 3**, as well as a list of reasons for continuing to participate (**Table 4**).

The aggregated mean was used to indicate the more important items. Other comments made were "always wanted to do roller derby", or it looked like "fun" (n=52, 37.1%). Stress reduction and wanting to hit people (n=23, 16.4%) was mentioned along with respondents having some type of connection or need for connection (n=21, 15.0%) such as a friend was trying out, involvement in the community, looking for social interaction after moving to the area, or just "attention".

Age of the Respondents			Current Profession or Type of Employment		
	#	%		#	%
18 to 19 years	11	0.77%	Professional/technical	478	30.30%
20 to 29 years	554	38.96%	Manager/official/proprietor	183	11.60%
30 to 39 years	653	45.92%	Student	152	9.60%
40 to 49 years	192	13.50%	Clerical	139	8.80%
50 to 59 years	12	0.84%	Teacher	113	7.20%
Total	1422	100.00%	Service worker	113	7.20%
Race or Ethnicity			Homemaker	84	5.30%
	#	%	Sales	71	4.50%
White/Caucasian	1384	86.9	Health Care	64	4.10%
Hispanic/Latina/	95	6	Crafts/trades	40	2.50%
Other	49	3.1	Unemployed	36	2.30%
Asian / Pacific Islander / Asian			Owner	31	2.00%
American	24	1.5	Laborer	24	1.50%
Black / African American	21	1.3	Artist	24	1.50%
Native American	19	1.2	Military	11	0.70%
Total	1592	100	Operator	7	0.40%
Current Relationship status			Retired	6	0.40%
	#	%	Total	1576	100.00%
Married / Domestic Partnership	782	49.2	Approximate Annual Household Income		
Single	374	23.5		#	%
Cohabiting (not married or domestic partnership)	340	21.4	Less than \$25,000	291	18.6
Separated / Divorced	90	5.7	\$25,000 to \$49,999	470	30.1
Widowed	5	0.3	\$50,000 to \$74,999	348	22.3
Total	1591	100	\$75,000 to \$99,999	216	13.8
Sexual Orientation			\$100,000 to \$124,999	103	6.6
	#	%	\$125,000 to \$149,999	58	3.7
Heterosexual	1240	77.6	\$150,000 to \$174,999	32	2
Bisexual	199	12.5	\$175,000 to \$199,999	16	1
Homosexual	96	6	\$200,000 to \$224,999	11	0.7
Other	55	3.4	\$225,000 to \$249,999	6	0.4
Total	1590	99.6	More than \$250,000	12	0.8
Highest Education Level			Total	1563	100
	#	%			
Some high school	4	0.3			
Completed high school or GED	72	4.5			
Junior College/Community College/Trade School (Associate's Degree)	160	10.1			
Some college/university	334	21			
Two year degree	119	7.5			
Four year degree	565	35.5			
A graduate degree (e.g. Masters, Ph.D. or an M.D.)	336	21.1			

Table 2. Roller Derby Profile Information

Length of Time Participating	#	%	Participation in Number of Bouts	#	%
1-6 months	262	16.4%	Zero	349	21.9
6 months to 1 year	308	19.3%	1 bout	140	8.8
1 to 2 years	497	31.2%	2-5 bouts	308	19.3
2 to 3 years	218	13.7%	6-10 bouts	284	17.8
3 to 4 years	122	7.7%	11-15 bouts	128	8.0
4 to 5 years	82	5.1%	more than 15 bouts	388	24.3
More than 5 years	105	6.6%	Total	1597	100.0
Total	1594	100.0%			

Table 3. Reasons for initially joining roller derby

List of reasons	Mean	SD
Looking for a new way to get exercise	3.81	2.379
Add something new and different to my life	4.22	2.669
Roller Derby might fit my personality	4.61	2.896
Meet new friends	4.93	2.450
Improve my overall health	5.08	2.285
The competition	6.09	2.594
Work on becoming more athletic	7.15	2.287
Needed a challenge	7.22	3.037
Feel like I belonged to something	7.33	2.849
Want to skate	7.77	3.921
Idea of accomplishing something as part of a group or team	8.63	2.826

The more important reasons to continue to participate were a bit different as the social aspect game out (see Table 4). Other comments contained more insight, "I love it" (n=21, 21.7%), roller derby was an outlet for stress (n=12, 12.4%), the "big crazy family" and other relationships (n=11, 11.3%) and they were accomplishing something "I keep getting better at it, why stop"(n=11, 11.3%).

