

WOMEN ON WHEELS

> Moms and *career women* by day, DERBY DOLLS by night, the *Tri-Valley Roller Girls* prepare for their first COMPETITIVE season.

by **leeanne jones** / photography by **mitch tobias** 

ike many women, Mai Leigh Chandler has fond childhood memories of roller-skating. She spent summer afternoons bumpily rolling down the streets of her Livermore neighborhood with wheels

clamped to her tennis shoes, and she'd join friends for birthday parties and school trips at the local Roller King rink.

But at 34, married with three kids and working a full-time job as a commercial property manager, she didn't expect to return to rollerskating. And she certainly didn't envision herself as a body-checking derby girl named "Mae Daze."

For the past year, she and two dozen other women have been training as the Tri-Valley Roller Girls, a roller derby team that will begin its first competitive season this summer. They're not quite the collegeage punk rock princesses portrayed in A&E's reality show *Rollergirls* or the Drew Barrymore–directed film *Whip It*. The Tri-Valley team members range in age from 24 to 48. By day, they are teachers, nurses, corporate professionals, and stay-at-home moms. But by night, they don tough alter egos—with intimidating nicknames that mix pop culture references with violent or sexual puns and protective gear worn over fishnet stockings—and engage in a sport that blends racing with strategy and football-esque pileups.



"I'm pretty conservative, so even the crazy kneesocks are stepping out of the box for me," says Mae Daze, who kept her derby habit on the down low for a while. "I didn't tell hardly anyone except those close to me at first. I was worried about the judgment I might get for a sport known for being a bit rough. The more comfortable I've gotten on the track, the more confident I feel about sharing my skating experience."

Teammate Shannon Wirchniansky, "Honey BasHer," a 41-year-old Dublin resident, grew up watching the Bay Area Bombers—contemporary roller derby's more theatrical, televised predecessor-and idolizing star Ann Calvello. "I thought, here's a cool, strong woman doing something interesting and different," she says. Two years ago, at a party, she talked with a coach for the Silicon Valley Roller Girls. "I told her, 'You're living my dream. I would love to do something that cool.' She looked at me and said, 'Would you just shut up and do it?' "

The team's 30 members represent a range of skating experience, but they all practice together three nights a week at the hockey rink in Pleasanton's Val Vista Park. Coach Mike Anelli, "Rex Luther," a 37-year-old Concord resident and lifelong competitive quad and in-line speed skater, leads experienced members through speed and technique drills on one side of the rink while new recruits navigate orange cones on the other. Once a month, they are joined by guest coach Rena Garcia, "Shadow Soldier," a recently retired star of Sacramento's Sacred City Derby Girls.

Shadow Soldier imparts derby-specific wisdom to prepare the team for its first match (called a bout), from game-play strategies to learning how to fall, which in this full-contact sport is as important as learning how to skate. To score points, a team's jammer-often the smallest, nimblest skater-must navigate her way through a pack of opposing blockers as she speeds around an oval track.

# Here's How They Roll

Here's a cheat sheet to the rules of the game.

### The Scene

Bouts consist of two 30-minute periods broken into two-minute iams. Five players from each team—one jammer and four blockersskate counterclockwise around an oval track.

### Game Play

Jams begin with blockers from both teams departing from a starting line at the sound of a whistle The pace and strategy of the blockers, who must skate together in a pack, are determined by the teams' pivots (blockers designated by helmets with a stripe). At a second whistle the jammers join in, starting from 30 feet behind.

#### Scoring

Each team's jammer (helmets with stars) navigates through the pack of blockers. initially completing one nonscoring pass. with the first of the jammers through being designated the lead iammer. On subsequent laps, the jammers earn points for each member of the opposing team they pass within the two-minute period or until the lead jammer

advantageously calls the jam by tapping her hands to her hips.

Penalties Blockers try to knock jammers out of bounds or slow them down, but cannot make contact with heads or feet, or hit with hands or elbows (There's a lot of shoulder and hip checking.) A major penalty, or the accumulation of four minor penalties, sends a skater to the penalty box for one minute.

