



# 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

**L**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 roller-skating. 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 college-age 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.





## 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 jams. Five players from each team—one jammer and four blockers—skate 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 jammer. 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 Joey, the teenage son of Nelia Gonzales, "HellZ NellZ."

Honey BasHer brings her biggest cheerleader, four-year-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 beat the crap out of one another—but still share kind words and laughter as we leave the track."

The Tri-Valley Roller Girls' first bout is scheduled 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 nerve-racking 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

## 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, rink-side "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](http://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](http://undeadbettys.com).

secure their own warehouse space (Pleasanton has not yet permitted bouts at Val Vista) and potentially pursue membership in the übercompetitive Women's Flat Track Derby Association.

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](http://trivalleyrollergirls.com).* ■