

Melissa 'Melicious' Joulwan. *Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007. 273 pages.

Lindy S. Hern, University of Missouri - Columbia
Michael L. Hirsch, Huston-Tillotson University

Rollergirl chronicles Melissa 'Melicious' Joulwan's experience as a member of the Texas Rollergirls Rock-n-Rollerderby. Her experience is cast within the context of U. S. roller derby including: its 1937 birth, its zenith in 1949, its TV re-popularization in the 1960s and 1970s, its demise in the 1980s, and its rebirth in Austin, Texas in 2002 (after which it grew to include hundreds of teams in dozens of cities across the U. S.). While Rollergirl is a memoir and not an explicitly feminist text, it does contain discussion of implicitly feminist themes.

On the surface, roller derby provides U. S. women's sports, long devalued and under-funded, with a growing forum for the participation of female athletes. As the benefits accrued by sports participation such as poise, confidence, and conditioning become more available, the reemergence and expansion of roller derby might be seen as an advance for women. Others might see the scantily clad athletes with sexualized names (e.g. 'Curvette', Joulwan 144), as a reification of the objectified status which anchors women in a subservient position within a patriarchal system. Such portrayals would oversimplify the world of roller derby for women. Modern flat track roller derby seems to be a 'cultural project' which challenges dominant conceptions of sport, gender, sexuality, and power through the 'body projects' of the participants.

Implicit in the sport of roller derby, and in Joulwan's discussion of it, is a challenge to dominant conceptions of gender and femininity. Participation in roller derby includes the development of a 'body project' which instead of reaffirming dominant conceptions of femininity as weak and submissive, challenges hegemonic ideas about gender. While gender is often believed to be intimately tied to biological sex, and thus inherent or natural, in the subculture of roller derby there is an implicit critique of this idea. In roller derby, gender is practiced rather than accepted. It is something one does and is a performance with political implications. Derby participants engage in 'gender play' during which they develop identities that challenge the 'controlling definitions' (Hill-Collins) of proper female

behavior. Male fans also seem to recognize and participate in this deconstruction of gender (Joulwan 208), which is an important element of political gender performance.

An important aspect of the roller derby body project is the rejection of hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty. While the modern valuation of femininity is based on appearance and stems from the 'cult of thinness' (Hesse-Biber), the construction of femininity in roller derby rejects this notion of femininity. Joulwan points out how for many women roller derby participation leads to the acceptance of one's body (29). There is a celebration of beauty among teammates and competitors that sharply expands the Barbie Doll depiction of beauty in a way that allows large, strong woman to be celebrated as 'glamazons' (98). However, the value placed on subversive conceptions of beauty is second to the value placed upon dedication to the sport. This further challenges the hegemonic idea that female beauty cannot exist alongside aggressive athleticism and that females should be valued solely based on their appearance.

An important aspect of the social construction of gender in roller derby is the creation of the derby girl's persona or identity. Being a rollergirl helps Joulwan move beyond her own self-described 'square' persona (141) which seems to be mired in traditional ideas of proper femininity, and causes her to develop the stronger, more confident on-track persona of 'Melicious' (146). This identity finds its way into her off-track life as she gains confidence in her self-expression. Joulwan discovers that she, or her derby identity, has become the role model to bookish and shy young girls (210), who use her example to gain confidence through their own self expression. This works against the 'controlling definitions' (Hill-Collins) of femininity that have historically constrained female self expression and activity.

The ironic outcome of the increased participation of female athletes after title IX, is that the 'control of women's athletic teams and organizations rapidly shifted from female to male hands' (Messner 4). The leadership and control of modern flat-track roller derby is an important topic of discussion for Joulwan. While women were in charge of the modern wave of banked track roller derby (the predecessor to the flat-track movement), the bulk of the participants - the skaters - were treated as employees without much stake in the running or rewards of the organization. In *Rollergirl*, Joulwan recounts how the majority of the athletes rebelled against the self-appointed leaders or 'SheEOs' (54) of the league when a tragic injury reveals that the SheEOs had allowed bout insurance to

lapse prior to a major event. The rollergirl rebellion leads to the establishment of a new league run 'by the skaters, for the skaters' (79). Once in control of their own play, the women move away from the tawdry and sexist promotional gimmicks (e.g. jello wrestling, Joulwan 83) used to promote their sport under SheEO leadership. As the flat track roller derby sprouts spontaneously across the United States, a convention is held whereby in a democratic fashion the women form a United Leagues Coalition to govern interleague play (218) and establish and oversee a national championship. Again the by the skaters for the skaters ethos comes forward to guide the decision making process. There is strength and satisfaction derived from participating in the creation of a league whose gate goes to the teams and their players (266). This is an empowering experience for women who exist in a patriarchal society that limits egalitarian control in many ways.

While these empowering features of the roller derby are laudable, one might question to what extent other aspects of the experience might give credence to the fear that the phenomenon sexualizes and objectifies the participants and reinforces rather than challenges the patriarchal system. In her discussion of the history of roller derby Joulwan recounts how Ann Calvello, an important historical figure in the sport, recognized how the prominence of players' breasts brought in male fans. She referred to them as 'tickets' and would remind her teammates to 'Get your tickets up' (49) when preparing for a bout. Joulwan herself recognizes the importance of this type of physical appeal to male fans as she sports fishnet stockings in her profile photo (149) and discusses her own choice of bra as '(t)he tickets have to be front and center for the jam' (159). Lucky fans (those who are 'vertically impaired') get a 'booby hug' (207). On the track there are 'booty blocks' (94) perhaps delivered by 'Betty Rage' (208) a derivation of Betti Page, a 1950's pin-up model, or Sid Vixxen, Sadie Masochist, or perhaps any member of the Hotrod Honeys. However, as the heterosexist organization of society has played a role in the controlling definitions of, specifically, white femininity as not only frail but also sexually pure, the overt sexuality of the roller girls could also be viewed as a challenge to this heterosexist system. In this way, their 'gender game' (Hern) not only subverts hegemonic ideas about femininity, but also dominant ideas about female gendered interaction and sexuality.

On balance, it seems to the reviewers that roller derby empowers rather than degrades women while it also offers a viable form of athletic participation for women across the United States and

increasingly around the world. It does so while promoting a democratic governance structure wherein the benefits of the league go back to the league's participants. It also supports a community or 'sisterhood' (244) of women who are encouraged to challenge hegemonic and controlling definitions of femininity. Further research is needed to develop these conclusions and to see if they are apparent in other examples of modern roller derby. It is a phenomenon worthy of study and could further develop our knowledge and understanding about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and sport. For the uninitiated, *Rollergirl* offers a unique window into the world of roller derby, which may, as a text, cause the reader to question their ideas about gender and femininity. This book would be a valuable supplementary text for classes in Women's Studies, Gender Studies, and the Sociology of Sports.

Works Cited

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