Swear to Impact:

An ethnography of the Minnesota RollerGirls

I. Preface (Rachel Piram)

Until I decided to get a job and start saving for college, I participated in only one sport—soccer. Soccer was an outlet for me to let out a little steam. When someone pushed into me powerfully, I was ready for the next opportunity to return the favor. Just like the fighting in soccer, it was a constant battle growing up with my two older brothers. We hit with pens, angrily insulted with swear words, and aggravated one another with bitter, cocky remarks.

When trying to find an ethnography topic, I knew I could handle the arrogance of the roller derby subculture because I could stand up for myself like I did with my brothers. However, I had no connection to this subculture. Kailee and I didn’t know where to start, so we surfed online and found many leagues in the Twin Cities, which was actually a shock. This sport seemed bigger than I expected. We e-mailed leagues and waited desperately to get a response back and eventually decided to observe the Minnesota RollerGirls located in St. Paul.

I assumed the women would wear bizarre outfits of colored clothes with obnoxious accessories to get attention. When these big, tough women with scary names skated, they used every opportunity to fight an opposing player. I expected the players to swear non-stop and criticize each other steadily. Their one and only objective was to win. However, I suspected they were not only there to be
physically active, but joined to become more social. They wanted to feel young and rebellious again in order to show that they still had fire in them and could have been mean when necessary.

I. Preface (Kailee Steen)

Raising four unique daughters, my parents had the difficult task of instilling values into us in hope that we would become decent human beings. Thankfully, they know they fulfilled their responsibilities because we take delight in communicating respectfully, dressing appropriately, and serving others.

Athletics are another story. As a year-round soccer player, track participant, and badminton enthusiast, it’s obvious that I highly cherish sports. I still strive to be the best encourager on my team, but the other team—my so-called enemy—rarely receives any of my sympathy. Competitive in nature, partly due to my status as the youngest of three sisters, I strongly dislike losing or giving up, which means I sometimes resort to pushing and secretly irritating the other players as necessary strategies on the soccer field. However, if I happen to be too rough, I denounce my wrongdoings by saying “sorry” and extending my hand. I surprise people by how aggressive I become—unlike the sweet, innocent, and quiet Kailee at school.

Despite soccer consuming my life, I was able to watch an episode of Hawaii Five-O that featured the roller derby subculture. I was in awe of how their short shorts barely covered their skin and how the girls’ vile pseudonyms masked their identities. The girls actually startled me; their tough girl attitude mixed in with the swearing and intense rivalry starkly contrasted with my upbringing. On the other hand, I could appreciate and understand their competitiveness in sports. Although I had never met a roller derby girl, I wondered if this all-girl team just acted cruelly inside the rink, similar to how I am only aggressive on the soccer field.

When my friend Rachel suggested that we observe the Minnesota RollerGirls for our
ethnography topic, I jumped on the idea as a way to answer my question. I don’t mind knowing my comfort zone might be pushed because I am curious about the participants’ lives. I think that a specific type of personality—one full of rebellion and malice—is needed in order to fully embrace this lifestyle.

Since we have no connections, Rachel and I contacted Harmony Killerbruise, who is responsible for coordinating student visits, via an email address we found on the league’s website. Her enthusiasm about us observing her subculture is evident through her word choice of “awesome” in all caps and finished with an exclamation point. From this, it is easy to assume that the girls participate for the same reason I play sports: to connect with others who have similar interests and to have plain fun.

Based on my television knowledge, I cannot help but assume that they will be conceited or aggressive, and they grew up in homes where they were not cared for. Therefore, drinking and smoking—foreign behaviors to me—might be a social norm for them. I expect to hear many swear words loosely thrown out and to see unique personalities expressed by different hairstyles and clothing choices. Like any other sport, shoving, hard work, and girl drama will be based on miscommunication, jealousy, and selfishness. My innocence might shock the team in return, which causes me to think I will not be accepted immediately and it will be hard for them to warm up to me.

