

derby is a sport

BIROLLER DISORDER, DUTCHLAND ROLLERS

We face many levels of obstacles to promote derby as a sport. The colorful cultural history of roller derby doesn't help; even when people figure out derby girls aren't scantily clad mud wrestlers on wheels, clichés persist. Copycat news hounds spin tales of angst-ridden housewives and Sunday school teachers erupting out of a frustrating 9-5 day into a battle royal at night.

To get past these misconceptions, we have to convince people that derby isn't fake, despite its colorful history to the contrary. Then, we have to fight the notion that derby is recreational; since almost anyone can play at some level. Finally, we have to do more than talk and spit out facts; we must proactively market the sport to fans, sponsors, and the media.

If you do nothing else, learn an elevator speech, an explanation of roller derby that you could deliver in 15-20 seconds, or the length of an elevator ride.

Elevator Speech: Today's roller derby gives credit to the culture of the 70s and 80s spectacle while pushing forward as a sport, with rules, athleticism, and sanctioned tournament competition on the national and international level.

step 1: overcome a history of fake names, fishnets and fraud

Bottom Line: "Roller derby is not fake. We keep the punk rock image and names to attract fans and to acknowledge our history. We don't get paid; we actually pay to play! And we follow rules – 43 pages of them!"

Tell anyone over 30 that you play roller derby and they'll wax nostalgically to memories of the Los Angeles Thunderbirds, fierce skaters who appeared to beat the living crap out of opponents. Appeared – because it was fake; not the athleticism or the bruises, but the falls, the shakedown and the flying punches.

From the names to the fishnets, modern roller derby doesn't look that different from the old Roller Games to the casual observer.

Derby names draw crowds, protect skater privacy

How do you explain the cheeky aliases and the punk-rock booty wear while also insisting that you're not putting on a show?

Names and derby wear are marketing tools that create a curiosity and excitement that enriches the sport and fills seats. Once you've captured the audience with the curiosity, you can show them the real sport.

Fake names keep derby girls safe from creeps; after all, derby

girls can't afford to hire bodyguards to protect them from overzealous fans.

Even so, some derby girls use their real names. Per Denver Roller Doll's website, "In 2009 the majority of the skaters on the Denver Roller Dolls' all-star travel team, the Mile High Club, started skating under their legal names." For intraleague play, the girls keep their monikers; for tournaments and sanctioned play, they use their real names for credibility.

Derby Bouts Are Meticulous, Unscripted, Regulated Events

We've explained the fake names, but what about the theatrics? How do you prove that roller derby isn't just an entertaining show? Entertainers get paid. Derby girls pay hundreds of dollars a year for equipment, travel, dues and fees. Commit the list of expenses to memory to rattle off to doubters, and as a nice segue way toward soliciting donations and sponsorship.

Derby bouts have blowouts and official timeouts. What producer would engineer a 300 to 10 loss? What sane scripting agent would write in ten-minute official time outs to debate the fine points of 43 pages of rules?

Derby bouts have stats. There's no logic behind doing lineups, penalties, scores, actions and errors for a pretend sport.

Derby coaches create game plans, not scripts. They aren't choreographing epic battles; they're plotting strategy, in derby fashion. "In the same way that awesome coaches like Rex Ryan sit in swank clubhouses watching footage of their opponents, conceiving plays and build strategy, derby teams are doing the same things in diners, living rooms, and local bars," says Eric Rawk, Level Five Certified WFTDA referee.

step 2: convince them that derby isn't recreational aggression therapy for harried housewives

Bottom Line: "Derby is professional and internationally sanctioned, with rules; tournaments – held in 7,000-seat arenas; officiating – with a five-level certification process; statistics and box scores; and dedicated news venues like Derby News Network."

Derby is largely represented as a novelty, a social phenomenon rather than a sporting one. Even when derby makes national sporting news – it's been online on ESPN, Sports Illustrated and NBC Sports – the usual stories persist; skaters are "teachers and attorneys and real estate agents," who need to "adopt an alter ego and take out some of their frustrations." Worse yet, NBC actively

resists a mainstream derby: “Don’t expect this sport to join the establishment any time soon.”

Explain away the recreational image by showing that derby is regulated, international, and distinguished by levels of play. And in many cases, it attracts a sports demographic to athletic venues.

Derby is accessible to almost anyone, but not all skaters or teams compete at the same level. Home teams are no less a part of derby than all-star teams, but the latter compete for official rankings and perform at a higher level of play. All-stars are a different class of athlete; but they are largely snubbed by a mainstream media more interested in culture than competition.

Derby has rules, referees and standards. Says Gotham’s Level 2 certified Ref, In Peace: “28 girls getting together to skate is a game or a hobby; girls skating with rules, officiating, and sanctioning is a sport.”

Officials who are serious about the WFTDA mission endure an intense, five-level certification process that requires not only a mastery of the rules (in context, not mere repetition of fact), but also rigorous demonstration of skating skills; and multiple evaluations by coaches, other referees, and skaters.

Derby is internationally sanctioned and recognized as a sport. USA Roller Sports (USARS) recognizes derby as “the most rapidly growing (roller) sport with well over 500 women’s leagues in 16 countries (all over North America, to Europe, Australia and Brazil).”

