ABSTRACT

PARROTTA, KYLIE LYNN. The Politics of Athletic Authenticity: Negotiating Organizational Change and Identity Dilemmas in Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby. (Under the direction of Michael Schwalbe).

This study examines how members of a democratic organization negotiated growth and change based on differential identity investments and identity rewards. Based on nearly three years of participant-observation, fifty-four in-depth interviews, and archival data from Listservs, websites, blogs, and forums, I show how skaters in a women’s flat-track roller derby league negotiated what it meant to be a rollergirl. I argue that initial identity codes, or rules for signifying a derby identity, were renegotiated as some skaters sought to be recognized as serious athletes and bring the sport to a larger audience. Skaters who embraced a “sexy bad girl” identity and an image of derby as sexualized spectacle resisted organizational change. I show how the rapid growth of women’s roller derby at the global, national, and local levels generated and complicated these identity-related organizational struggles. Finally, I analyze the strategies that skaters and volunteers used to make time for involvement in derby, and how these strategies created inequities that further intensified pressures for change. My research suggests that scholars need to pay more attention to how the extra-organizational environment shapes identity struggles within organizations, and to the role of identity in negotiating organizational change more generally.
The Politics of Athletic Authenticity: Negotiating Organizational Change and Identity
Dilemmas in Women’s Flat Track Roller Derby

by
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DEDICATION

To CL: “K.T.I.L.Y.”

To Lillian:

if it wasn’t for your bucket list, this probably would have never gotten done.
BIOGRAPHY

Kylie Lynn Parrotta was born outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Kylie moved to North Carolina with her mother and her step-father when she was nine and graduated from Apex High School. Kylie attended North Carolina State University, completing her B.A. in Psychology, and her Master’s degree and Ph.D. in Sociology.
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CHAPTER 1
THE NEGOTIATIVE CONTEXT OF ROLLER DERBY

Kris, a friend of a person I was dating at the time, had been talking non-stop about roller derby for months. She finally talked us into going to a bout. As a hockey fan since the age of 5, I was intrigued by the idea of women doing contact sport, something I had only seen firsthand when a teenage girl who I babysat played hockey. Women dressed in costumes tore our tickets at the door of the packed skating rink. Rope lights were taped down to the center of the skating rink forming an oval track. I was standing on my tippy toes on what I would later learn the skaters refer to as “the mushrooms”—the benches that lined the wall in the packed skating rink—trying to get a glimpse of the action. Skaters and referees were out on the track providing the audience with a slow motion example of a jam—a two-minute period where jammers (marked with star “panty” on their helmets) try to pass skaters on the opposite team to score points—hoping to convey the basics of the rules and objectives of the game. Skaters were introduced one by one by their derby names as the crowd cheered and laughed at the mix of violent and sexualized names. My interest in roller derby started at this moment in 2005.

At that time, I was taking my first qualitative methods course. I was in the midst of a quantitative study of the effect of attorney type and plea bargaining on charge reductions in North Carolina for my master’s thesis. I wanted to step into a courtroom and see firsthand what was going on between courtroom actors and how it had differential impacts on defendants’ sentencing outcomes. I decided to use the qualitative methods course as a way to supplement and inform my thesis research. However, as I progressed through my course

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1 Kris is a pseudonym. Throughout this dissertation, I use pseudonyms for the skaters and volunteers with whom I interacted.
work, my inclination to study roller derby grew as I was exposed to research on doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987, Bartky 1990), especially in subcultural contexts like Wilkins’s (2008) analysis of goths. Her intersectional analysis, particularly the ways to signify a goth identity and the policing of authenticity, got the wheels in my brain turning. I kept thinking about those women colliding in their homemade “uniforms.” The roller girls seemed like a perfect way to combine all of my interests into one project: gender, sexuality, social psychology, and deviance.

The more that I read, the more that I became intrigued by the roller girls. I wanted to learn about how these women participating in the derby subculture negotiated their gender and sexual identities, while playing a full-contact sport. One of the ways that women adapt to their subordinate locations in the sports world is by demonstrating that femininity and physicality are not incompatible (Hargreaves 2002:59), and the roller girls seemed to do this by skating in fishnets and skirts (Storms 2008, Finley 2010, Carlson 2010, Pavlidis 2011). Women athletes, including roller girls, do identity work to avoid negative appraisals, but may find themselves in a double bind because self-sexualization – a way of signifying femininity – undermines their athletic accomplishments (Cohen 2008). When women athletes of any sport do emphasized femininity and sexualize themselves, they undermine their athleticism and perpetuate the larger problem of the objectification of women (Ezzell 2009a).

Despite not attending a bout while finishing my thesis, I kept roller derby on my radar. My awareness of derby increased when a friend and DJ in the local electronic music community began volunteering for the league and was consistently posting about derby on the scene message board. In the summer of 2007, I attended another roller derby bout. By
this time the Star Killer Rollergirls² (SKRG) had attracted a large enough following that they had outgrown the local skating rink and moved to a higher capacity venue where a professional minor-league hockey team previously skated. A volunteer, wearing a shirt that said “We Rock, They Roll,” recommended that I sit track-side on the floor. The first bout was between a SKRG home team and a team from a league out of state,³ and the second bout was between the other two SKRG home teams (see Figure 1). The costuming elements had been toned down from two years prior, and the emphasis on athleticism had increased (a phenomenon noted by researchers studying other leagues; see Finley 2010, Carlson 2010). I wondered, “How did the league attract a larger audience and what consequences, if any, did the popularity have on the skaters’ experiences?” Before the first bout was over I was certain that I wanted to study these women.

During intermission, I flipped through the bout program looking at the derby names and saw an advertisement for a recruitment event. The ad had a rollergirl mocking Uncle Sam recruitment posters and had text that read: “We Want You For Roller Derby!” I attended the “interest meeting” the next day. The training director told me and the other three women sitting on the picnic benches:

To make the league takes time, lots of time and lots of practice. If you make the league you have to skate and you have to help with committee work. You have to practice three times a week and you will probably do a minimum of a couple hours of committee work a week. There are all sorts of jobs; really anything that you can think of that a corporation would do to sell a product we have to do to run the rollergirls. There is a ten practice minimum for every thirty days, which averages to three a week.

² This is a pseudonym for the league that I studied. Jammers, the women who score points for the teams, are identified with a star on their helmet cover (called a panty). I chose it because early in my fieldwork I heard one of the coaches yell “kill the star,” from the bench, telling the skaters to go after the woman to stop her from scoring points.
³ By this time SKRG had expanded from two home teams to three and were regularly competing in interleague games, represented by twenty skaters who competed for spots on the SKRG All-Star roster at both home and away games.
As the training director and a veteran skater continued to talk about the league expectations, I found myself wondering if I had the time to take on derby as my dissertation project.

As the two SKRG representatives explained the equipment requirements and the training drills done at practice, I worried about my ability to study derby if I also had to skate. Fears about my own athletic ability made me even more curious about why these women became rollergirls. What attracted them to derby? Who were the women who wanted to become rollergirls and who were the ones who actually stuck around long enough to play? Were they athletes? Were they women like me—a woman who occasionally went to the skating rink for a birthday party or a family outing as a child, but had only minimal sport experience later in life? How did these women learn to play derby, help out with the league, and have time for a life? I worried that taking on this project would be too much. I wondered how these women could be willing to do so much work—and without getting paid; in fact, paying to play—to do something that was just supposed to be for fun. How did league members “sell a product” to potential recruits?

I approached my data collection inductively, but went into the project interested in the gender and sexual identities of the skaters. I wondered how the women decided to play a contact sport, how their participation shaped their gender and sexual identities, and how they made time (and justified making time for) derby. Later, I became interested in how these women managed the conflicting identities of athlete and rollergirl, especially as they negotiated tension developing around the mainstreaming of derby. I wanted to understand what made some women quit as derby grew in popularity and made others stay, and even more women and men join the community. I also became intrigued by why some skaters
were invested in spectacle elements from the past, while others wanted to reduce the sexualization and spectacle in derby.

SETTING & METHOD

My data come from a field study of a roller derby league—the Star Killer Rollergirls (a pseudonym)—a non-profit organization formed in 2004 by a woman who discovered Texas Roller Derby while on a road trip with her boyfriend. When I interviewed her five years later, she said she knew as soon as the saw the bout that that it was something she “had to do.” She watched in awe as they paid homage to a skater who broke her leg in a previous bout, and could hardly contain her excitement as the skaters lined up on the track. The founder explained, “Texas Roller Derby was theatrical! They were playing the game and it was super exciting! There was all of this circus stuff going along with it. It was the perfect event—so sport and so circus. It was like it was custom tailored for me!” After enlisting the support of her college roommate and fellow design school graduate, they began spreading the word and promoting derby.

After spending months recruiting and training enough women to fill two home teams—the Cotillion Killers and the Pummeling Princesses—the league hosted its first expo bout, a private event, in the fall of 2004. In 2005, the league traveled out of state to play another league. This gave birth to the SKRG All-Stars, or the league’s A-Team, which remained in the rankings (top 25), only falling off once, throughout my fieldwork (See Figure 1). By 2006, derby had grown in popularity and the league had attracted enough women and added a third home team, the Jam Burglars. After much debate about how to restructure the league, the majority of skaters voted to create a second interleague team, the B-team (a
popular trend for top Women’s Flat Track Derby Association leagues at the time), and after rejecting the proposal to eliminate intraleague competition, they voted to continue with three home teams instead of the alternative proposal to expand to four. Shortly after I left the field, the league experienced a decline in league enrollment and eliminated the third home team. By 2012, they dissolved home teams completely, but they were resurrected in 2014 under different names and themes.

Shortly after forming their own league, several SKRG members were integral in founding what later became known as the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA). The WFTDA is an international organization composed of 301 member leagues and 91 apprentice leagues (see Intra-O rganizational Context below for detailed organizational description). According to its website, the WFTDA “promotes and fosters the sport of women's flat track derby by facilitating the development of athletic ability, sportswomanship, and goodwill among member leagues.” In 2007, the Men’s Derby Coalition was founded as a “loose federation” of leagues, much like the WFTDA, and was later renamed the Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA). The organization currently has fifty six member leagues. There are also approximately 200 Junior Roller Derby Leagues, most of which are founded and coached by current or retired skaters (see Barbee and Cohen 2010: 215-218). After I left the field, a men’s league and a junior derby league were started in the area.

4 I became aware of three leagues that left the WFTDA, for reasons similar to those cited by the founders of the Renegade Rollergirls. According to Barbee and Cohen (2010:103), the Renegade Rollergirls formed after a group of skaters split away from Arizona Roller Derby (a WFTDA league), “due to philosophical differences about the future of the sport.”
Gaining Access

As noted by Lofland and Lofland (1995:37), “Gaining entry into a setting or getting permission to do an interview is greatly expedited if you have ‘connections.’” My access to the league was facilitated in the summer of 2007 through the three friends I mentioned above, the two white males from local music scenes and one white female skater. One of the men volunteered with the track crew, and the other was a bench coach for one of the home teams and was the training director for the league at that time. As the training director, he sat on the Board of Directors for the league, and eased my entry by talking to the other board members about my project (see Appendix A for original email). The skater and coach were both key informants who helped me gain further access and insights throughout my project.

