

ROLLER DERBY: Transporting into Academia Lessons from the Body Slam

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My parents placed me in private school to ensure an undistracted education. Within the intensely disciplined program, student misbehavior rarely disturbed or took time away from the curriculum. I attended the required daily church services and, as the only non-Christian, truly enjoyed the morally valuable and entertaining stories the pastors told. We walked to and from chapel every morning single file, hands folded in front of our crisp uniforms, and then returned to our classroom to say the Pledge of Allegiance. When the principal visited the classroom, we placed our pencils on the table and stood up militarily to acknowledge her authoritative presence. I learned that teachers would praise me if I were quiet and turned my work in on time, and that I had to wear gym shorts under my jumper because I couldn't "sit right." Obedience was quickly rewarded, as was playing "like a girl." My teachers chastised me for my dirty knees, the only brown part of my body that poked out from under the ugly plaid uniform. While the school provided an incredible foundational education, I left for high school with a deeply internally colonized outlook on how I should carry myself: attend church daily and diligently practice uniformity, obedience, and cleanliness.

Ten years later, I was sweaty, cussing, and vomiting in a patch of grass from over-exhaustion. My fishnet stockings were torn, and ants started to bite my hands before I could lift my face out of the grass. What the hell was I doing here? Some girl intentionally pushed me onto the asphalt, which grated my nalgas like a piece of cheese. I'm sure everyone in that parking lot got a good show. Notably,

we weren't fighting. We were practicing roller derby. Roller derby subverted all of my good schoolgirl values into an aggressive, abrasive sport. Despite my internal conflict, I loved every painful and wonderful moment of it.

I played roller derby for two years, and I remember vividly the first game I saw. I sat on the concrete rink on the blue tape that outlined the oval track. While drinking a beer, I watched as the whistles blew and the women took off like jockeys on horses, racing 'round the track. These broads were fast skatin' and hard hittin'. The women knocked the hell outta one another, and one misstep sent a player's wheels flying out from under her, delivering her right into the audience's lap, allowing the spectators to feel like they were living inside the game! I left that bout fairly amused, understanding that with my weak athleticism, I could never play; and yet I found that after two weeks, I couldn't stop talking about it to anyone who would listen.

That is, until I met a girl who went by the name Goldie Knocks, and she convinced me to try out for the San Antonio league. I admitted I didn't know how to skate, and she said, "It doesn't matter, they'll teach you." So I went to a practice and held onto the wall while training my spaghetti legs to stay upright. I expected the Benny Hill theme song to repeat while I skated on banana peels and had pies thrown in my face before I made it halfway around. I was a fool, and I made stiff zombie movements towards the exit.

After shamefully exiting the rink, I plopped down next to a friend who had attempted to skate as haphazardly as I had. Earlier I had told him with mild sarcasm, "Whatdya think? I'm ready to join roller derby!" He responded by laughing and said, "YOU?! You could *never* do roller derby." I understood that I was "under-toned" and awkwardly scrawny at that point in my life, but

I hadn't expected such insulting and crushing cynicism! That was the impetus that launched me onto a course I didn't expect. The next day, after a sleepless night obsessively ruminating about that comment and my abilities (or rather inabilities), I joined the roller derby league, mostly to challenge myself—to see if I could actually do it—and I stopped talking to my “friend.” Slowly my spaghetti legs were able to hold up my body and with every practice, my skating improved. I realized in that moment that I could think for myself—that I could challenge myself. This newfound thought process would prove vital and only continue to resonate into the future, perhaps best evidenced when I decided to attend graduate school.

I remember the first time a skater slammed her body into me...to intentionally knock me down. I had heard every vertebra in my neck and back pop. Her impact was so powerful, it twisted me literally flat on my face, and I had to double check if my neck had been broken or if I could still feel my toes. Shakily I stood up, brushed off some skin I had scraped off my palms, and, through a haze of adrenaline, thought, “That was awesome.”

“But it's not very lady-like,” my stepmother said to me after my first game. “All those women are out there showing their nalgas to all of those men who are just drinking beer and staring. It's tacky.”

My stepmother reinforced what I had trained so hard to shrug off. This was an empowering sport for women. It wasn't supposed to be a spectacle.

I encountered these difficulties even in my research when negotiating roller derby as a spectacle performance—as in my stepmother's trained patriarchal gaze—or as a legitimate athletic sport. Could it have been both?

I made a shortlist of some of the first things a legit roller derby player needs to achieve:

1. Learn how to skate. Done. Check.
2. Have the proper equipment so you can learn how to fall.
Another check.
3. Choose a roller derby name that is likely to stick with you for life.
Uh...Crap.

I had to come up with a name with which I could self-identify. This was *terrible*. It was like branding myself—such a major dilemma, and I was not even getting a tattoo! My indecisiveness! I tried to think of something witty...something South Texas and Spanglish. Juana Fight, Barbara Coa and Lucha Dora were already established, but I couldn't seem to find something that would resonate with me or a crowd.

After a good two months of mulling over Spanglishismos, a close skater friend and fellow Heeb Hermana suggested, "What about your Jewish side?" Genius! In efforts to appeal to the largely Mexican American audience, I shamefully forgot to examine a whole half of my family, assuming those Judeo-cultural jokes would fall flat on the goyim. Shortly thereafter, in a *treyf* play off the reference to Jewish penicillin, *Matza Brawl* was born.

