



wonder women on wheels:

boston derby dames,
women's roller derby

Top: Some "fresh meat" (the term used to describe novice players) prepare for a practice. Middle: Doreen "Belle" Manning, 41, picked up the sport in 2009 and was voted 2011's "Rookie of the Year." Bottom: The sport takes a huge commitment, but there is always room for creative name choices.

by **Kathy Shiels Tully**

photos by **Melissa Desjardins**

Women’s roller derby. Quick. What comes to mind?

Images of your grandmother’s roller derby in the ’70s? Or maybe Drew Barrymore’s 2009 movie “Whip It” and the tough, young, tattooed women — think Micky Ward’s sisters in “The Fighter” on roller skates — punching, bashing, bruising and elbowing each other while speed-racing around a track?

Do you have a cartoon-like vision of demure, ladylike women by day — school teachers, nurses, young mothers — transforming into their nighttime alter egos, wonder women on wheels, decked out in frilly tutu skirts, brightly colored fishnet stockings, and Day-Glo leather quad skates? Better get that out of your head right now.

“I hate it when stories are written that portray us like we’re some super heroes,” says Kelly “Shark Week” Ryan. “It’s a sport, and the women are athletes. People seem surprised to see women play contact sports.” Ryan, 27, is head coach of the Boston Derby Dames (BDD), the only Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) sanctioned roller derby league in Massachusetts.

Each WFTDA member league is run as an independent business by the athletes themselves. Bouts, or games, consist of two 30-minute periods. The objective is for each team’s “jammer” to circle the track, getting one point for each opposing team member they pass. A bout’s winner is the team that has the most points when the clock runs out.

Since it got rolling in 2005, the league has expanded as the sport’s popularity has grown both nationally and internationally. More than 65 women skate in the league, which is comprised of five teams: the Cosmonaughties, the Nutcrackers (2010 Champions), the Wicked Pissahs (four-time champs), the Boston B Party (the “B” travel team), and the Boston Massacre, BDD’s all-star travel team, which plays on a national level.

Entering her third season, Ryan co-captains Boston Massacre, ranked seventh in the WFTDA’s Eastern Region, with Caitlyn Monaghan, aka “Ginger Kid.”

The way Ryan tells it, she didn’t go looking for roller derby. It found her.

“A friend was in the league in 2005 when it started, but broke her ankle. She’s a photographer, so BDD hired her as a photographer and she hired me as an assistant. (Ryan has a degree in photography from the Massachusetts College of Art

and Design). As thanks, they gave me two comp tickets to the March ’09 bout.”

An in-line skater as a kid, Ryan, who lives in Brighton and works as a property manager in Allston, was hooked.

The 1,400-seat Aleppo Shriners Auditorium in Wilmington serves as home base for the Boston Derby Dames. According to Ryan, Shriners frequently sells out, as fans come from all over to cheer the female skaters who themselves come “from all over the place,” Ryan says.

According to Ryan, most skaters are professional working women — graphic designers, nurses, teachers, scientists, medical professionals, even an author of three books for young adults. The average age is mid- to late-20s, women who are busy with their careers, but not yet settled with kids.

Then there’s Doreen Manning. Voted the 2011 Rookie of the Year, Manning, 41, aka “Belle Air Bomber,” lives in Shirley with her husband and their four kids, ages 6, 11, 13 and 15. The editor of Worcester Magazine, she says proudly: “I’m a Nutcracker.”

Manning’s involvement in roller derby began with an article about BDD she was writing for the magazine in 2009. She was never much of an athlete, but fell in love with the sport while putting the piece together.

“Some people midlife decide to sail around the world. Others learn to play the violin. I decided to do derby,” she says.

One of an original group of 70, Manning made the first cut during the 2009 tryouts. She became “fresh meat” (the term used to describe novice players) and committed to another three months, learning while she skated and surviving three more cuts. “It was the most stressful time of my life,” she says.

But she made it. “My husband couldn’t believe it. It blew him away. I’m not the fastest, or the coolest, for sure,” Manning says with a laugh. “I think [it was] the fact that I tried so hard.”

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**It’s not just for
 counter culture
 women...
 it’s mainstream.**
 ”
 — Allison Trela, The Bruised Boutique

roller derby

“The commitment for the girls is huge,” says Eric Jones, the boyfriend of Allison Trela, owner of The Bruised Boutique in Nashua, N.H. She skates for the Cosmonaughties and the Boston Massacre under the name “Dee Stortion.”

Commitment is an understatement. The Boston Massacre has traveled to, and has hosted teams from, Chicago, New York, Las Vegas, Seattle and Montreal, to name a few. Some teams practice four days a week — the Massacre skaters even more — in addition to supplemental workouts such as CrossFit, an intensive strength and conditioning program that’s used by military special operations units, police academies, martial artists and elite athletes. Roller derby team members also volunteer to help run the bouts.

“People don’t realize we’re self-run,” Trela says. “We do it all by ourselves, all aspects of a bout: set up tracks, get DJs, book our travel, do our taxes. Everyone pitches in.”

Besides the time commitment, there are expenses. Each skater pays for her own equipment and outfits. There is no corporate sponsorship. All proceeds from ticket sales and donations go to support the league by paying for practice space and liability insurance, hosting visiting leagues and offsetting travel expenses for the Boston Massacre, according to the Boston Derby Dames website.

Custom-made skates, for example, can cost \$600 to \$700 per pair. Fabricated by Trela, Jones and Corianne Kenty, a Bruised Boutique employee and Boston Massacre skater, the wildly colored leather skates have made the shop, which Trela started four years ago as “a little website,” into the biggest derby store in the U.S., according to Trela. She says that her success is a reflection of the sport’s growing popularity.

Trela, who now skates with Boston Massacre, started the New Hampshire league, New Hampshire Roller Derby, in 2007 with a friend a year after seeing a BDD bout and says there are now “thousands of leagues all around the country.”

“It’s not just for counterculture women,” Trela says. “It’s mainstream.”

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For more information:

Boston Derby Dames | Aleppo Shriners Auditorium
99 Fordham Road | Wilmington, Mass.
info@BostonDerbyDames.com | www.BostonDerbyDames.com

Upcoming bouts:

March 24th: Cosmonaughties vs. Nutcrackers, 5 p.m.
Boston B Party vs. Maine Calamity Janes (of Portland, Maine), 7 p.m.
April 28th: Wicked Pissahs vs. Nutcrackers, 5 p.m.
Boston Massacre vs. Naptown Tornado Sirens (of Indianapolis, Ind.), 7 p.m.

The Bruised Boutique | 210 Daniel Webster Hwy. | Nashua, N.H.
(603) 821-1311 | www.BruisedBoutique.com



Top: A pair of custom made skates at The Bruised Boutique in Nashua. Second from top: Owner Allison “Allie” Trela. Above and below: The boutique is the largest derby store in the U.S., containing thousands of unique items.