I received IRB approval for the project in October of 2007 and began attending non-public events. Participant-observation extended over a 34-month period during which I attended 93 meetings, 25 practices and scrimmages, 6 rounds of tryouts, 3 home team draft selections and numerous All-Star Roster selections, over 70 home and away bouts, 8 tournaments, and 14 community events (see Table 1). I also conducted 54 formal interviews and many informal interviews with female and male skaters and volunteers from the local league and leagues from across the country (see Table 2). Archival data came from Listservs, message boards, and articles and comments posted on websites like the Derby News Network (DNN) and Derby Life. As I wrote my analysis, I continued to attend bouts to stay loosely involved with the league. Additionally, I used social media to stay in touch with some skaters and volunteers after I left the field. Rupp and Taylor (2011:493-494) note, “The longer one stays in touch, the more trust develops about sensitive matters and the more awareness comes about the vulnerabilities and tensions in the community.” As I gained access to committee
meetings and board meetings, I became increasingly focused on the organizational aspects of the league, especially how they negotiated the growth and corresponding changes that were taking place at the league and WFTDA levels.

Participant-Observation

I attended my first closed practice in fall 2007 after being invited by the training director. I watched about twenty minutes of practice before anyone noticed me beside the daughters of some of the skaters who were playing by the lockers nearby. The following exchange took place as a skater rotated between me and her drills.

The coach caught my eye from the rink and smiled my way. About five minutes later a skater came over to the carpeted “mushroom” bench to fix her skate. In a friendly, but out-of-breath tone she asked, “Are you waiting for someone or are you thinking about joining?” I replied, “I’m here watching and would love to join, but I do not have enough time to even think about it for a couple of months.” “No doubt,” she said, “It’s a big commitment because it is really time consuming. So, you’re just watching?” I confessed, “Well, I’m a grad student and I’m just interested in your group.” She interrupted, “Oh yeah, they said someone might start coming to our events.” As I replied, “Yeah, that’s me,” she sprinted back to the track. She yelled back, “Well, we are a crazy bunch.” As the whistle blew, she tried to catch her group from where she started on the carpet instead of the line and the coach blew a sanctioning whistle at her and told her to go with the next group. She waited until her designated group made it around for one lap and joined them anyways. As soon as her squad was done with the drill, she skated back to me, again and again, until practice was over, explaining how she got involved in derby and the league’s history.

After practice, the coach invited me to follow him to the training meeting. I attended my first training committee meeting the same evening as my first practice. When the skater mentioned above learned I would be attending, she cautioned: “You’re in for a treat. You’ll see, these meetings are chaotic. Everyone is all over the place.” Unsure of what to expect from the “crazy bunch,” I headed to my first backstage derby meeting.
The meeting took place at a couple’s house—she a skater and he a coach—where an additional 21 league members were in attendance. I sat between two male coaches. In the middle of a discussion of a skater who might not pass her upcoming assessments, I asked the coach who they were speaking about and what would happen to her. I noticed in my periphery that two skaters were talking about me. The unfamiliar skater whispered, “Who are you?” I asked, “Me, a student at [local] university.” The skater from the practice early came to my rescue and said, “I’ll tell you later.” At this point others were paying more attention to our side conversation than the meeting agenda. I felt embarrassed and said, “I’m just trying to learn about your group. [The coach] invited me to the meeting.” After he nodded in support, a board member declared, “Well, don’t go telling people that weren’t at the meeting that we were talking shit about them!” Everyone laughed and the meeting continued.

I was formally introduced to all of the league members at the final quarterly league meeting of the 2007 season. At this point, the board members briefly introduced me as a graduate student and familiarized the league with my project. The following exchange took place:

BoD 1: Okay, I want to start by introducing Kylie. This is Kylie. [I smile and wave] A lot of you have asked who she is. She’s not a spy from another league coming around to write down our secrets. She’s a sociologist that studies gender and sports and she just wants to learn about derby. She’s going to be around a lot, so get used to it! If you have questions about what she is doing you can talk to her.

BoD 2: She has an email on all support (general league Listserv), so send her an email or introduce yourself at the next event.

Eventually, I became a regular attendant at meetings and league functions that league members became “habituated to my presence” (Esterberg 2002:71). As time went on, I became an active volunteer and participant in the league. At meetings, I mostly observed, but
came to be seen as a secretary and historian of sorts. Occasionally, board members would cross check meeting minutes with me or details from prior committee meetings or board meetings.

The mornings of bouts I volunteered with the “track crew,” which consisted of boyfriends, husbands, coaches, and sometimes skaters. Taping the track to the floor provided me hours to talk to men who volunteered. During games I would sit with the team on the bench. I would make myself useful by getting water, towels, and skate tools for skaters and by refreshing their numbers on their arms with permanent marker. By consistently attending training meetings and team meetings, I built a good relationship with captains and coaches. Some skaters saw me as a bench manager and I once earned MVP. Traveling to away bouts and tournaments enabled me to build close relationships with members of the SKRG All-Stars and to learn about the derby community.

During the course of participant observation I attended monthly board meetings, monthly committee meetings for training, sponsorship, marketing and public relations, and bout production. I also attended quarterly league meetings, interest meetings for recruitment, tryouts, draft meetings, award planning meetings, home team and interleague team meetings, volunteer meetings, and several community events (e.g., parades, charity events, fundraisers). I attended all home bouts and scrimmages, the East Coast Extravaganza twice, three Regional Tournaments, and two WFTDA Championship Tournaments (see Table 1). I attended “after parties” following these events. I served as a member of the track crew and volunteered at all of the events. I was on the league email lists, as well as the league message forum, Yahoo group, and a forum set up for “freshmeat.”
The typical derby meeting took place at a skater’s house, at the rink, or at a sponsor’s place of business. At committee meetings, board meetings, and league meetings, most members took notes, so my jotting was unremarkable. However, at team meetings, tryouts, and draft meetings, I often refrained from taking notes because it made some attendees nervous. At tryouts I did not take notes because the assessors were whispering with one another about who should or should not make it and why. At draft meetings, the captains and coaches decided which skaters would make the roster and which ones would not. In these situations I did not take notes, but immediately afterwards I used a voice recorder or notebook in my car to get down the information. At the tournaments that I attended, the captains, coaches, and referees from SKRG encouraged me to tag along with them to various tournament meetings. While away for tournaments for long weekends, I shared a room with three to five other skaters, so I was unable to “leave” the field to do my notes. The strategy that I developed for “jotting” in this situation was to keep notes containing dialogue or descriptions of events in my phone. This activity did not look suspicious, because the skaters frequently were texting.

During my time in the field, I was denied access to only one event, and that was at the WFTDA level. Every Memorial Day weekend, the WFTDA held a short conference in a different derby city. I contacted the WFTDA president about attending and was told that it was closed to the public. Although I was denied access, it was a valuable experience, because the board of directors of the Star Killer Rollergirls wrote a letter on my behalf and it

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5 The board members conveyed to me outsiders were not wanted at the meeting due to concerns for the organization’s image. I learned from league representatives that workshops were typically held on marketing, sponsorship, recruitment, etc. One skater who attended the meetings in the past told me she had to signal her desire to speak by raising a playing card with a naked woman on it.
became clear that they were willing to go out of their way for me because they saw me as part of the league. Representatives from SKRG who attended the annual conferences discussed the meetings with me upon their return.

In most cases, I transcribed fieldnotes on the night of an event or the following morning (which was mostly the case for game day), at which time I also wrote notes-on-notes (Emerson et al. 1995). Qualitative analysis is said to be a “process of making meaning” (Esterberg 2002:152) or an “active process of interpretation or sense-making” (Emerson et al. 1995:8). To develop my analysis and to start making sense of my data, I did open and focused coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2006, Esterberg 2002, Emerson et al. 1995). With the goal of building “levels of abstraction directly from the data” (Charmaz 2006), I wrote analytic memos to elaborate my interpretations of patterns emerging in my fieldnotes (Kleinman and Copp 1993, Kleinman 2007).

Despite having connections to core league members, I was nervous about entering the field. Other than one birthday skating outing for a friend, I hadn’t been on roller skates since second grade. I had no team sports experience and only briefly ran track in middle school. I was also worried about my academic status, but quickly learned that there were two other women working on their doctorates, and later a woman transferred to SKRG when she accepted a local post-doc position and began skating with the SKRG All-Stars.

Initially, I did not plan to skate. I was asked repeatedly by skaters, “When are we going to get you on wheels?” After being pressured to strap on skates after practice one night, I managed to dodge the offers for private training sessions by veteran skaters for another year. I eventually caved to peer pressure during my second summer in the field and reluctantly strapped on skates. A doctoral student in Parks, Recreation, & Tourism
Management pointed out that I was not teaching or studying for a comprehensive exam like I was the previous summer, and I realized these honored accounts were no longer going to suffice as reasons not to skate. To overcome my apprehension, I convinced myself that there would be no better way to learn about the process of becoming a rollergirl than to go through it myself. At my first private training session, a veteran and two rookies coaxed me onto the rink and tried to introduce me to the basics of skating. My aptitude proved minimal, and as it turned out, I did not become a skater.

The league held five practices a week at the local skate rink, and from May through July of 2008 I attended weekend practices with the new batch of “freshmeat,” women planning to try out for the league. Around this time, league members were debating how to restructure the league, which was creating factions between women who skated both intraleague and interleague season. Following Lofland and Lofland (1995), I did my best to maintain neutrality and not show loyalty to one group or position. With this in mind, I talked to the board of directors about my desire to maintain full access to all three home teams, and decided not to tryout. After tryouts, women are drafted on to one of three home teams, which would have limited my access to two-thirds of the league (Additionally, this decision had the added bonus of me not making a fool of myself at tryouts!). By not limiting myself to one home team, I was able to maintain access to all league events and meetings, and it was often joked that I knew more about the league than most skaters, or that I was the “league secretary.”
Interviews

I conducted 54 formal and informal interviews with skaters and volunteers in SKRG and from other leagues across the country (see Table 2). After two years of participant observation, I sought out individuals who were involved in different aspects of the Star Killer Rollergirls, the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association, the Men’s Derby Coalition, and a local men’s league that was starting up. Only once was an interview turned down. In this instance, a veteran SKRG skater initially agreed to participate, but then the day of our scheduled interview she told me that she needed to reschedule for the following week. Four days later she sent me an email saying: “I’m sorry, but I have decided not to participate in the interview. Right now, I have nothing good to say about [SKRG] or the people in it ☹️.” Despite explaining that I was interested in understanding both the good and bad aspects of league involvement, she declined to participate. One request for an interview was also ignored once. In the fall of 2010, the chairperson of SKRG resigned and retired (see Appendix B for resignation letter) and never replied to my request to discuss her decision. These experiences pushed me to think about league members’ reasons for retiring and encouraged me to examine intra-organizational conflict.