As the only player with a Jewish name, I worried that the audience would read my performance as representative of a whole culture. In those moments when I would fly into the audience like a ragdoll, I worried my performance would reinforce stereotypes of the unathletic Jewish weakling. This compounded other

personal insecurities, like my Jewish nose anxiety. During my growing-up years, my parents told me that I was fortunate enough to get *the good nose*—in this case, the Jew-nose—instead of my mother’s more indigenous nose—the hooked, over-a-hump-and-a-slide nose.

I remember one crucial game we played during our season of losing streaks. We had ten players benched from injuries and only five of us skating at a time, which, with five players needed per jam, meant no breaks between jams. We had to skate each one back-to-back. For *two* hours. I remember how my body felt a level of exhaustion and dehydration that made me shaky and emotional—a big no-no in a sport full of tough women. A player from the other team slammed her full body into me as I tried weaving past her. When I fell down, I noticed that my eyes started watering; it hurt, but surely I wasn’t crying. I couldn’t see a thing as my vision was completely blurred. I wasn’t crying—I *wanted to cry*—but definitely I wasn’t crying. I held my face as I skated to where the team manager stood calling out plays.

“Owww! That *really* hurt.”

“Stop being such a baby and get back in there—the team needs you, Matza!”

She was right, how selfish of me to skate off the track when I couldn’t see a damn thing. Really, though, I just needed to shake it off. I moved my hand from my face and watched her speak, as if in slow motion: “Oh shit, I’m getting some ice.” I saw my reflection in her glasses. I have two noses? No. A swollen mass the size of a tulip bulb had formed on my nose after an opposing team member’s elbow pad had broken it. She broke my *good* nose! The proper etiquette of “hits to the nose count as low blows” was thrown out the window.

I learned that even skillful players can be maliciously injured in the same way that invested researchers can be criticized. Sometimes I think I'm on the right track, questioning roller derby as a performance of masculinity, femininity, or androgyny when suddenly someone challenges me. I ask, after being on a roll, am I wrong? Oftentimes research is conducted within right and wrong binaries, and I realize that situations in roller derby, as with research, are more complex and not polarized.

Of all of the empowered and talented women in roller derby who changed how I saw myself, Copper Penny was one of the most solid players I had ever skated next to or against. She was a beer drinkin', corn-fed, fifty-year-old lesbian grandma who grew up in the farmland of Oklahoma. I remember her telling me once, "I ain't had much schoolin', but I know how to skate all right." And, that she did.

During our very first game, we played on opposing teams. Her blocking skills were so good she stepped in front of me during crucial plays and pinned me where I couldn't break free. I was fed up and couldn't yell at her with my mouth-guard in, so I gestured instead. I pointed at her and then gave her the downward thumb—practically an international derby sign for "You're going down." Suddenly, I felt a strong gravitational force around my waist and before I knew it, Penny and I were both on our knees punching each other—*except I was winning*, because with the momentum, she had fallen on her back. Yes! A triumphant moment for me—the scrawny unathletic player kicking Copper Penny's ass! Except that I had totally underestimated her sheer strength. Like a wrestler, she lifted me off of her body and body-slammed me onto the floor, knocking the wind out of me, all the while still punching the crap outta me and saying, "Oh, Matza, I owe you a beer for this one."

While grasping for my breath as if it were tangible, I recognized that I had to separate the player from the game. Copper Penny didn't have a mean bone in her body. She pulled me down for a fight, not for trash talking, but rather as a game plan strategy. If I were out of the game fighting, I wouldn't be scoring points. She knew that and I fell for it. Similarly, in academia, one must negotiate and distinguish between research participant and friend, and figure out which battles are worth the sacrifice. And though I left that game with bruises, I gained understanding of the perils of overconfidence.

Once, when we were on the same team, Copper Penny threw me into an opposing player because she couldn't get her body where it needed to be fast enough. I just went with it; and with her force and my momentum, my body knocked the opposing player out of bounds. Copper Penny taught me that collaborating with a team and using available resources to play the game can prove successful and even apply outside of derby. In graduate school, I found that my greatest moments of inspiration came from the peer relations formed through classroom discussions. It was the collaborative learning—bouncing ideas off of women who were as brilliant as those in roller derby were strong—that helped me recognize the feminist collective of roller derby and how it served as a space to express actions unbound by gendered gazes.

As a display of agility and strategy, roller derby is a sport that requires women to maneuver and position themselves, both literally in the physical sense and figuratively through resistance of gendered structures and obstacles. Beyond physical agility, roller derby is a thinking person's game because it requires anticipatory strategies. Understanding where my body was supposed to be was totally different from actually getting my body into the most strategic position. It took a long time to synchronize the instantaneity of seeing an unguarded blocker and impeding her maneuverability.

I left roller derby for graduate school. After deciding that my body was the fittest and most muscular it had ever been, I realized my mind had suffered during the process. While I trained my brain to anticipate actions and behavior, my vocabulary and cognitive skills had dwindled. It was time to work out my mind. While my body felt super-fit, I could also feel the negative effects of how rough I had been on my bones, manifested in the sensation of weather veins in my knees that could predict the rain. In school, I hesitated to mention my affiliation with roller derby to professors because I wanted them to see me as a serious student, thereby avoiding any stigmatized associations with a “scandalous” sport. But I realize that I am reverting to the role of the good schoolgirl, and that I must shed my fears of jeopardizing respectability. As in the rink, I am performing outside of the gendered norm by attending to the mind. I just need the spaghetti legs to turn solid again, to crush that social framework that attempts to control women’s behavior—on and off the rink.