Table 4. Reasons for continuing in roller derby

Reasons for continuing	Mean	SD
Roller Derby has added richness to my life	3.56	2.323
I like the idea of overcoming obstacles as a team	4.56	1.927
I like the social interaction	4.67	2.109
I find I like the competition	5.40	2.383
I get an opportunity to express myself in a new way	5.56	2.941
I enjoy the support of team members	5.65	2.238
I like working on improving my skating	5.82	2.571
I like the exercise	6.55	3.600
Roller Derby has changed my outlook on my life	6.55	3.605
I like the effort and perseverance involved	7.18	2.774
I love it, It's fun,	21	21.65%
Outlet for stress or "hitting people legally"	12	12.37%

Relationships; "a big crazy family", "community/sisterhood", "parties",	11	11.34%
Accomplishment	11	11.3%

The pragmatic reason for beginning the sport, exercise, was subsumed by such reasons as social interaction, richness and overcoming obstacles. Henderson et al., (2002) have pointed out creating positive environments for women's leisure is important. The sport is attractive to the respondents as it is for adult women and roller derby allows all women no matter their size, skating skill, age, or profession to participate.

A key to roller derby's popularity could be the inclusivity of the sport. The respondents liked that roller derby did not include minimum skill level requirement. A skater may become a member with no skating ability but must make the effort to meet a skating proficiency. The reason for continuing in the sport is as one woman said, "I love the mental challenge of pushing myself to new limits". The physical and mental effort seems to be a benefit of the sport, the satisfaction with a sweaty workout, and the chance to "hit someone". Roller derby offers a "career track" or progression of development from Fresh Meat, through a training period, then to probation, and finally choosing a derby name and number when joining a team. The DIY aspect offers members the opportunity to improve skills. Respondents noted the impact of gaining skills to apply to their professional lives.

To explain the attraction of roller derby the question was asked; "What makes roller derby different from other sports?" **Table 5** contains the major categories that emerged from the data; (1) General Characteristics (2) The Self, (3) Relationships, (4) Inclusivity; and (5) Perceptions of the sport; and (6) No opinion (Did not do sports, do not do other sports, do not like sports). The number of phrases analyzed was 2,891 (n=1,531; 95.9%; mean responses= 1.89).

Table 5. How is roller derby different from other sports?

Response	#	%
The Play	786	27.2%
Self	742	25.7%
Relationships	481	16.6%
Inclusivity	440	15.2%
Perception of the Sport	350	12.1%
Did not do sports, do not do sports, do not like sports	92	3.2%
Total	2,891	100.0%

The actual play is different. Roller derby strategy and playing offense and defense at the

same time and the fact that roller derby is a full contact sport for women was paramount. Skating, the commitment needed, and mentoring occurring were seen as different. The individual outcomes of participating in the sport (The Self) were seen as different from other sports (n=742, 25.7%). Many felt roller derby empowered them and they gained “fun” and enjoyment. Roller derby adds enriching experiences and becomes a “lifestyle”. Learning new skills is something different as well as having the opportunity to further develop those skills and become “good at it.”

Relationships were a keystone. The depth and scope of these relationships ranged from a friendship, a social circle, sisterhood, “family”, and team accomplishment. The feeling of belonging extended beyond the individual’s team and the league to the larger roller derby community. This belonging included the Inclusivity of the sport. Women of all ages, fitness levels, skill levels, body types, and professions may join and contribute. Women join with no skating ability and are able to become competent and join a team in the league. Roller derby is a sport for adult women, “women over 22”.

