Tahoe Derby Dames bring a feminism-punk style to oval

By Austin Fay

A blur of black and green whizzes by with clenched fists and bared lime-green mouth guard. She earns one point for each of the five members of the opposite team she laps during a two-minute period, or “jam” in roller derby lingo.

Trying to block Carey “Crazy” Jenkins, several of her opponents hook skates and tumble, arms outstretched they cross the rink and nearly land in the pine cones at trackside.

Roller derby is all the rage at Bijou Community Park. Photos/Austin Fay

For the past two and a half years, the Tahoe Derby Dames have been colliding with other teams.

The team consists of about 20 Lake Tahoe Basin women who love road rash and full contact competition. In addition to making cash donations to local charities, they raised $10,000 to pay for a cement track in Bijou Community Park through ticket sales at home games.

Three nights a week the Tahoe Derby Dames sharpen their craft in anticipation of the next monthly bout.

At the last bout in Bijou Community Park, more than 400 people showed up to cheer their local derby girls on. At this month's bout the team is expecting even more people.

Make no mistake about it, this kind of roller derby is real and on its way to becoming officially sanctioned by the Women's Flat Track Derby Association.

Points are scored by a skater called the "jammer" who passes the opposing team's skaters in the pack. It's essentially two skaters racing against each other, dipping and diving through a cluster of women who don't want them to pass.

That's where it gets a little brutal as the players try to block one another. There are strict rules about where contact can take place, but roller derby is a physical sport.

Roller derby has been around for much of the past century. It became popular in the 1960s and '70s as sports entertainment, with scripted matches and action punctuated by good guys and gals beating the evil team.

Drew Barrymore helped bring roller derby back in vogue with the movie "Whip It" in 2009.

Today's players are an unusual blend of feminism and punk, raw strength and agility. It is a game of strategy, too, and many of the over-the-top track characters contrast the athletes' meek or highly accomplished real lives.

The games became so popular that the Women's Flat Track Derby Association was established in 2004 to promote the sport by "facilitating the development of athletic ability, sportswomanship and good will among member leagues." Not all women's roller derby teams belong to the league, but the league hopes to offer rookie groups like the Tahoe Derby Dames

an opportunity to join.

Former coworkers, loose social connections and enthusiasts now make up a loyal team with a camaraderie not found in many places in the players' lives. A recent dive taken on the "really, really, really hard track" by Hollie "Jinn Beam" Straubinger caused a gnarly imprint of her fishnet stockings on her hip which later led to a staph infection.

With names like Piratella, Valigator, Ghostface KillHer, Ganjzilla, and Poisoned Peach, derby names become alter egos.

"Typically in your everyday life, you're a mom, you're an employee, you're a wife, that sort of thing. When they come on the track, they put that all aside," said the hard-as-nails referee Kera "Lepra C" Amsterdam. Some players like Julie "Mad Maggie" Roulain come out three nights a week to relieve stress or to decompress from her daily life.

Christine Mendoza works is a physical therapy assistant at Barton Memorial Hospital by day, but three nights a week assumes a persona on the rink better known as "Fiona Fearless."

Players maneuver jobs, stress, children and husbands the other four nights of the week. "It becomes a juggling act," Mendoza said.

"It's something I've wanted to do since I was a kid. I've just never lived in a town where there was a team," said Allison Green, schoolteacher and three-week Tahoe resident clad in mismatched loaner kneepads and wrist guards. "I'm here to allow my inner badass to come out."

Endurance is what it will boil down to in the upcoming match. The next bout is against the Silicon Valley Killabytes and will probably be one of the toughest teams the league has faced yet.

The Killabytes are a bigger, more advanced, sea-level dwelling team, so taking advantage of the low oxygen concentration in the air along with a strong home team turnout is essential for the team’s win. Last home game a player was suspended for throwing an elbow, which is illegal. There’s a chance she’ll be out for the season.

The team is always recruiting new girls, with newbie practices on Monday nights at 6. Helmet is required.

The Tahoe Derby Dames lock horns with the Silicon Valley Killabytes on July 24 at 6pm. Gate’s open at 5, and there’s a beer garden, a raffle. Bring a lawn chair to Bijou Park off Al Tahoe Boulevard. The cost is $10, with those 10 and younger free. Plus, it goes to a good cause. Relay for Life receives the first $200.

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