

Derby Lite Nights

by Gwenda Conner

Something strange was afoot at Skrine Chops the night of November 7. Nearly thirty women converged on the spot and proceeded to mix and mingle before a meeting. It didn't feel like a book club or Tupperware sale or even a happy hour. It felt edgier and maybe vaguely subversive, but in a good way. It was an informational meeting for Derby Lite, a new recreational skating group that now rolls Tuesday nights in Oak Park.

Derby Lite is the genesis of something unique. While other recreational leagues around the country are for retired or aspiring derby girls, Derby Lite hones the skills and drills of real Roller Derby but is open to skaters of every skill level. Billed as being "for women old enough to know better," Derby Lite is, in fact, designed to appeal to women who maybe haven't been on skates in twenty-some years but are looking for a good excuse to get out of the house and have some fun while getting in serious shape.

Derby Lite is the brainchild of Barbara Dolan, an Oak Parker and veteran of the Windy City Rollers (WCR), the local league with which she skated as "Queen B" for the better part of two years from August 2004 through April 2006. She joined the WCR at age forty-two on little more than an impulse. Back then, she was just "dabbling in pilates" when a friend suggested starting a Roller Derby league. "Without giving it much thought," says Dolan, "I said, 'That sounds fun—count me in.'" And so she was sucked into the "completely new and fascinating world of Roller Derby," which she quickly grew to love and as quickly grew strong and fit from, skating four or more hours each week.

"It became MY thing," explains Dolan of the appeal. "It had nothing to do with my husband, children, job, or house. And, really, what forty-two year old suburban mother of two WOULDN'T enjoy being the Queen in a gang of derby girls in front of thousands of screaming fans?" But ultimately Dolan couldn't commit the time necessary to keep up with the league, nor could she assume the injury risk inherent to the sport, especially as it is played by the highly competitive WCR. But not yet ready to leave the derby world behind, she set out to have it on her own terms.

This meant securing a venue and lining up the liability insurance for it and of course getting the word out and attracting the skaters themselves. But if you organize it, they will come. And come they did, thirteen girls strong to the very first skate held at the gym of Beye School in Oak Park where it is now held every Tuesday night from 7:00-9:00 p.m. and attracting more skaters each week.

Derby Lite currently draws members from Forest Park, Oak Park, River Forest, Berwyn, Glenview, Wheaton,



Chicago, and even Indiana. Though the majority of the women are in their 30's and 40's, they are too diverse a group to pigeonhole with a type. By day, the girls are business owners, nurses, actors, seamstresses, tourism directors, therapists, designers, marketing directors, moms, and more. Their athletic backgrounds are equally diverse. While a few are skaters, most haven't skated since middle school. Some are dancers, runners, or yoga devotees, but as many aren't. The one trait unifying them all is that they joined Derby Lite looking to have fun.

Of course there were other motivating forces at work as well. "Reina Chaos," for example, wanted to meet new people of a similar disposition, being relatively new to the area. "Tough Cookie" didn't know what Derby Lite was but saw quad skates were involved and signed up, having always loved to skate. "Baubolicious"

wanted to "try something new to get in better shape for my passion, horseback riding." "Belle E. Roller" was "looking for something motivating that didn't involve a solitary iPod-wearing experience." And Kelly Clark, who is still seeking her derby name, "just thought it sounded so rockin'!"

And just as each is drawn to Derby Lite for different reasons, so each derives from it something slightly different, in addition, of course, to the heady, sweaty workout that leaves you sore but strong and energized. Interestingly enough, part of the appeal for many is that Derby Lite offers this departure from their regular world, from their tried and true routines. They don their derby names and assume their "alter egos" as they skate, as Kelly Clark observes. "Tough Cookie" adds, "It lets you be a kid again for two hours each week." Or, as "New York Doll" experiences it, "It takes you out of your daily thought processes to focus only on the moment."

And though Derby Lite may sound like it trades in escapism, what it really offers is the opportunity to stretch outside your comfort zone within the safety of a supportive environment. As "Reina Chaos" observes, "It reminds you that it's ok to try something new and to not fear failure." You don your derby name and your alter ego not so much to be someone different but to give yourself the freedom to explore something new and find what might still be you.

That is, in fact, why I ("Pinky") joined Derby Lite. Yes, it makes you feel like a kid again, but it pushes you to grow, not regress, as you test your body in new ways and learn new skill sets and meet new challenges. How often do you do that once you've nestled into the complacency of adulthood? Besides, it's a great bargain. For about \$200, you can get all the gear you're going to need—skates, pads, and helmet. And just \$20 buys you a month's worth of weekly two-hour workouts. Enrollment is open (women only!) through March 2008. Adult visitors are welcome with a signed release form. Guests can drop in and skate with a signed release form and proof of medical insurance.

Wanna roll with the Derby Lite girls? Contact "Queen B" Barbara Dolan at BADolan@aol.com.