I conducted interviews with female and male skaters from other leagues and volunteers from other leagues at the East Coast Derby Extravaganza, Regional Tournaments, and WFTDA Championships in 2008 and 2009. I also conducted two phone interviews, one with the executive director of the WFTDA and one with the coach of Team USA competing in the first derby World Cup held in 2011.⁶ Interviews with skaters and volunteers from other

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⁶ Teams from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden, and the United States participated in the first World Cup, which was held in Toronto, Canada in 2011, sponsored by Blood & Thunder (a derby magazine).
leagues helped me understand the shared problems other leagues experienced and to examine if their solutions and outcomes were similar or different. I also conducted an interview with a man involved with the San Francisco Bay Bombers for four decades, and with Jerry Seltzer, the son of the man credited with inventing derby (Coppage 1999). Both of these interviews provided me with insights on the changes that derby had experienced over the decades, including difficulties marketing derby to larger audiences.

Similar to Finley (2010:370), I found that “Skaters were consistently willing to answer my questions and seemed pleased to be able to describe their interpretations of the sport since they felt media reports were often distorted. They wanted to be taken more seriously than they felt casual reports usually depicted them as.” As one coach griped during an interview:

I think the sport should carry itself. That’s what’s missing from the crummy rough pieces in the press. My family members send me emails about stuff in the paper and it’s always the same old story, “Doctor by day and insert derby name by night, or something stupid, like mother of three plays derby.” It’s been the same story for years—over and over and over for four years. No one ever mentions how cool the game is and all of the strategy that’s involved.

News stories typically focused on femininity and heterosexuality, rather than the skater’s athleticism, a common criticism of coverage of women’s sports (Duncan and Hasbrook 2002, Griffin 2002, Kane and Maxwell 2011). In fact, the former marketing director wrote a letter to the local newspaper editor asking that roller derby items be put in the sports section instead of arts and entertainment.

Interviews with SKRG league members often took place at sponsorship locations, such as local bars or restaurants, or in private homes. I typically conducted interviews with skaters and volunteers individually, but on four occasions I interviewed wives and husbands
together. When interviews were conducted at home, skaters often shared their derby memorabilia with me, including framed bout posters and team pictures, scrap books, awards and trophies, binders and boxes of meeting notes, and collections of pins and derby shirts. After receiving approval, I digitally recorded all interviews, including those conducted over the phone. During two interviews I was asked to stop the tape so that a respondent could say something about fellow skaters off the record. Interviews ranged from about 45 minutes to nearly 4 hours. I began each interview by asking, “How did you get involved in derby?” I asked skaters to explain their previous involvements in sports and to explain their progression as skaters. Skaters shared the significance of reaching different milestones, such as “making” tryouts, passing level ones, becoming scrimmage eligible or getting “thrown in the blender,” being drafted onto a team, skating in their first game, and, for some, making the all-star roster.

I transcribed most interviews verbatim myself. For those I paid to have transcribed, I listened to the audio recording to verify the accuracy of the transcript, often correcting derby names, league names, and other derby lingo (discussed below). Returning to the tapes was invaluable for listening to respondents’ inflection and being reminded of how they said things, not just reading what they said (DeVault 1999). Following the principles of inductive analysis, I read through interview transcripts numerous times, doing focused coding,

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7 When skaters passed eligibility assessments, they were finally able to scrimmage, which was known as “being thrown in the blender.” During an interview, one skater described scrimmage practices as, “You feel like you’re in a blender. The first time you scrimmage there is so much going on. There are people in front of you and behind you and coming up and hitting you. You’re falling down. You’re learning the logistics of the game, and the strategy. There’s the physical part and there is the strategy—like, ‘should I be paying attention to defense or offense? There goes the jammer!’ It’s a lot of things to mentally and physically balance.” Getting to scrimmage was a turning point for skaters because it meant that they would be receiving contact for the first time. At this point, skaters became increasingly reflective about their body, particularly gauging their increased ability to take hits and associating it with “growing strength.”
discovering themes and patterns in the conversations I had with league members (Charmaz 2006).

Archival Data & Photography

I also collected textual data from roller derby websites, tournaments, and meetings. This data included organization programs, tournament programs, T-shirts, buttons, and stickers; fliers that advertised for bouts; and agendas from meetings. I was included in various league Listservs, which generated nearly 6,500 emails and thousands of responses. I also had access to the league message board, which had 65 registered members who generated 2,346 threads and 10,661 posts. I stayed on the general league Listserv and the league message board until the summer of 2012, but continued receiving the league newsletter and continued to regularly view the league blog and website, as well as the WFTDA website. Additionally, I read news and blog posts on the Derby News Network and Derby Life, continuing to pay attention to debates occurring in the comment sections of articles. These materials were especially valuable for understanding how the league and national organization did “organizational dramaturgy” or “organizational impression management” (Goffman 1959, Denzin 1977) and for understanding how authentic derby identities are created and contested through online mediums (Williams 2006, Wilkins 2008, Pavlidis and Fullagar 2012). Programs, shirts, and other merchandise contained images that these organizations have created to represent derby. By participating on the league Listserv, emails, and message board forum, I learned a great deal about how changes in the derby community were creating divisions between skaters at the local level.
After taking two visual sociology workshops with Douglas Harper, I was interested in incorporating photography into my dissertation project. Throughout my time in the field, I would take photographs while traveling with the league to tournaments, often capturing scores from the games, uniforms, and vendors’ displays. While writing my social psychology prelim paper on gender and sports, I came across an article by Snyder (1990), who used photo-elicitation interviews with gymnasts to explore how they managed and controlled their emotions. I used a similar method, asking skaters to comment on images in popular books about roller derby. I found that images elicited comments that would have been difficult or impossible to elicit through verbal questioning alone (see Harper 2002).

ANALYSIS

My research is theoretically informed by symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934, Blumer 1969), dramaturgy (Goffman 1959), grounded theory (Charmaz 2006), and feminist fieldwork methods (Kleinman 2007). I argue the Star Killer Rollergirls engage in subcultural identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996), which consists of: defining, coding, affirming, and policing to negotiate the contradictory identities of rollergirl and athlete (Carlson 2011). According to Finley (2010:365), “women negotiate practices of femininities that fit alternative subcultures while making efforts to remain feminine.” League members engaged in identity work, both individually and collectively, to “give meaning to themselves and others” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:115).

Because roller derby is “a leisure space where the macro and micro levels of identity can be played with,” I used the negotiated order perspective to frame my analysis (Pavlidis 2011:7). Strauss (1959:271) argues that “Identities cannot be understood independently of the
organizational contexts in which they exist and that social organization cannot be fully comprehended without an appreciation of the interpersonal dimension of human conduct.”

To understand how the rollergirls negotiated change, it is necessary to understand the organizational or negotiative context of the league (Fine 1984, Maines 1977, Maines and Charlton 1985, Strauss 1959, Strauss 1978). Maines (1977:253) argues:

What is important for the analysis of negotiations is the negotiative context. These contexts are structural units that bound any particular set of negotiations, defining what it is to be negotiated, by whom, in what manner, and for what purposes.

I contextualize my analysis by situating the league negotiations (see Figure 2) within the league, within derby on the global level, within the male dominated institution of sport, and within a sexist gender order (Connell 1987, 2002). The negotiations that I observed took place in a subcultural sport context, specifically within a democratically, women-led alternative organization (Beaver 2012). This enables women to be at the focus of the study, rather than merely examining them as marginalized members of sports subcultures dominated by men.

Coming from a symbolic interactionist perspective, I was interested in the language of the participants, specifically the accounts that they provided to justify their participation (Scott and Lyman 1968). As I coded my data I noted that I was developing categories such as “changing image,” “resisting change,” “developing policy,” “resisting policy,” and so my focus shifted to the negotiation of organizational growth. My analysis became a story of how skaters’ participation transformed them as individuals, and how these individuals then became a force for transforming the organization. Throughout my analysis I demonstrate how some skaters’ justify the professionalization of derby, the construction of a competitive
culture, and an unequal division of labor and distribution of rewards, while a growing subset of their leaguemates began to resist.

Subcultural identities and roles are not static. By using the negotiated order framework and by performing a meso-domain analysis (Hall 1987, 2003), I investigate the process of how identities—at the skater level, team level, league level, and WFTDA level—were negotiated and contested in relationship to one another over time. Donnelly and Young (1988:237) argue these identities are “constantly undergoing revision and change due to a variety of processes both within and outside the subculture.” Employing the subcultural identity work perspective, I examine how identity codes are “negotiated continually as people try to stretch and modify them and as outsiders try to co-opt them” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:125). During my observations, league members, especially members of the marketing committee, became more conscious of the image they were projecting—realizing that if they wanted to draw a larger audience they would need to refine their organizational image—both in terms of marketing materials and skater appearances.

To overcome legitimacy issues, the Star Killer Rollergirls engaged in redefinition-negotiations. According to Margolis (1985:338), “redefinition-negotiations begin when, in an ongoing interaction, the maintenance and reinforcement of meaning are interrupted by an attempt at meaning change.” While some skaters tried to preserve the meaning of rollergirl, others tried to change the meaning, making it synonymous with athlete. Under this new conception, “real rollergirls” were defined as those who could perform as competitive athletes. These differing identity investments made it difficult for organizational members to come to a shared understanding of the future direction of the league.
Derby Culture

Catherine “Jayne Manslaughter” Mabe (2007:89) states, “A variety of women respond to the siren song of derby—one that lures them in to a world where they can sweat, skate, and scuffle into their hearts of fans around the world…that, and they do get to wear cute uniforms.” Studying the collective identity of a group requires, “examining the symbols, rituals, beliefs, and values they share” (Klandermans and DeWeerd 2000:76). For the rollergirls, a ritual central to constructing a derby identity was creating and adopting derby names (Carlson 2010, Cohen 2008, Finley 2010, Storms 2008). Unlike athletes in formally recognized sports, people in the derby world typically create a name that is a pun on a famous person, band, or phrase, and then put a violent or sexualized twist on it. The identity codes surrounding roller derby created a conflict for women who want to be seen as embracing derby culture while also being appreciated as serious athletes.

Coding is “the creation of a set of rules for signifying an identity” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:123). Individuals must abide by these codes to be recognized as socially competent members of a group. “Scene names” or aliases are an important way of signifying subcultural membership for goths, ravers, and hardcore participants (Anderson 2009, Wilkins 2008, Williams 2003). The adoption of a derby name gives birth to a derby identity, one that signifies membership in the derby community. One skater said, “Getting to pick your derby name is like a rite of passage. It’s hard to get a name. You feel it’s you and that when you get it registered that you are finally here. Like, ‘I’m derby now.’ It’s like your first initiation to being an official derby girl.” Skaters typically think of several names before officially adopting one, because they have to cross-check the International Rollergirls’
Master Roster to make sure that the name doesn’t already exist or isn’t too similar to one of the other 40,000 plus names on the list (Mabe 2007).\(^8\) One skater said:

> When I first joined, someone told me to start thinking about a name, then to think of another one, and another one and then another one. She said I needed to at least pick four because she guaranteed that someone would already have the first three that I wanted registered.