The blockers try to impede the jammer by knocking her to the floor or sending her flying out of bounds. Despite helmets, knee and elbow pads, and mouth guards, injuries are common, particularly gnarly bruises and what derby girls affectionately call fishnet burn.

It's a risky business—and a significant time commitment-for these women. But the support of teammates, friends, and family helps them aim for a healthy derby/life balance. "Child care" is available at practices, with a few kids hanging out in one of the rink's penalty boxes, playing on iPods and reading books under the watchful eye of Joev, the teenage son of Nelia Gonzales, "HellZ NellZ."

Honey BasHer brings her biggest cheerleader, fouryear-old daughter Sasha, "Bit O' Honey," to most practices, where she often shouts out an encouraging "good job, girls!" Honey BasHer works as a partner services manager for HP and says her boss loves that she skates derby. "He jokes, 'If people act up, I'm going to tell them you'll hip check them!' "

Of course, one of the greatest benefits is fitness. Many of the women cite the quest for a fun or alternative form of physical exercise as the primary reason they found roller derby. And between practices and participating in

sorority-like committees, activities, and events, whether fundraising or recruiting or skating in a local parade. they've also developed a strong bond of sisterhood.

"I had been searching for something to do for exercise with other like-minded mothers-having previously been with moms' groups or other parents with whom I just couldn't connect," says 41-year-old Oakland resident Erin Nunn, "Old E." "So it was serendipitous when I saw a random [roller derby] post on Craigslist. I love the challenge, the support, and the general understanding that on the track, we're going to knock each other around-maybe secure their own warehouse space (Pleasanton has not beat the crap out of one another-but still share kind yet permitted bouts at Val Vista) and potentially pursue words and laughter as we leave the track." membership in the übercompetitive Women's Flat Track The Tri-Valley Roller Girls' first bout is scheduled Derby Association.

for July 21 in Modesto. The two coaches will select 14 skaters to suit up in the team's teal, pink, and black '80s-inspired jerseys, and take on the Sintral Valley Derby Girls. They report a mix of nervousness and anticipation as the date approaches.

"At this point, I'd say there's more excitement than fear," says Old E. "But it's probably going to be nervewracking as the bout is coming up. I've been working out outside of practice, making sure I'm strong enough.'

After this first season, the Tri-Valley Roller Girls hope to recruit enough members for multiple teams. which would compete against each other, plus a traveling team that would play other leagues. They'd also like to



Whatever the future may hold, the Tri-Valley members are along for the ride-and loving it. Says Mae Daze, "I was worried at 34 that I should 'act my age,' but then I realized this is my age. This is who I am right now, and 20 years from now, I want to remember that I wasn't afraid to do something new and to challenge myself."

The Tri-Valley Roller Girls' summer bouts are scheduled for July 21, August 25, and September 15. For times, tickets, and locations, and for more information on the team, visit trivalleyrollergirls.com.

# Double-Up on Derby

While it's the newest East Bay team on the derby scene, the Tri-Valley Roller Girls isn't the only one. Here's the rundown on two more local leagues and where to see them in action this summer.

## **Bay Area Derby Girls**

This nationally ranked Women's Flat Track Derby Association league of four teams (Berkeley Resistance, Oakland Outlaws, **Richmond Wrecking** Belles, and San Francisco ShEvil Dead) hosts sellout bouts in a concertlike atmosphere with colorful announcers, loud music, rinkside "suicide seating. and sponsors such as Pyramid Alehouse June 16, July 7, and August 4, at Craneway Pavillion in Richmond. For information. visit bayareaderbygirls.com.

#### **Undead Bettys Roller Derby**

Contra Costa County's first women's roller derby league formed in 2008 in Antioch The Undead Bettys has two competing teams (the Undead Bettys and the Damned Skaters), two development teams and is currently forming a men's team. June 23, August 18, and September 15. at Antioch Indoor Sports Center in Antioch. For information, visit undeadbettys.com.