II. Background Information

According to the National Museum of Roller Skating, Leo Seltzer popularized roller derby in the 1930s when he started the Transcontinental Roller Derby, which was first held in the Chicago Coliseum. The skaters traveled 3,000 miles to replicate the distance between San Diego and New York City. In 1937, Seltzer heeded to sportswriter Damon Runyon’s suggestion to allow skaters to be more physical. The crowds, loving the shoving and pushing, increased dramatically from 10,000 to five million; thus, violence became a hallmark and modern roller derby was born (“National Museum of
Roller Skating.”

The sport is no longer an endurance race, but now the roller derby match, called a “bout,” has two 20-minute periods. The periods are comprised of an unlimited amount of “jams,” plays that can last up to two minutes. A maximum of twenty skaters on a team and fourteen skaters on the roster for one game is allowed (“Rules”). Although roller derby continues to transform, the basic fundamentals remain: two teams of five skaters score points by passing the opposing skaters. Four of the skaters, known as blockers, form “the pack.” They play offense and defense to block the opposing jammer, the scoring skater, and to clear a path for their own jammer. The jammers aren’t allowed to score on the first lap, but the first jammer who passes through the pack is dubbed “the lead jammer.” Lead jammers have an advantage because they can end a jam at anytime to prevent the other from scoring.

Stated on the Minnesota RollerGirls’ (MNRG) website, in August 2004, the three Donnelly sisters founded the MNRG, craving to bring “the fire of flat-track to Minnesota and start recruiting a cadre of bad-ass women from all over the Twin Cities.” Originating with only six members skating at a Coon Rapids roller rink, the league has expanded to eighty skaters, not including the referees, coaches, and volunteers. Located in the heart of the state capital, St. Paul, the Legendary Roy Wilkins Auditorium is where they have practices and bouts. The league consists of four home teams that have been part of MNRG from the start: the orange Atomic Bombshells, the pink Dagger Dolls, the green Garda Belts, and the red Rockits. Throughout the season, the teams fight to win the Golden Skate trophy. The MNRG All-Stars, 20 of the best skaters of the league, travel nationally and have competed in the 2006, 2010, 2011, and 2012 World Championships (Minnesota RollerGirls).

The skaters, referees, announcers, and production staff are unpaid and “do all the work to keep the league running” (Minnesota RollerGirls). The members must try-out for a team, which requires
them to be over 21, have health insurance, and their own protective gear (Minnesota RollerGirls). The try-out consists of a three-month boot camp described as “full of blood, sweat, and tears” (BOOMbay Safire). To stay qualified for bouts, they must actively participate in a committee that keeps the league running, as well as attend at least half of the two-hour practices that are three times per week (Minnesota RollerGirls).

From the profits of their bouts, the MNRG has donated $67,000 to more than 60 local and national charities, such as the Children’s Tumor Foundation, the Special Olympics, and Teenwise Minnesota, because they “like to spread the love” (Minnesota RollerGirls). Part of their mission is to be “dedicated to [their] local communities and charities” by serving and giving (Minnesota RollerGirls). Although not directly stated, their purpose is “to project a positive, strong athletic image” and “to show kids that everyone can be involved in sports and be physically active, as long as you find the right sport to participate in” (Minnesota RollerGirls).

III. Observations
8 October 2013, 7:30-9:30pm
15 October 2013, 7:00-9:30pm

Following Google Maps’ instructions, we ended up in St. Paul’s prominent Xcel Energy Center of the notorious Minnesota Wild because it obscured the Legendary Roy Wilkins Auditorium. Confused and slightly embarrassed at not knowing the location of this “legendary” building, we hesitantly walked in, and immediately encountered a cool draft as we wandered further into the vast openness of the 45,000-square-foot building.