According to the Master Roster website, its purpose is “to ensure that all rollergirls feel rewarded for their creativity by maintaining exclusiveness for their names” (see Fagundes 2011 for an analysis of the self-governing nature of the naming process in the derby community). In addition to concerns for expressing individuality, derby naming rituals are also about team bonding and engaging in gendered play (Carlson 2011).\(^9\)

People in the derby world refer to each other by their derby names. A skater’s name is *who she is*. Several skaters in the derby community have tattoos related to their home teams, their league, their derby name, pin-up style skaters, and one even had a characterization of her derby persona tattooed on her upper arm. Other skaters have ink reflecting their home teams or the league, such as stars with the team colors or the league logo (see Barbee and Cohen 2010:196-197 for more discussion of derby tattoos). A derby name is also a sign of a skater’s dedication and commitment to the league. The Star Killer Rollergirls do not register derby names until a skater passes her level-one assessments, or until he or she is considered a loyal volunteer. After I was in the field for several months, I was granted permission to

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\(^8\) http://www.twoevils.org/rollergirls/ When I entered the field, fewer than 10,000 names were listed on the website in the summer of 2007. Currently, there are over 40,000 names registered worldwide, which includes skaters and non-skating officials. In order to protect the confidentiality of the league, I asked to remain off the registry and I have given myself a pseudonym, “Annie Lytic,” for my derby name. I have corresponded with several leagues with my derby email and have worn badges with my derby name at home bouts and tournaments. The association my derby name has with the league would make it apparent which league I studied, and would break my confidentiality agreement.

\(^9\) In Kasey Bomber and Axels of Evil’s book *Down and Derby: An Insider’s guide to Roller Derby*, they list “choose your derby name” as the fifth step of getting involved with derby (Barbee and Cohen 2010).
access the message board and the Listserv, but the board of directors told me that I needed to come up with a derby name first.

Claiming a derby identity prematurely was policed by veteran members. While socializing after practice, a skater remarked that there were new people at practice, two of whom already had derby names. One skater expressed surprise: “They already have names?” Another said, “[a veteran skater] would be pissed.” When I asked why, she said, “She thinks that you should wait for, like, three months before you get a name. You know, like be on a team and part of the league. A lot of places make you wait three months before they register your name.” Earning a derby name was thus a step toward becoming a full-fledged member of the derby world. In addition to claiming a derby name, another way women signified their membership in the derby community was by wearing “bout fits” or “derby drag.”

Clothing is often used to signify subcultural membership, as in the case of goths (Hebdige 1979, Hodkinson 2002, Wilkins 2008), Straight Edgers (Williams 2003, 2006), musicians (McLeod 1999), punks (Fox 1987, Le Blanc 1999), and participants in alternative sports (Donnelly and Young 1988, Humphreys 1997). One skater declared the style elements of derby were what piqued her interest: “It has this little bit of crazy undertow to it. That’s what attracts me. This is me. I’ve been this person my whole life. When they say dress derby, I mean, I pretty much dress derby anyways. I don’t dress like a whore or anything, but I do have, like, gothy tendencies.” Finley (2010:272) argues that skaters draw on “pariah labels” such as the sexualized bad girl and rebel punk. Like the self-presentation of women in the goth subculture, the presentation of roller girls “evokes cultural themes of historical versions of unacceptable femininity such as the sexually assertive seductress, the dangerous witch, the femme fatale, the bitch, and the sassy, uncontrolled misfit” (Finley 2010:272) that “fetishizes
These sartorial styles contrast dramatically with the crisp, matching (and loose-fitting) uniforms of a women’s basketball or soccer team. The identity codes surrounding roller derby created a conflict for women who wanted to be seen as embracing derby culture while also being appreciated as serious athletes. This led to tension between skaters who were invested in one or the other, or both.

Previous literature on roller derby has discussed how elements of derby culture are gendered. As skaters climb through the ranks they are assigned labels denoting their status, transitioning from “freshmeat,” to rookies, to “grannies.” Skaters also use the terms “derby wives,” “derby crushes,” and “derby widows” (see Barbee and Cohen 2010:129, Finley 2010:375-376). Derby plays and strategies are often gendered and sexualized. For instance, Barbee and Cohen (2010:96) provide the definition of a “pussy whip,” which is when “a skater reaches her arm through her teammate’s legs, latches on to her crotch and give a good solid tug, using that momentum to pick up speed.” In addition to noting that the strategy should not be confused with being “pussy whipped,” they say, “perhaps not the most effective assist move, but a titillating one to say the least” (p.96).11 Finley (2010:373) argues, “The use of the term ‘derby girl’ itself is reclaiming the term ‘girl’ commonly used to evoke the untamed female.” In an effort to treat terms with analytic distance, I avoid using derby lingo, and intentionally replace rollergirl with skater (or woman or man) throughout to acknowledge the adult status of participants.

10 Melissa “Melicious” Joulwan (2007:127-136) lists several derby archetypes and their corresponding on-and-off the track behaviors: superheroine, the bombshell, the sexy librarian, the hottie homemaker, the wisecrackin’ dame, the gang leader, the dominatrix, and the girl next door, all of which are familiar porn tropes (Jensen 2007).
11 Additional terms include: chase the pussy, booty blocking, and panties (Barbee and Cohen 2010:96).
SKRG Skaters

When I began my research, the Star Killer Rollergirls league had about fifty female skaters (all white except for four Black women), six bench coaches (four white men, one pregnant skater and one retired skater), eight referees (all white men, women, and a transman), ten people on the stats crew (mix of white and Black men and women), four announcers (two white men, one white woman, and one Black woman) and four regular DJs (two white men and two Black men), and about 25 regular staff (mostly white significant others, parents, and friends of skaters, and some members of a local church congregation). See Table 3 for WFTDA 2012 demographic survey results of skaters and fans.

To join SKRG, women had to be at least 21. During an interview, one woman said, “I immediately felt like it [derby] was something I could do, but I didn’t realize the age range of the girls. I was almost 30, so I hesitated a while.” This woman held off on skating because she thought she was too old. Her coworker kept urging her to tryout, and when she told her mother she was considering it, she said her response was, “You’re not 18 anymore!” Once joining, she realized that most of the skaters were in their late twenties or thirties. In another instance, a woman labeled her tryout cohort the “Manager’s Special.” She said, “I was 39 when I joined, [she] was 42 and [she] was 45. We were the not-so-fresh meat. We used to call ourselves the Manager’s Special because it was like we were past our expiration date.” There was not an upper age restriction, making age less of a constraint on women’s participation than in other athletic endeavors.

At the March 2009 Quarterly League Meeting the league voted to change the age requirement to 18, but there was a bit of concern posed about maturity and ability to go to after parties and fundraising events at bars.
Derby was an expensive leisure activity, and skaters, coaches, and referees all paid out of their own pockets to be involved. When I entered the field, skaters paid $45 in monthly dues to access the practice space (a fee two to three times higher than most local gyms), a fee that increased to $55 a month only a year later. Purchasing the gear necessary to attend practice was expensive. When I asked one skater about the financial costs of derby she replied:

It pains me deeply to have to buy a brand new set of $90 wheels, but it’s not a question. It has to be done. At this point, it is a little like birth control [laugh], you know, it has to be done. Like, if I need a pair of wheels, then I’m going to find an extra person’s hair to cut because that money has to be made. It is nothing that I would ever quit personally because of financial reasons. I know that some girls have had to do that before, but I would take on another job to pay for my derby habit.

At times, the skater worked more so that she could pay for her “derby habit.” It was mandatory for skaters to wear wrist guards, knee pads, elbow pads, a mouth guard, a helmet, and quad skates. Unable to afford her own skates, one woman used rentals for five months. Rental skates, or “peanut butters,” were available to people who paid practice dues. Regarding costs, a veteran of six years said, “I don’t see it as a strain and maybe that’s just because I love it. Yeah, it’s a bill every month and yeah, it’s time away from my family, which I value very much. But it’s time for me, which also needs to be valued.” Skaters and volunteers reported numerous strategies for budgeting time and money for derby, which will be discussed more in chapter 4.

In addition to facility fees, skaters paid fifty dollars for USA Roller Sports (USARS) insurance (required by the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association). The league typically covered the registration expenses involved with skaters participating in tournaments and, depending on the budget, each skater on the roster received a travel stipend to represent the
league at these events. But this did not cover all costs. Tournaments typically lasted three
days and required hotel lodging, rental cars, and airfare. When possible, most skaters
carpooled to away games and tournaments and shared rooms or used “roller housing” to
reduce costs. At board meetings, conflicts occasionally arose over league members’ league
expenses. Eventually, the league adopted a reimbursement plan for skaters facing “economic
hardship.”

Why would women dedicate hours to training and volunteering, and risk serious
injury, to participate in an activity that the public generally misunderstood, for zero financial
compensation? What did they get out of their participation?

Motivations to Skate

Social media is credited for spreading derby across the globe (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2012). The majority of SRKG skaters learned about derby through friends or co-workers,
online, or through a print medium. One woman declared that she joined soon after learning
about it through a friend. She recalled:

My friend had gotten involved with derby. She was like, “This derby stuff has
just been keeping me busy.” And I was like, “Derby what?!” She told me the
basics: skates, game, bunch of hitting, aggression, girls doing sport! I was so
intrigued by it. I just had to check it out. I basically committed to it like right
then and there!

During an interview, one board member said: “Having to gather money is tough, it’s really hard, but we have
someone that is kind of like our bill collector. You have to…you should pay for this because it’s the right thing
to do. I have always been a firm believer that you should not be able to practice if you owe the league money.
People who have hardship…I’m between the point where if you have hardship, maybe you should focus on
other things in your life…other things should be your priority over derby. I hate to say that, but it’s like you
shouldn’t be able to travel if you can’t pay your insurance to the league.” Not all league members agreed with
this sentiment, especially when it meant key all-star players could not afford to travel. At one point, an
anonymous grievance was filed following a league meeting discussion regarding stipends for an upcoming
tournament. The filer feared “game play [would] be determined by bank statements, not ability or dedication,”
and declared, “Skaters are working more hours, missing practice, to help pay for travel. Skaters are thinking
twice about paying skate passes because of increased travel expenses. Skaters are thinking twice about playing
derby because it is too expensive. Don’t make derby a sport for the rich at [SKRG].”
Similarly, another skater said, “I’m competitive. I used to be a lot more aggressive than I am, so I had a lot of pent up energy and passion about it. It was more than just a workout. You’re with all the other girls. It was like joining a society. It was the coolest thing I’d ever been involved in.” Some women cited the “outlet for aggression” as the major appeal of derby. For instance, one woman said, “I definitely had this kind of aggressive side that didn’t have an outlet. I thought potentially that this could give me that outlet.” Much like the women rugby players that Ezzell (2009a) studied, most skaters derived identity rewards from engaging in a contact sport, something than most other women do not do. Derby was not seen as an activity for “girly girls” (Finley 2010).