Perception of the Sport is “intense exercise”, and roller derby necessitates perseverance and pushing yourself beyond your limits, endurance, and “fierceness”

The effect on the respondent (empowerment, fitness, skill development, self-esteem) differed from other sports. These conclusions mirror Cotterill’s (2000) findings whereby roller derby provided an outlet for aggression, escape from daily constraints, camaraderie, exercise, empowering women, self-fulfillment, and love of the sport”. It is logical to conclude that other sports for these women were not empowering, did not allow for skill development and did not improve self-esteem. These aspects should be fostered and developed in sports participant; a sport should be empowering! The overwhelmingly positive affect of roller derby on the respondents necessitate more research. Could this be why roller derby is popular?

An open-ended question, “how has roller derby affected your life” resulted in 4,073 coded phrases (n=1567; 98.1% response rate), a mean of 2.6 phrases per respondent. Nine categories emerged from the data (see **Table 6**).

Table 6. How has roller derby affected your life

Response	#	%
Positive opinion of self	1,157	28.4%
Health	1,019	25.0%

Relationships	777	19.1%
New Outlook	404	9.9%
Skills	265	6.5%
Takes a lot of time	191	4.7%
Affecting other parts of their life	160	3.9%
Negative comments	44	1.1%
Negative effects on body	37	0.9%
Travel	19	0.5%
Total	4,073	100.0%

The most numerous comments addressed how they feel about themselves; opinion of self. These were positive comments as they had increased confidence or felt more empowered; “gets me out of my shell, pushes my comfort level”. Some found the new confidence and empowerment translated to their work and personal lives. There was an increase in self-esteem, “I feel better about myself” especially acceptance of the body. Others enjoy the challenge and sense of accomplishment from meeting goals, getting results, and achievements both personally and as a team. Many comments reflected an increased self-efficacy; “I never thought I would succeed in derby, but I have, and I’ve found that I’m more willing to take big life risks, such as switching career paths.”

The physical being, and personal health were benefits including all aspects of the individual; “physicality”, mental, emotional, overall health, and weight loss; “I was in shape before, but now I’m more muscular”, “I’ve lost 30 lbs.”, and No more asthma.” Roller derby also positively affected the ability of respondents to overcome negative life events such as a death, divorce, addiction, and addressed illness such as diabetes and depression.

The connection and support of league members had a major impact on the lives of the respondents. The relationships gained included; a network, a community, friends, a social life, and “a family”. These relationships and the support gained granted them the ability to accomplish things, gain confidence and overcome challenges. “The friendships you build during the process of blood, sweat and tears are there for a long time.”

Effusive remarks were made such as “I love everything about it” or “it has changed my life” indicating they had gained a new outlook. Respondents also felt roller derby added something new and different to their lives as roller derby “was something to look forward to in their lives” or roller derby was “something out of the ordinary”. The respondents have gained new skills in-

cluding skating, leadership skills, and working as a team. Additionally, coaching, mentoring, training, and business operation skills transferred, to their work lives.

The obligations of roller derby affected their non-roller derby family. Several mothers indicated the “me time” offered by roller derby provides an outlet that results in better interactions at home. Roller derby could become a focus of family activity as daughters have joined junior leagues, husbands have become referees, and other friends and family have become fans. Self-confidence increased, which benefited their careers, however, problems, developed within the family; “. . . has strained non-derby relationships”. Some mentioned problems with the marriage after joining “my husband resents me for “getting out”, but others say roller derby has improved their marriage.

Besides the strain on relationships, the respondents disclosed other negative effects on their lives including their work, time, financial resources, and bodies through injuries. Roller derby “takes over” their time and time demands are further exacerbated by league management duties. Problems were noted but not enough to want to give up roller derby. Some respondents have “cut back” on their time given to the sport. Injuries and physical pain affected the lives of very few, 37 respondents (0.9%), but most did not let it slow down participation for too long

The impact on the respondents’ lives revealed praise for the sport and the effect their participation had on their physical and mental well-being, family relationships, and plans. There are costs and the respondents commented on the tradeoffs they made with family and friends, the injuries, and time commitment; “about 90% of what I do on any given day has something to do with roller derby.” At what point do the costs outweigh the benefits? What negotiation occurs so roller derby can remain part of one’s life? These are questions for a deeper investigation. Individual benefits must offset the “costs” as many saw improvement in health, fitness, family interaction, empowerment, self-esteem, and professional life.