The auditorium, illuminated by flood lights, contained two tracks separated by a wall. One track was used for drills and the other track, where we focused our observation, held the scrimmages. Faded white paint marked the shabby, timeworn oval track on the ashed-colored cement floor, contrasting
with the state-of-the-art Xcel Energy Center. Set 20 feet above the ground, the 3,650 maroon movie
theater seats provided ample space for fans. An assorted mix of suitcases and water bottles were
carelessly thrown about, which led us to believe team members trusted one another. Even at school, in
safe little Buffalo, we are careful to guard our possessions.

We didn’t know who we were looking for since our broker, Harmony Killerbruise, was
unavailable that night. However, an extremely fit, blonde hair woman, who introduced herself as
Hurtrude Stein, a skater on the Atomic Bombshells and All-Stars, made us step back when she skated
up to us abruptly. “Hi, students,” she awkwardly welcomed us. “I don’t know exactly what you’re
gonna do but do whatever.” Since Harmony’s job as an insurance agent demanded long hours, she
often had to miss practice. It seemed like no one ever stepped in to fill her role when Hertrude’s
uneasiness indicated she never had to act as the student coordinator.

Hurtrude’s lack of direction caused us to feel like outcasts as we sat on the cold, hard ground,
leaning against one of the pillars on the sides. We weren’t comfortable enough to make our way to the
chairs along the walls because we thought we were the only onlookers. We knew it would be hard to fit
in but didn’t expect it to feel so uncomfortable.

In high school soccer, the team’s apparel must be completely identical—even to the hiding
spandex under our shorts. Slightly confusing us, the girls wore T-shirts or tank tops in some shade of
their team color. One Garda Belt skater wore a sparkly burnt orange helmet, bright green leggings with
pink tie-dye shorts, and a studded belt. These artifacts revealed that they valued individuality and
expressing themselves while connecting to something larger than themselves. Excluding that it was an
unspoken rule to wear short shorts or spandex, the girls were dressed more modestly than anticipated.
Safety obviously on their mind, they covered themselves from head to toe in protective gear. The all-girl
teams appeared to be Caucasians in their 20s to 30s, except for a middle aged, thin but fit woman with sandy blonde hair and little hoop earrings.

SandblastHER, at the prime age of 51, is the oldest woman in the league, but she doesn’t allow age to stop her. Even after she broke her fibula and could not participate for six months—“the longest six months of [her] life”—she was determined to earn her way back to the game. Her indifference about the injury amazed us: “I thought, ‘Just a break. It’s not cancer. This fucker will heal.’” Kailee sympathized with her resilient attitude because after she sprained both her ankles playing soccer, she worked harder than anyone else to compensate for the time she should have been practicing.

SandblastHER’s determination doesn’t stop there; it follows her everywhere. After a neighbor introduced the world of roller derby to her, she became interested in joining MNRG and it became a goal on her bucket list. After she failed making a team, she spent the next year skating for hours and was drafted at the awe-inspiring age of 49. At the same time, SandblastHER was also going through a divorce and faced a dilemma: drink or skate.

She does not credit herself for persevering; instead, her gratitude goes to the other girls. “It’s not only your network and support group,” she explains. “It’s also a relationship that you become separated from. It’s like a marriage or getting pulled away from your parents, who love you and support you. There are days you don’t want them there and days where you really need them.”

According to SandblastHer, the teams were supposed to be a family, but instead of their real names, they embraced creative pseudonyms, such as Norwegian Mafia and Crowella De Vil. When we overheard someone discover another’s real name, we concluded that they didn’t know each other’s “real-world” identities but instead used the identities as an outlet or escape. “Each person has a story behind those. Sometimes they match. Sometimes they fucking don’t,” SandblastHER informed us. “I
tried to keep part of my name. I can sand blast her or sand blast him when I need to.” Her description implied that the names described how they played in the bouts, but the names were more of a theatrical disguise for the fans.