Derby was an opportunity to make friends and to have fun, while exercising. Finley (2010) notes that the skaters she studied typically cited being tomboys and/or not having many female friends, which was the case for most of the SKRG skaters without backgrounds in team sports. Although sometimes criticized for being like a “twisted sorority,” a community of friends (and couches to surf across the country) was a top benefit skaters and volunteers claimed from their involvement. One volunteer explained that he and his wife were initially drawn to the social aspects of derby. As young professionals new to the area, he said, “It was hard to find individuals who were adults, semi-professional, liberal and interested in having fun.” After becoming friends with a couple in the area, they “lost them to derby.” He said, “We met [this couple]. They disappeared all of a sudden for a year and a half [because of derby]. We started to hang out again and they talked [my wife] into the idea of [derby] being something interesting.” Aware of the time commitment and costs, they were determined as a couple “to find a way to buy skates,” and they said they’d “figure out the time after that.” A recent college graduate without sports experience found herself wanting to
“do something besides sit at a job for 8 hours a day” and checked out derby because she “just felt like it was going to be fun.”

The benefit of sociability was often cited by mothers, who made up about 30% of the league when I entered the field. During interviews, mothers frequently mentioned that derby provided them with the chance to “be more than just a mom.” One woman came to derby shortly after having her first child. She said, “I saw derby on MySpace. I was looking for exercise. [My daughter] was about to turn one and I didn’t have anything else to do besides be a mom and work.” Similarly, another mom recalled, “I was a young mom and I kind of left my teenage years into…into being a mom, and so it was like I wanted to do something for myself.” Derby gave this young mom a way to reclaim lost years. Like the other mother, she said, “I needed something, and it just sounded like so much fun, like to meet girls and have friends.” She explained that a lot of her high school friends “had gone off to college and moved away. I kind of wanted to feel like I was doing something for myself and succeeding at something.” Unable to claim the college student identity like her friends, this mother also found derby appealing because of the potential for measurable success.

Roller derby can be understood as a serious leisure activity. According to Stebbins (1979:23), serious leisure is defined as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that they launch themselves on a career, centered on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge, and experience.” Rollergirls display the characteristics that define serious leisure (Stebbins 1996:46). For skaters, advancing through the “career-like trajectory” required perseverance

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14 Some of these women retired, some returned to skates, and some stayed involved with the league in at least a volunteering capacity, which will be discussed more in chapter 4.
and effort. As the league was forming, women were not required to have backgrounds in skating to join, but by 2006, SKRG had implemented a tryout system and level assessments for progressing through the ranks of the organization (see Table 4).

In sport, “progress is measured in terms of growing skill,” and skaters, especially those without backgrounds in sport, came to find it rewarding to advance their skills and knowledge of strategy (Stebbins 1992:77). Although women without backgrounds in sports reported “improving gradually” or experiencing “slow, but steady improvement,” it was still an immensely gratifying experience. A self-described “baby giraffe on skates” explained, “I could not bend my knees at all. I could not do a crossover. I could barely stand. [A granny] took me under her tiny, tiny wing and kind of made me feel okay about it enough to diffuse my sense of shame long enough for me to get better.” She said, “I was useless the first six months before I could do any of the basic skills. I experienced very gradual improvement.” At first, she progressed with two other women from her tryout cohort, “occasionally hitting a frustrating point where we didn’t improve much for a while, then, we have an epiphany that kicks things off again.” Having other “plateau people” progressing at a similar rate was comforting to women, especially in these moments of frustration.

Women with backgrounds in sports tended to pass through level assessments faster than women without backgrounds in sports. One woman credited her range of previous sports experiences as facilitating her development as a skater. She said, “I’m one of those people athletically where I can play any sport and be good at any sport.” Although able to excel at many athletic endeavors, she said, “I’ve always been searching for the sport I’d be great at.” She came to derby looking for a chance to continue playing competitive sports as an adult. Similarly, another woman said, “I couldn’t play women’s NBA. I’m not that good.”
However, she said, “I can advance in skating. Playing different sports has helped me with skating—like doing linear movements and the aggressiveness that I had from competing in upper-level basketball.” Neither woman’s athletic career advanced to the professional stage, but their previous experience gave them an edge in advancing in derby.

Mastering skills and passing level assessments was motivating for women, regardless of their sports backgrounds. Some women who were initially looking for friendship and exercise developed a new interest in training once interleague competition began. At this point, some skaters began taking derby more seriously, prioritizing training and losing patience for teammates who were “flaky,” “uncommitted,” or “just in it to say they’re a rollergirl.” As time went on, skaters’ motivations for involvement shifted as the WFTDA became focused on interleague play, which will be discussed in chapter 3. League members negotiated the meanings attached to their participation over time, with most prioritizing athleticism.

SKRG Volunteers

The majority of the volunteers for the league were partners, family, or friends of skaters. Derby frequently was a source of relationship tension; several husbands and boyfriends admitted getting involved with the league to avoid becoming a “derby widow” (Barbee and Cohen 2010:129). When one man’s wife “ended up disappearing to practices all the time,” he decided to get involved with the league. Likewise, another man said, “I was meeting the other guys that were also involved. So, I got involved.” Joint involvement was a way to “spend time together” and a strategy for balancing participation in serious leisure with life (discussed in chapter 4). A skater involved since the first season said, “I’ve seen
relationships break up over derby. I’ve seen some husbands who are resentful about it, some husbands who get involved, some who don’t want anything to do with it, and some who support it but don’t get involved.”

While few in number, some non-partner volunteers were key to the development and survival of the league. One core volunteer said, “I work to support my derby habit. I’m a fanatic.” This fan-turned-avid-volunteer primarily expressed positive feelings about her involvement, but she did note a distinction between the league members. She said, “If you’re skating, you’re one of the girls, and if you’re not, you’re not.” Pavlidis and Fullagar (2012:12) documented how derby identities are “policed and regulated in ways that undermine discourses of empowerment and belonging.” Several SKRG volunteers told me of feeling similarly about their secondary status in the league.

Historical Context

Roller derby was created as co-ed contest of “stamina and speed” by Leo Seltzer in the 1930s (Mabe 2007). In the 1940s the flat-track race turned into full-contact competition between two rival teams on a 45-degree banked track, but remained co-ed (Coppage 1999, Mabe 2007). After traveling around the country, the sport made its television debut in 1948, airing live from New York. Popularity increased and more than 50,000 people attended the worldseries held at Madison Square Garden only a year later (Coppage 1999). Seltzer received a three-year television contract, but television ratings were said to drop as “fans began questioning the legitimacy of the sport and no longer embraced the on-track antics that once helped make the sport popular” (Mabe 2007:43). By the 1960s, three non-Seltzer teams sprang up under Roller Games: the LA Braves, the San Francisco Bay Bombers, and the

The modern derby revival was started in Austin, Texas, by Dan Palicarpo, known as “Devil Dan” (Brick 2008). Although not involved long, he recruited the women who formed Bad Girls Good Women Productions (BGGW) in 2000. Palicarpo’s original vision for a high-spectacle performance was the inspiration for what later became the Lone Star Rollergirls, otherwise known as Texas Roller Derby (TXRD), a bank-track league (Joulwan 2007). The first public bout of the revival was held in 2002. Mabe (2007:61) notes:

This time, the organizers added a twist to the sport – no men allowed. Sexy uniforms, skater alter egos, and new-school rules combined with unparalleled athleticism and fearlessness. The new breed of roller derby girls all proved that you can bring something back. Do it differently, put a fresh spin on it, and fans will respond.

In contrast to derby of the past, the women-only bank-track reincarnation relied on women skating in “pinup girl uniforms” instead of the athletic uniforms worn by male and female skaters in the past, as well as adopting a “PG-13” style, including “playful penalties” (Joulwan 2007:83). The actual “fresh spin” was that this version of the game was not being controlled by a man.

Skaters began to express discontent with how the league was progressing. Members of BGGW attempted to appease league members by letting them form a council of representatives, but as evidenced by footage from the documentary *Hell on Wheels*, this
was only a temporary solution.\textsuperscript{15} By April of 2003, skaters were fed up with the hierarchical power structure of the league. Skaters felt alienated due to their limited input in league decision making, considering the effort they were putting into the league.

Approximately two weeks later, sixty-five of the eighty skaters split from the Lonestar Rollergirls (TXRD), walking out on BGGW, to form the Texas Rollergirls (TXRG) a flat-track league.\textsuperscript{16}

The skaters who left the BGGW operated derby together, gained solidarity through the experience, and used the momentum to start their own league with a different organizational philosophy. Beaver (2012:35) argues, “Due to their dissatisfaction with BGGW’s organizational model, which left skaters with no control over league decisions, the disgruntled rollergirls were determined that their new league would be owned and operated by the skaters.” In an interview, a Texas Rollergirl explained the origin of the governing phrase of their league: “by the skaters, for the skaters.” She said:

Oh gosh, that’s an old phrase. I think that’s one that the Texas Roller Girls brought into the WFTDA because we’d gone through that split with our old league because the skaters weren’t being considered. When we formed the Texas Rollergirls we said that this was going to be run by the skaters for the skaters and that there wouldn’t be anybody else running it. You had to be a skater. There wouldn’t be somebody making a decision without your input. It’s going to be for you by you.

\textsuperscript{15}The dialogue involving Texas Roller Derby (TXRD) skaters comes directly from the transcript of the documentary \textit{Hell on Wheels}. At a council meeting in October of 2002, one of the BGGW members said: “The way the attorney said that we can be the fairest and protect our interests at the same time is by having—um, it can’t be everyone. Not every person can be a member. You cannot have a company run by 50 people, period. So basically what it would be is, the four of us would be managers and then we’d pick seven other people that we felt—the criteria was that they had been with us a year continuously, have put an extra effort out and have expressed like, a want to be a part of this, and pay in a hundred dollars. We each have to pay in a hundred bucks. And that means we own the business… And the way that we protect our own interest the managers each get 2 votes all the other members get one vote. So that’s eight votes—eight of our votes against their seven.”

\textsuperscript{16}Michael Brick tells the story of Dan Policarpo’s vision for the derby revival, in a \textit{New York Times} piece titled, “The Dude of Roller Derby and His Vision.” The documentary \textit{Hell on Wheels} captures front and backstage interactions between league members. An insider perspective of the split is provided by Melissa “Melicious” Joulwan, a founding member of the Texas Rollergirls, in her book \textit{Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track}.
The phrase “by the skaters, for the skaters” later became the slogan for the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) and it is also the governing philosophy of the Star Killer Rollergirls (discussed further below).