FIRS, an international roller sports governing body (recognized by the International Olympic Committee) also recognizes roller derby, alongside figure skating, speed skating, and rink hockey.

Derby has its own governing body that regulates the sport and runs regional and national tournaments. The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) promotes the sport of derby, produces large-scale, bracketed national and international tournaments, computes rankings, provides standards, and gives growing leagues structure and integrity as they join.

Derby fans aren’t just punk rockers and disaffected youth. Per

the audience data published on WFTDA’s site, they’re an appealing, varied demographic.

While many leagues field bouts at classic roller rinks, some leagues fill arenas. Key Arena, home of the Rat City Rollergirls, regularly attracts 5,000 to 7,000 fans, according to IRockit, Marketing and Development Chair and league skater.

Statistics demonstrate legitimacy, longevity, and sports focus.

Today’s roller derby bout fills a 38-page Excel workbook, tracking game flow, jammer and blocker performance, scoring and penalties. Without capturing this information, derby would have no way of

measuring improvement, calculating rankings, or showing continuity – as every other sport does.

step 3: proactively market derby and educate fans, media and sponsors

Bottom Line: Knock down difficult decision makers with words, pictures and the raw action of derby. Teach derby, gently, to fans with words they know and box scores that every other sport has. Market the sport, not the sex, with action-oriented advertisements and sports-oriented sponsors.

You’ve got your elevator speech in hand and can talk to anyone about derby as a legit sport, but that’s not enough. You’ve got to engage and create repeat fans, create a league-wide sports image, and sell derby to the media to get more coverage than a once-yearly entertainment write up.

Prepare your pitch and deliver an experience to a difficult audience

You’ve secured a meeting with the sports editor from hell. He’s short on attention and stubborn with 20 years of covering the “big three” – basketball, football and baseball. You’ve got to do more than talk; you have to demonstrate.

Try the following strategies: Bring a bound copy of the ruleset with you, suggests DNN correspondent and co-founder Justice Feelgood Marshall. “It doesn’t matter if your target actually READS the rules so much as they see how detailed they are and realize how seriously the competitors take them.”



Jules Doyle

Push large-scale tournaments; show big action with bout footage. “With Montreal, we now have ‘WFTDA World Championships,’” says Eric Rawk. Fire up the portable DVD player and play the nail-biting final jam of the 2010 WFTDA Championship, with a single point separating first place Rocky Mountain and second place Oly.

Promote derby media outlets to demonstrate how “it should be.” Cite Derby News Network (DNN) – a veritable ESPN of roller derby – that delivers live boutcasts, scores, recaps, predictions, strategy, and analysis.

Close the sale and bring the experience home with a local scrimmage invitation. Give the editor an insider look from track center to see the complexity, the strategy, and the intensity of the sport firsthand.

If all else fails, appeal to the bottom line, advises Derby Phil. “If you can show them that you have sponsors and between 500 and 2,000 fans per game, they know those people could also buy their newspaper.”

Follow through quickly with a novice, yet sports-oriented focus

You’ve created a new fan in the sports editor; make sure you act quickly after your next bout to get coverage. “Value with most sports fans is lost more than 24 hours after an event,” says Derby Phil.

Resist the urge to write a droning jam-by-jam recap, but don’t kill your reader with derby for dummies, either. Write a brief, plain-language review that covers the game-changing events.

If the paper won’t take an actual article, you’ve still got a chance with a game summary or box score.

Use Box Scores to Distill Complex Stats, Engage True Sports Fans

Box scores, tabular summaries of games popular in other major sports, “provide easily digestible summaries of data that give fans fodder for the water cooler, and bar debates,” says Hurt Reynolds, DNN co-founder and project manager for Derbomatic, a massive bout statistics program.

Box scores are comfortable to existing sports fans, and if not overdone, can be a nice segue way from something they know to something new.

Make Derby Accessible To New Fans at Bouts

Forget every intricate detail of the rulebook at bouts; send forward non-rostered “ask me about derby” skaters equipped with a friendly, 15-second explanation of game play. It’s okay to sacrifice the nuances and subtleties for a basic understanding. Try “it’s a race on skates inside a track with one person from each team earning points by passing the other players, who are trying like hell to stop them.”

Refs and skaters alike will hate me for this: Suck it up and do the agonizing, ham-fisted demo jam. It’s a nice walkthrough for newbies who may be expecting an all-out brawl.

Stop Pushing Sex: Market Your League As A Sport

Some leagues play coquettish and softcore to draw in all manner of curious parties, hoping that some will come to appreciate the actual sport. While this is okay to some extent, it’s better to fill seats with advertising that portrays the action of derby, with a focus on the strong, athletic, fast-paced excitement aspect. See <http://tiny.cc/z1e6i> for a model bout ad that screams sport.

Get More Sports-Oriented Sponsors

Many struggling leagues take any sponsor willing to pay or trade to keep the league afloat, but Gatorade looks better than Mike’s Pet Shop in a sponsorship brochure.

Final Thoughts – Keep Derby Exciting – and Simple

Gaming the rules may be good strategy, but it makes bad watching. Try to explain to a fan why girls are stopped on the track, shuffling in place; or why they hang out behind the pivot line when the jam whistle blows, waiting for seconds to tick by before entering play. ●