When the scrimmages started precisely at 7:45, the sound of four sharp whistle shrills and rubber skidding against the cement were instantly the most audible noises. The ritual of the scrimmages was in an orderly but hastily fashion: line up, skate, and form a wall to impede or help the jammers get through the pack. The role of the pivot, one of the blockers, was to lead the pack and defensive plays, but we didn’t observe any difference between them and the rest of the talkative blockers. On the contrary, the jammers caught our eyes as they bulldozed their way through the pack in order to become the coveted lead jammer. They gave their best effort because they knew they could only score points for their team. Similarly, blockers would do anything because their role was to defend their jammer at any cost.

Although the skating appeared tiresome, the blockers weren’t in unceasing, counter-clockwise motion; they always slackened their pace when the jammer was near. It was a logical strategy because the jammers couldn’t easily pass through a condensed, slow pack. Jammers were typically the quickest and skinniest skaters on the teams, but sometimes a muscular skater would be needed. All body types had a strategic purpose. “Roller derby is the only sport that doesn’t discriminate against body type,” boasted SandblastHER.

Communication was clearly their key strategy to success. As the talking increased, the intensity and competitiveness of the matches escalated. As the intensity increased, the more likely the jammer passed easily through the pack and the blockers guarded effectively. The jargon was unfamiliar as they commanded, “Slow, slow, green,” and, “Call it! Call it!”
Throughout the jams, players skated over to a pot-bellied man and larger woman with straggling, graying hair. When a short, brown hair skater with braces came over to them to complain about her injury, our question to their identities was answered: they were the emergency medical technicians. We were surprised because the roller girls were supposed to be tough, but this girl complained about a simple broken nail, an incident we thought only occurred in *Legally Blonde*.

Along with this couple’s aid, at least a quarter of the players grabbed ice out of an off-white garbage bin to soothe their muscles or “scars and bruises of honor.” This artifact signifies the contrast of their temperaments—an aggressive but nurturing nature of a woman. “You can hit people and not get in trouble. You get to be physically challenged yet get to be a woman at the same time,” SandblastHER revealed genuinely.

A player, BOOMBay Safire, came an hour late, probably due to her day-time job. When she got her gear on, she hastily joined her teammates and participated like she was there on time.

BOOMBay Safire is not a typical University of Minnesota employee. No one expects a major events planner to have frizzy, curly red hair with orange and yellow streaks. Describing herself as a “gin connoisseur,” she easily came up with her name after the Bombay Sapphire Gin. She was a perfect example of randomness. She was certified in sign language, yet she was on a national fight team for full contact martial arts. Being in martial arts helped her get used to the physical contact of roller derby. “I like getting hit. I like hitting others. Sometimes people hit me and I giggle,” she blurted nonchalantly.

After practice, no one left in a hurry but socialized with other players. As each layer of their gear came off, their cut-throat attitudes dissolved. No one seemed to care that they were chatting with “the enemies,” a peculiar concept to soccer players. If a player does form a grudge, it is expressed candidly. One irritated girl angrily swore at SandblastHER because she needed to hit harder. “We are sometimes
really crude to each other, but it’s actually really moments of empowerment that we can say that. No
one takes things personally. If anyone has a beef with another, they just say, ‘What the fuck?’”
BOOMbay interpreted.

19 October 2013, 6:30-9:40pm

When Harmony Killerbruise mentioned that we could get a free T-shirt if we were one of the
first 200 people to enter the bout, we were ecstatic. We thought we could easily obtain one. Our jaws
dropped open when we could not see the end of the line. And we were an hour early.

In the front entryway of the auditorium, various booths selling clothing, punch cards, balloons,
and fake tattoos were sprawled around. On the left side, we were surprised to see a “Kid’s Corner,”
complete with artifacts that revealed the subculture’s desire to attract family involvement: coloring
books, a “Black-Eye Booth,” and a bean bag toss.