As Mabe (2007:69) put it, “The flat-track ideal has enabled leagues to get off the ground quickly, without the need for financial backing to purchase a track and pay for a locale to store it.” Texas Roller Girls (TXRG) are credited with spawning the “flat-track revolution,” making roller derby the fastest growing sport internationally, with more than 1,500 leagues (including both bank-track and flat-track) worldwide.17

Organizational Context

Gary Alan Fine (1984:286) argues that “Just as negotiated order ties the individual to a network of other individuals, organizational culture connects the individual to the community.” The derby community touted being inclusive and empowering (Pavlidis 2011), as did members of SKRG.18 For example, Breeze (2010:127) offers the “Vagine Regime” as an example of how “the sport presents a queer positive public image as well as visibly recognising and celebrating marginalised sexualities and same-sex relationships.” From the

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17 As of March 2015, there were 1515 leagues registered on http://derbyroster.com/, which includes skaters from the Junior Roller Derby Association (JRDA), Modern Athletic Derby Endeavor (MADE), Men’s Roller Derby Association (MRDA), Old School Derby Association (OSDA), Roller Derby Association of Canada (RDAC), Roller Derby Coalition of Leagues (RDCL), United Kingdom Roller Derby Association (UKRDA), USA Roller Sports (USARS), Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA).

18 During an interview, a male skater and coach of a women’s all-star team explained the diversity of the derby community being one of the main attractions: “Everyone knows the range of people in derby: lesbian, alternative, overweight, skinny, big, small, short, disability, no ability, whatever it is. And so, this is like one of the only sports where you don’t have to change who you are in order to be in derby.” SKRG had a formal Code of Conduct, which contained a “Respect for Others/Equal and Inclusive Treatment” policy. The policy outlined organizational expectations for league members with regard to: respect, equality, and inclusion, and, how SKRG leadership was to sanction incompliance. The majority of WFTDA member leagues voted to adopt a formal “gender policy,” but some leagues found the potential need for information to be provided by medical providers “upon request” to be problematic. At least one league wrote a formal objection to the policy. The official WFTDA Gender Policy can be found here: http://wftda.com/wftda-gender-policy
start in 2004, SKRG had an open recruitment strategy. One skater explained, “At that time, everybody was still so excited about derby. That’s all we did. There was no free time. That’s all we talked about. Derby was word of mouth.” One veteran I interviewed without sports experience liked it that “you didn’t have to be in shape, you didn’t have to be able to skate, and that you didn’t have to be able to do anything except show up.” Women interested in joining the league were not initially required to have skating experience or a previous sports background. A former training director explained, “There was no training agenda back then. We wanted to learn more about the game.”

Unlike pre-revival derby, in which decisions were made by team owners, managers, and coaches, in modern flat-track derby decisions are made by skaters. Beaver states, “In addition to their athletic labor, rollergirls perform nearly all of the labor required to produce public bouts and maintain the league,” which was also the case for SKRG (2012:29). The league’s board of directors is composed of an elected chairperson, training director, sponsorship director, marketing and public relations director, business and finance director, bout production director, skater relations director, and interleague relations director. Everyone except the chairperson is allowed to vote. WFTDA leagues are required to fill two-thirds of the board of director positions with current or former female skaters, in the spirit of being “by the skaters, for the skaters” (although male and female volunteers can also serve on the board).19 When I began my fieldwork, there was a chairman, but the position has since been filled by skaters.

19 A transgender skater policy was debated at the league and WFTDA levels in 2008. In 2011, a “gender policy” was adopted by the WFTDA. The policy went into effect January 2012. The WFTDA executive director said in a press release, “We’ve maintained our commitment to women’s sports while expressing the value of inclusivity, and affirming the right of transgender females to be included and accepted in the WFTDA” (http://wftda.com/news/wftda-adopts-gender-policy)
Board members held elected positions but, more often than not, league members did not voluntarily run for these positions. One skater told me, “I was nominated [for the board]. I would have never nominated myself.” Another recalled, “I got a lot of peer pressure;” another said, “I didn’t want to have that responsibility, but no one else was going to do it. It was the same way when I came into being a captain—it was because no one else was going to do it.” Replacements were often actively sought and groomed by board members who were ready to be relieved from their positions. Board members frequently described service on the board as: “emotionally exhausting,” “thankless work,” and “obligatory.”

At the league level, the negotiation of organizational growth was heavily shaped by board members, who deliberated over solutions to organizational problems at every monthly board meeting I attended. Keeping everyone happy was cited as the most difficult task for board members. For example, one board member who served multiple terms, said:

The most challenging thing is organizing everything and communicating with everyone. It’s hard. Whenever one person gets really loud about something you feel this insane pressure to solve the problem. It might just be one person upset about it, but it’s hard for me to ignore those one or two people. When, sometimes, it really makes sense to look at it as if you’ve got forty people happy and two upset people, you’re doing pretty well.

When issues came up in between meetings and when solutions to organizational problems were not reached at the four-hour long meetings, flurries of emails were exchanged (i.e., in more than one instance hundreds of replies were generated). Despite board meetings being open to everyone involved with the league, they were rarely attended by non-board members. Although the board served as the governing body of the league, they did not have ultimate decision-making power. The league by-laws dictated that all active skaters had a vote. This
policy was ratified in 2009 to allow active skaters to nominate and extend volunteers’ active status, thereby granting them a vote in the league.

Tim Hallett (2003:130) defines organizational culture as “a negotiated order that emerges through interactions between actors, a negotiated order influenced in particular by people with symbolic power—the power to define the situation in which the interactions take place.” Despite being democratically controlled and cooperatively operated (Beaver 2012), power differences developed between league members, resulting in some skaters’ voices being heard more (or even at all) and their voices carrying more weight. At first, skaters with symbolic power included the founder and other original league members, but later all skaters were involved in league decisions. However, as focus shifted throughout the WFTDA to interleague competition, the all-stars who contributed the most to securing wins, especially members of the training committee, gained more control over the negotiations. Athleticism became a currency and leaguemates feared jeopardizing their playtime opportunities for speaking out against the elected leadership and the direction of the organization.

The future direction of the league was to be determined by the skaters, but league members’ thoughts and feelings shaped how change was negotiated. As noted by Pavlidis (2011:4), “[The] desire to remain ‘true to the original’ is ever-present within roller derby, and is a sticking point for many decisions.” Skaters developed different investments in roller derby, and in an effort to protect their investments, often argued with each other at meetings. Skaters argued from particular emotional standpoints, especially with regards to restructuring the league (discussed in chapter 3), and emotions were undeniably present in negotiations, often “permeat[ing] or tak[ing] over the situation at hand” (Sugrue 1982:280).
The phrase “Don’t be a Douche Bag” was informally used to tame personal attacks and became the board of directors formalized response to league members who spammed the league Listserv, filling skaters’ and volunteers’ inboxes with more derby related emails.\(^{20}\) This tactic was adopted in an effort to keep debate “more civilized” in the comment section on Derby News Network. They issued a “Don’t be a douche bag” public service announcement, specifically stating:

This means treating those with whom you disagree with respect, and engaging in actual debate rather than just contradiction, repetition or abuse. To make it crystal clear: repeating the same points over and over again in increasingly irate tones is not debate, it is being a douchebag. The same goes for ad hominem attacks on organisations, teams or people. By all means express your disapproval or admiration for whatsoever you desire, just don’t be a douchebag about it (see also Barbee and Cohen 2010:204).\(^{21}\)

This phrase, along with “Shut up and skate” (Pavlidis and Fullagar 2012:10) and “What happens on the track, stays on the track” (Mabe 2007:117), became ways that league members would regulate discourse during practices, games, and meetings (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Partly to reduce the time spent in meetings, a chairperson restructured the league meetings, attempting to keep attendees on track, by limiting time spent discussing topics. This had the unintended consequence of some voices not getting the chance to be heard when they were not comfortable speaking first or in opposition of skaters with seniority.

\(^{20}\) A member of the Announcers Flat Track Derby Association explained to me that they had also recently adopted the “Don’t be a douche bag” policy. In a general explanation of how derby had become more structured, he said, “We [the AFTDA] have our own guidelines, like the “don’t be a douche bag” policy. [Q: What’s that?] Don’t be a douche bag! Bring your fellow announcers in and share the mic. Don’t be drunk. Don’t slur. Don’t say dumb shit on the mic. As announcers, we’re trying to control that. We’re trying to control that within ourselves. We want to grow with the sport as the sport is growing. We’re going to do certifications and get serious like the referees.” In a similar search for respect, the announcers adopted this policy to regulate a variety of behaviors that the members of the AFTDA deemed unprofessional.

\(^{21}\) Full policy can be found here: http://www.derbynewsnetwork.com/blogs/lex_talionis/2013/06/community_standards_psa_dont_be_douchebag
Intra-Organizational Context

In 2004, leagues communicated on a message board—sharing common struggles and solutions—functioning as a loose cooperative. In 2005, the first ULC/WFTDA meeting was held and representatives from 30 leagues became the founding members of the WFTDA. According to Joulwan (2007:241), “The fifty-five girls who represented us at that first ULC meeting willingly purchased their own airline tickets.” Following the first ULC meeting, membership in the organization was closed, but it opened again in 2006 when the WFTDA adopted a formalized rule set, split membership leagues into two divisions, and established a ranking system to determine qualifications and seedings for tournaments. The rapid growth of the organization coupled with the goal of promoting interleague play led to several structural changes and policy implementations at the WFTDA level.

In 2007, the first official WFTDA tournament was held in Austin, Texas. By 2008, there were 60 member leagues and a policy was put in place requiring leagues to compete in two games before quarterly rankings were released. Another policy mandated that all-star rosters be submitted quarterly. For SKRG, this required expanding the all-star season and changing the roster selection process. Some league members said that these changes were unfair because they gave all-stars even more opportunities to play and required skaters to commit to prioritizing all-star training and game travel for three months in advance, putting skaters with work and family obligations at a disadvantage (will be discussed in chapter 3).

To accommodate organizational growth, in 2009 the WFTDA established an apprenticeship program to accept new leagues into the organization. During an interview, the executive director of the WFTDA explained the purpose of the apprenticeship program. She said:
Because this is a unique organization and because this is a volunteer run
organization managed all completely online, it takes some getting used to. It’s
also [The WFTDA] an organization that values democracy pretty highly. As a
result, the membership requirements are pretty reflective of that, in the sense
that, um, leagues don’t just have the right to vote, but they have the
responsibility to vote. And if they don’t, then their membership status
becomes exempt. And so, with all of those sort of complicated rights and
duties, the apprenticeship program is almost framed as an orientation.