The Physical Activity Council’s annual participation study (2018) indicated participation in many areas of active participation is either flat or declining and the inactivity rate is increasing. In fact they report that the top 2 reasons for non-participation are “Having someone to take part with” and “having a friend take me along” As Putnam (2000) states in *Bowling Alone*, “Americans have had a growing sense at some visceral level of disintegrating social bonds” (p. 287). Why

is the sport of roller derby gaining membership while other sports have been flat or losing participants? Is roller derby the antithesis to *Bowling Alone*?

The grass roots design of roller derby results in members being invested and passionate about the sport, their league, and teammates. The survey asked participants to use five words to describe roller derby and their chosen words typify this investment and passion. Firstly, the building of a “Community”, with “family”, “friends”, and “sisterhood” creates a new social environment. In roller derby, the social aspect seems to be more important. The term collective has cropped up in the literature as something that emerges from women participating in activities such as roller derby (Pavlidis, 2012). The collective could provide room for “gender maneuvering” in other settings typified by skills and confidence gained from roller derby being used to make changes in their lives and to improve career opportunities. Mentorship and support practiced as part of roller derby could extend into other arenas whereby mentorship becomes a norm rather than something trained. It would become non-threatening to the mentor.

Success in roller derby could mean climbing the roller derby career track, playing on elite teams, or being able to “beat” someone. It is competitive. This view is shared by many respondents; they like the competitive aspect of the sport and accomplishing something as a team. Perhaps for many success is being part of the roller derby community with such intrinsic rewards as fun and an outlet for emotion and “I keep getting better at it, why stop.” The reasons for continuing in the sport transformed from the reason for initially joining the league.

Roller derby creates an environment of teamwork, relationships, teaches skills, provides an outlet for stress, and consists of many components including the physical, strategies, and creativity. Participants gain prolific tangible (i.e. the physical changes to their bodies) and intangible (i.e. the mental aspect and relationships formed) benefits. Roller derby participation is increasing while the trend in other sports is flat or decreased participation. Is this a new model for activities? Should a culture be formed to provide an outlet for individuals to create space for themselves? A persona allows an individual to try other behavior and gain insight into the effect of that behavior. It has resulted in the empowerment of women. It is important to note the “adult” aspect whereby a sport is learned in a supportive environment as an adult. It has a career so there is somewhere to

use the skill once learned. Many times adults take introductory courses and when the class ends the opportunity for continued practice and participation ends as well. An individual who does not progress well still participates and belongs in the league. Roller derby is a sport for “adult women” is attractive as there are no other options.

Our work environments are changing as more individuals work from home. Regular telecommuting increased 115% since 2005 (Lister & Gardner, 2017). Telecommuting is approximately 2% of the United States workforce. It is estimated that 45% of the U.S. workforce has a job that is compatible with telecommuting (Global Workplace Analytics, 2012). Additionally, there are home-based businesses and mobile employees. Thus, a staff that works face to face will be unique. As our workplace becomes more mobile, our offices disperse, and individuals work alone, personal interaction will be explored in other venues. In roller derby personal interaction has been shown in this research as paramount to members. How will sport and leisure activities provide “face time” with others?.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this research was to increase understanding of why roller derby members are attracted to this sport and continue to participate. This research provides a look at who a roller derby member is through their demographic characteristics and their roller derby longevity and skill level. The reasons for joining were exercise oriented but grew to social and relationship reasons. The benefits indicated were geared toward the social and improvement in self esteem and professional skills. The sport is different from other sport in that it allows for an unskilled participant to excel and be encouraged. Thus, why are derby members attracted to the sport and continue is because of the structure of the sport itself but also the organization and comradery gained. Through the structure and organization, the participants are addressing their needs for a “family”!.

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