In the “Kid’s Corner,” a seven-year-old girl’s frown turned into a huge grin and snicker when
she realized she was talking with the “great” BOOMbay Safire. As we glanced around, we saw other
roller girls following in her manner, interacting with children of all ages. Roller derby wasn’t just some
game; it was an opportunity to impact the kids. “If you make a kid’s life special, even for one moment, I
swear, it’s like bacon time in heaven. It’s the warmest feeling you can get,” BOOMbay commented.

Their mission statement wasn’t supposed to be taken lightly, it was embedded in their subculture's
essence. “One of the reasons I am in derby and stay in derby, even though I have broke my shit from
here to fucking China and back, is because girls need role models in sports. We are brainwashed to
believe that Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty are the only archetypes we can have,”
BOOMbay said, revealing her heartfelt side. Both BOOMbay and SandblastHER’s sensitive but
passionate desire to be role models helped them with their informal role to bring in other women to
follow their example.

In order to bring in more attendees from the larger subculture, the basic rules were shown through screen animations and live demonstrations. And it worked; most of the fans were newcomers, ranging from normal grandparents and infants to those decked out in derby apparel. We have attended many sporting events, but we have never seen the Minnesota Twins explain the rules of baseball before a game.

When it was finally time to start, the first teams, Atomic Bombshells and Garda Belts, came through the black curtains to their personal themed music. Just like a high school varsity soccer game, each player’s name and number were called out dramatically for the purpose of increasing her sense of value to the team. When the team introductions ended, the first five players skated to the starting line and awaited for the whistle to begin the first bout of the year. The rest of the bout followed the rituals of the practices we observed days before.

During a jam, SandblastHER and a Garda Belt player captivated the crowd when they unfairly shoved against each other along a curve of the track, initiating uproars, but the players knew the true meaning behind it. “Hitting is a sign of respect and acceptance. I will hit you because you’re part of my fucking clan,” BOOMbay exclaimed. We could relate because in soccer practice, we shove, hold, and trip those we feel closest to. In games, we are more aggressive towards those who are better and consequently cause us to get frustrated.

The end of the bout was like a soccer game when all the teams lined up and held their hands out in a friendly “good game” slap. There were no sore losers; only girls genuinely congratulating each other. SandblastHER described it perfectly: “You get to play with brave girls who play the shit out of each other but love each other afterwards.”
IV. Conclusion

Roller derby is not just a sport where women swear, hit, and fight; it’s more than that. These idiosyncrasies may seem eccentric and unacceptable to the outside world, but they are ways for this subculture to freely express themselves and make a difference. Before taking a deeper look, we knew that they donated money to charities, but we did not realize how important impacting others, especially children, was to them. Every player skated with the purpose of empowering others. As the sport’s awareness flourishes because of their “do-it-yourself” ambition, they will impact more children, causing them to raise strong, dependent leaders.

We knew we could relate the aggressiveness of soccer to roller derby, but theirs had a different meaning than we expected. We thought that the skaters were savage to each other because of their backgrounds and frustration with themselves. Instead, this behavior was a way to show that they cared and valued one another. It was a different way to show it, but it successfully worked. We discovered that it was the same reason we are harder on those we love. Because of the support, connection, and genuineness of this subculture, new members will be attracted and older members will always stay connected.

Their desire to be role models deteriorated their attitude towards us, and they embraced us instead. They accepted us and cared for us quicker than we assumed. At the beginning, we felt uncomfortable and out of place, as we expected, because we didn’t have their rebellious spirit, but their demeanor ended up not being a factor.

Equally important, we admired how they freely spoke their minds as an approach to communicate. Too many times in school and in everyday life, we are not allowed to voice our opinions and speculation in fear that we will be misunderstood, judged, or not accepted. The girls know they may
have something important to contribute, so they will share, especially if it is for the benefit of the league.

We could all learn from this because who knows how we could change the world if we didn’t have limits or expectations holding us back.