Each league seeking admission to the WFTDA is required to have a mentor league sponsor
them. Mentor leagues act as “big sisters” who teach the sport, business, and democratic
aspects of the organization to members of the newer league. When leagues graduate from the
apprenticeship program, they are filtered into two divisions of membership.22

Because of the increase of membership leagues, the WFTDA split into four regions in
2009. This restructuring meant that more leagues could participate in regional tournaments
(the top ten leagues from each region, each advancing three teams to the championship
tournament, whereas previously the top four leagues from the Eastern and Western regions
progressed to the championship tournament). In the summer of 2013, white papers were
available through the WFTDA website explaining the competitive division structure and the
ranking system. Rankings were previously determined by a voting system, often criticized for
being biased and based on popularity.

22 The executive director explained: “After they have gone through this curriculum, which typically takes 6
months to a year, then they graduate into full membership. At the moment they graduate into Class B
membership, which is a full membership status that doesn’t have complete voting rights and responsibilities yet.
Once they have demonstrated voting for a year or less they typically track up to a Class A membership, which
has full voting, full representation, and heavier membership requirements at the moment.”
Dissertation Overview

This study is an examination of how members of a democratic organization negotiated growth and change based on differential identity investments and identity rewards. Chapter two is an examination of how league members signified a derby identity, and how this created challenges for marketing derby and conflict between league members. I argue that initial identity codes were renegotiated as some skaters desired to embrace an athletic identity and to reach a larger audience. League members tried to overcome the problems that early marketing strategies created by constructing derby as a sport and themselves as athletes, while other league members resisted the changes being made in the league and tried to preserve derby culture. I discuss the connection between subcultural identity codes, authenticity, and the commercialization of alternative sport.

Chapter three is an examination of how rapid growth of women’s roller derby at the national and global level influenced the strategies that local league members adopted to respond to similar growth. Responses to organizational growth varied in relation to members’ locations within the organization, as well as their individual and collective interpretations of what “roller derby” meant. Specifically, I demonstrate that some members – those on the training committee and all-stars in the local league – negotiated organizational growth by stratifying recruitment, membership, and playing opportunities. I show how organizational members made comparisons to conventional sport and drew on talent rhetoric to justify cultivating an increasingly competitive organizational culture. I discuss the consequences that a competitive organizational culture creates for a democratic organization.

Chapter four is an examination of how people manage participation in serious leisure. I analyze the strategies that skaters and volunteers adopted to balance their participation in
serious leisure, and, in turn how some strategies resulted in others over-or under-benefiting. I investigate the division of league labor, specifically how organizational members accounted for inequity in light of the WFTDA motto “by the skaters, for the skaters,” and how in trying to restore equity, board members proposed and implemented a policy to mandate “volunteering.” I show that policy violators were sanctioned differently based on their contributions to the league’s success in competitions.

In chapter five, the conclusion, I reconsider the role of identity in the negotiation of organizational change. I discuss how my findings contribute to the literature, especially the relationship between identity investments, external pressures, and organizational change. I argue that gender and identity are key parts of the negotiation process that have been underexplored by negotiated order theorists.
CHAPTER 2
NEGOTIATING CONFLICTING IDENTITY CODES IN SUBCULTURAL SPORT

Roller derby is a paradoxical arena for its participants (Pavlidis 2011). The skaters challenge traditional notions of femininity by participating in an aggressive contact sport, but remain captive to the idea that no one will care about women’s sports unless the women are half-clothed (Cohen 2008). “While roller derby is a full-contact sport that requires a high level of athleticism,” Jennifer Carlson (2011:86) argues, “the derby world is a cross road of sport and spectacle.” The derby subculture encourages the skaters to adopt a sexualized “bad girl” style of self-presentation (Mabe 2007), which became problematic for skaters concerned with being seen as authentic athletes and authentic rollergirls (Cohen 2008). Skaters are thus simultaneously engaged in negotiating their images as athletes, as women, and as rollergirls. My analysis focuses on how some skaters’ desires to be recognized as serious athletes affected the reconstruction of the image of modern roller derby and how others resisted their efforts in an attempt to “remain true” and keep derby alternative by preserving derby culture (Pavlidis 2011).

Despite gains in women’s rights over the last few decades, there is still immense pressure for women to conform to conventional standards of heterosexual femininity (Jeffreys 2005). Because female participation in sports challenges traditional ideas of femininity, stereotypes of women athletes are prevalent. Some argue that female athletes have to do identity work to avoid being stigmatized as lesbian (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin 2005, Blinde and Taub 1992 Ezzell 2009a, Melton 2013) and to have their participation seen as legitimate (Adams and Bettis 2003, Kelly et al. 2005, Lafferty and McKay 2004, Shakib and Dunbar 2003). These conflicting identity goals created a number of
contradictions with which the rollergirls – as individuals and as an organization – struggled when dealing with organizational growth and legitimacy issues.

The skaters of SKRG wanted roller derby to be recognized as a legitimate form of alternative sports entertainment. Skaters—as individuals and as an organization—used stigma management strategies to fight misconceptions of modern roller derby that were shaped by memories of spectacle filled television shows and live events from decades past. They wanted people to recognize their activity as real sport. As the marketing committee and board of directors recrafted the league/organizational image to overcome legitimacy issues, tension developed between league members over how much derby should mimic conventional sport (Carlson 2010, Pavlidis 2011).

THE CHALLENGES OF MARKETING DERBY

In the early years of the revival, most leagues’ marketing efforts, including SKRG’s, were sexualized. Kearney’s (2011:290) content analysis of the A&E show Rollergirls, which featured Texas Roller Derby (TXRD), demonstrated that producers (and the skaters) used “campy eroticism” to market the show to a straight male audience, rather than highlighting the athleticism of the skaters in ads and promotional materials for the show.23 The skaters wanted to attract audiences to their bouts, but they couldn’t do this through sheer athletic virtuosity or people’s long-cultivated love for roller derby, so they tried to do it by adopting

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23 The London Rollergirls announced in the summer of 2013 that the Extreme Sports Channel would be doing a 13-part documentary series on their league and UK roller derby. In the press release, Tim MacMullen, the General Manager of Extreme Sports Channel, said: “We strive to bring our viewers the most adrenaline-fuelled sporting action from a variety of disciplines. As soon as we saw the event and met the women involved, we knew that Roller Derby was a perfect fit for the channel. We are delighted to be bringing this young and exhilarating contact sport to TV viewers in the UK and Europe for the very first time.”
an alternative identity and edgy-sexualized presentations, both in terms of organizational image and skaters’ appearances. While this worked to some extent, it also tended to detract attention from the athletic prowess the skaters valued (Cohen 2008). A Texas announcer described early years as being, “rock n roller derby.” He reflected, “Back then, there was a lot more theatrical stuff. The girls used to do this guerilla marketing where they would put their skates on and go into a bar and then throw down. They would tackle and start fighting and skate around the tables and hand out flyers.” This marketing strategy was geared at catching the attention of bar patrons in Austin and was developed with consideration for the male gaze (see also Cohen 2008).

Skaters employed sexualized marketing schemes to draw a crowd. Although the announcer thought this was cool, he said, “You can’t do that for long periods of time because it becomes antic-y. [Back then] you were combining these girls who wanted to go out there and get aggressive and do sport in their own way—with tattoos and sexiness and antics.”

Early bout production efforts delivered more spectacle elements to the crowd, some of which were sexualized as well. The announcer told me about the infamous penalty wheel. According to Barbee and Cohen (2010:101), when referees called a penalty on a skater, Amber “Diva” Stitson (otherwise known as the “original penalty mistress”) would spin the penalty wheel to determine the sanction the skater faced for their rule infraction. He went on to describe an early penalty that was given to skaters for violating a rule:

There was a spanking alley. Basically we’d pick 10 people out of the audience and they’d get to sit with little paddles. When the girls got penalties—one was having to skate slowly while everybody spanked them. There was also a reverse spank where the girls spanked them.

This sexualized spectacle gave audience members direct, eroticized contact with the skaters, and stood in stark contrast to the penalties imposed at the tournament where our exchange
took place in 2009. Instead of being “spanked,” rule violators now served time in penalty boxes, similar to hockey players. The elimination of this type of sexualized spectacle marks one of the earliest examples of how leagues adopted elements of conventional sport in the process of reconstructing the image of roller derby.

The Star Killer Rollergirls adopted marketing strategies like those used by Texas when they were getting started, but later replaced them with more conventional strategies. A key marketing member explained during an interview that they held spanking booth fundraisers to raise the money to put on their first bout at the local skating rink and allegedly raised enough to cover attorney fees associated with gaining non-profit status. She said, “We looked at other leagues as role models. They were doing fundraisers at bars with spanking booths. We did that for a while and realized it was tacky. We realized that we didn’t want to get that image, so we quit.” Although the strategy was successful for raising money and for attracting attention, it was not gaining the skaters the type of recognition they wanted or the reputation the league wanted. Some league members spoke out and were unwilling, as one skater put it, to continue “prostituting [themselves] out for the league.”

A board member drew a clear connection between the decisions to drop the sexualized marketing strategy and the desire to project a different league image. She explained via email, “We used to drag the spanking booth to festivals and bars and stuff. We’d get peeps [people] to pay us to spank them or pay to spank us. It’s not the image we try

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24This strategy was passed on to visiting skaters who were attending a workshop in 2007 for leagues trying to get started. During a workshop session on managing business aspects of derby, an attendee asked the workshop presider (who was the SKRG bout production manager) for marketing ideas. The presider shared, “We’ve had spanking booths before, but we quit doing that because it was pretty controversial with some of the girls. Regardless, it got us a lot of attention. We raised enough money to pay for a lawyer for our first year.”
to promote now of course ;) [wink emoticon].” A former SKRG marketing director told me, “We refined and came away from the spanking booth and the other things that we felt were more show and spectacle, rather than sport.” The Star Killer Rollergirls and other WFTDA leagues across the country dropped spectacle elements from marketing efforts and bout production in attempts to gain recognition as a sport (Finley 2010). The spanking booth was converted into an announcer’s booth and the fundraisers were replaced with conventional marketing and PR efforts, such as skating in local parades and doing community service (i.e., volunteering at the local food bank, participating in charity events, coaching and fundraising for the Special Olympics).

The concern for the image of derby was a component of early exchanges between leagues. A veteran SKRG skater, who served as the league WFTDA liaison, recalled discussing the “ratio of sport to spectacle in [league] productions” at the first United Leagues Coalition meeting in 2005. She said:

What has kind of consistently happened is that pretty much – I feel safe saying this – that pretty much everywhere the sport has been played up. Some leagues still have a decent amount of spectacle, but just to be competitive the sport had to step up. The more we started playing each other the more we started standardizing.

The increase of interleague competition meant that all-star teams were spending more money to travel out of state to play other leagues’ all-star teams. To off-set the added costs of bout production at the larger venue and the increased expenses for travel, the Star Killers became more concerned about their organizational image as they tried to secure more sponsorship.

One of the former marketing directors told me during an interview, “There’s all these challenges in marketing roller derby. People don’t understand what it is and there is all this
stigma attached to it. [Q: Like what?] You know what, that’s it is overtly sexy and violent.”

A volunteer echoed, “The first impression…people think it’s antic-y. They see the way the girls look and they stereotype them.” The marketing director further explained the dilemma:

I was talking to some people at [potential sponsor] the other day. We were trying to work out some cross-promotion there. The guy said, “Yeah, I haven’t been to one of your shows.” He kept saying shows. I was like, “It’s not a show, it’s a sporting event.” And I feel that way because we aren’t performing. There’s not a plot. It’s not a show, it’s a sporting event! Someone else contacted us about an article they’re writing for [an out of state newspaper] and said something about, “I want to get this out there, some information about your next show,” and something about, “Do you have any pictures of so and so on the ring?” I’m like, “On the ring?! A what? A ring?!” Is this the circus? I was thinking like, “On ring one roller derby and on ring two you’ll find the dancing elephants.”

Despite having five seasons under their wheels and already eliminating early spectacle elements, this lack of understanding interfered with the ability to secure sponsorship from local businesses. In order to discount the “dancing elephant show,” skaters with investments in the identity of “athlete” pushed to adopt additional sport elements.

Researchers have previously noted, “As teams get more skilled the high jinx seem to diminish” (Finley 2010:376, see also Carlson 2010), but have not given much attention to how this phenomenon occurs or what it has to do with identity. Using a subcultural identity work perspective, I show that league members negotiate identity codes and redefined the organization in attempts to destigmatize the derby identity (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). To deflect the stigma of being “overtly sexy and violent” and “antic-y,” and to reach a larger audience, the Star Killer Rollergirls constructed a conventional sports image. They did this by: (1) presenting derby as real; (2) crafting a family-friendly image; and (3) adopting athletic uniforms. A subset of league members resisted these efforts and attempted to preserve derby culture by (1) defending the use of derby names; and (2) saving space for fun.
While league members agreed that it was important for people to recognize derby as real sport, some skaters were concerned that adopting elements from conventional sport would be “selling out.” Derby, from their point of view, was intended to be an alternative form of entertainment. As these skaters saw it, efforts to construct derby as a sport were ruining what made derby different.

CONSTRUCTING A CONVENTIONAL SPORTS IMAGE

Organizations, like individuals, must engage in impression management. Impression management involves the process by which organizations, and individuals who populate them, consciously seek to control how other people perceive and think of them (Denzin 1977, Goffman 1959, Hall 1979). Because individuals want others to think positively about them, they try to control both the information about them available to others and the impressions others derive from their appearance and actions. Organizations are also concerned with presenting their “ideal self” to others (Denzin 1977; Meyer and Rowan 1977) in order to acquire and maintain resources for their survival (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). While individuals carefully manage their image by dressing a certain way and paying attention to their speech and posture, organizations manage their image by carefully constructing public relation materials, using certain spokespeople, and by using certain rhetoric (Goffman 1959, Scott and Lyman 1968). The organizational members—in this case skaters and volunteers—had a personal stake in the organization and how it was perceived by outsiders because their individual identity stakes are tied to the league.
Presenting Derby as Real Sport

The first strategy that league members adopted to construct derby as a conventional sport required presenting derby as a real sport. Declarations that derby was a real sport were common across the derby community. For instance, Melissa “Melicious” Joulwan (2007:9), a skater for TXRG said, “Despite the on-track skirmishes and girls flying—ass-over-teacups—into the crowd, the game of Flat Track Derby is a real sport, with rules and penalties for breaking them. When it’s played well, it brings together strategy, skill, teamwork, determination, and psychological warfare.” When league members were directly challenged in face-to-face encounters, they would engage in educational accounting.

According to Marvasti (2005:535-536), providing an educational account entails “the account-giver assum[ing] the role of an educator, informing and instructing the account-taker about relevant topics.” In dealing with questions from derby outsiders, roller girls engaged in educational accounting to present a positive personal identity and league identity. Skaters and volunteers frequently expressed frustration with having to explain to people “that it isn’t like the derby they saw on TV when they were little.” During these “accounting-encounters” (Marvasti 2005:543), skaters often had to engage in emotion work to manage their frustration with their desire for legitimacy and athletic affirmation (Hochschild 1983).25

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25 Some skaters defined this emotional control as requiring more skill than engaging in fake fighting. For instance, one all-star explained: “In order to keep this sport safe and to keep it alive as long as we can…I’m sure people would love to come see real fights happen. The way the tensions get on the track with people talking shit all the time, it’d be so easy to just turn around and punch somebody. But, it’s a lot harder to sit there and listen to their shit, and to take that energy and use it. It’s a safety thing and a control thing, but I could see it turning into like, the more fights happen the more interested people get and then like, ‘Oh, let’s start staging these a bit more and get people to come.’ I don’t want it to be like a NASCAR race where people just go see the wrecks and not the race.” This skater saw the emotional control as a characteristic of true athleticism and positioned fighting as a marketing scheme that would undermine their athleticism.
When Drew Barrymore’s roller derby movie *Whip It* was released in 2009, WFTDA leagues across the country did cross-promotional events at movie theaters. Some skaters were conflicted about how the movie portrayed roller derby. A marketing committee member said:

> It will probably help promote derby. But I guess that they brought back what it used to be in the 70s – the hitting and the elbowing in the face. We’re trying to get rid of that image. We are trying to show people that *this is real* and that we don’t do those things. We work really hard to get rid of that image, but the movie shows that, and that’s what people enjoy seeing.

Every skater and volunteer I interviewed defined derby as a real sport and wanted outsiders to agree. One veteran was outspoken about derby being a sport, and when I asked her what qualified derby as a sport she said:

> It’s hard, you’ve got to be athletic. Not just anybody can do this. It’s not easy. You need to train. You need to keep your body up. It’s got strategy; you’re not out there anymore like you used to be just skating and hitting people. Now, you really have to have a plan, a play book, and coaches and trainer. It’s a sport for sure, but it’s got a little more flair than say…basketball [yawn] *boring!*

Similarly, another skater made parallels to markers in conventional sports: “It’s real contact, real injuries, and real training. Most people train five days a week and go to the gym to work out off skates.” Additionally, they stressed that unlike most recreational sporting activities, derby was not something that most people could go play casually, like a game of pick-up basketball.

Several people in the derby community admitted to having different strategies for describing derby to people based on their interest and experience with other sports. One volunteer said, “You break it down and find out what they know about sports.” During an interview with a veteran all-star, she gave me an elbow and said, “People want to know if you can do this.” In attempting to educate the inquirer, this skater relied on conveying the skill required to play derby. She said:
I explain to them that there’s not a lot of skill in that. But that if I can make myself agile enough on my skates to come at you in a horizontal direction and if I can direct my skates and give you a full body blow, that I can stay up-right and watch you fall! There is so much more skill in that [does full contact body block] than there is in this [gives me an elbow]. This [elbow] is nothing. This is just fake! Because people respect skill and they respect strategy and the in-depth training it takes to do something like that, I try to tap into that.

In this instance, and others like it, league members were able to construct and assert that derby was harder than it looked. Highlighting skill was a rhetorical strategy adopted by skaters who wanted to stress that derby was a real sport. Stressing characteristics associated with conventional athleticism, such as skill and strategy, helped skaters and league members build the legitimacy of derby.

For one skater, it took a while to convince her sister, with whom she had grown up playing various sports, to give derby a try. She said, “She saw the outer [image] and wrote it off. Once she really started to watch derby, she realized how tough it was, and how much I was working though.” Shortly after, her sister joined a different league. A male volunteer turned skater admitted his reaction to his first bout was, “Hot girls skating around, wearing fishnets, this is cool,” then went on to say, “But then, like, the more you see it, it’s impossible to deny [that derby is a sport], especially once you play it.” Similar to the sister above, his initial perception was shaped by the outward appearance, but he began skating and gained a new respect for derby as a sport. In fact, he went on to found the Derby News Network, a website tailored to present derby as a sport.

As an organizational strategy, SKRG and the WFTDA engaged in “dramaturgical stereotype busting” (Anderson and Taylor 2010:51). The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association was also concerned with derby being seen as a legitimate sport, and so the first strategy they adopted was countering misconceptions through a list of frequently asked
questions on its website. For instance, one frequently asked question (FAQ) was: “Is Roller Derby Real?” When you click on the link the answer states:

The roller derby you may have watched in the 70s and early 80s was often scripted and rehearsed. The roller derby of today is real and is thought of as more of a sport than a spectacle. The skaters involved are athletes and take the sport very seriously. They train hard every week and wear their bruises and scars with pride. One reason there are so many referees rolling around is to enforce the rules, which are in place to protect athletes' safety and preserve fairness. Among other things, skaters are not allowed to elbow, punch, grab, head butt, trip, or shove the opposing team. There are still plenty of hard hits, hard falls, and fast action.

The WFTDA used its website as a medium to educate those interested in roller derby about the sport-like elements. Other FAQs included “I used to love watching roller derby on TV! Is it like that?” and “I bet you throw a lot of elbows, right?” Similarly, Mabe (2007:107) has a section in her book titled “Yeah, but is it real?” and Barbee and Cohen (2010:117) assert that the second commandment of roller derby is, “Roller derby is a sport.”

At the league level, SKRG also reconstructed its outward image to convey that it was promoting a real sports activity. One way SKRG did this was by controlling information (Goffman 1963). The league maintained a website where fans and sponsors could learn about the sport and the league, and could purchase tickets. Content displayed on the website was often a topic of conversation at Board of Directors meetings, marketing and public relations meetings, and sponsorship meetings. Like the WFTDA, the Star Killer Rollergirls were invested in derby being seen as legitimate, and so they tried to debunk the idea that derby was a staged spectacle: “The Star Killer Rollergirls’ derby is NOT a wrasslin’ style circus act….Flat-track roller derby requires skill, strategy and a fearless defiance of good sense,” the league’s website declared.
The “scrapbook” section of the website was also used to craft the sport’s image; it included bout recaps, photos, and links to press coverage. This section also included an “injury archive” that contained stories, X-rays of fractured and broken bones, and photos of bruises resulting from derby. These stories and images served as proof that derby action is real, but they also served as sources of pride for the skaters (Carlson 2010, Peluso 2011, Storms 2008). Injuries were often bragged about and shown off. If they were particularly severe, they become a part of league history. Injury archives or “injury halls of fame” affirmed to fans that derby is a risky, non-staged, real sport.

The second organizational strategy adopted to legitimate derby and to construct it as a sport involved recrafting the organizational image. In attempts to legitimize the WFTDA as a sports organization, the WFTDA logo was designed to mirror (see Figure 3) the logos of professional sport organizations, such as the NFL, NBA, and the MLB. The logo shows a skater in skates, pads, and a helmet. The pink background and pony tail are unmistakable signifiers that this skater is a woman. Through this selective association with professional sports logos, the WFTDA is actively constructing a conventional sport image.

A third organizational strategy used to counter stigma and to present derby as a real sport was changing the WFTDA slogan (the change of the SKRG mission statement will be discussed in Chapter 5). The former president of the WFTDA told me that the slogan “Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary.” was adopted during a brainstorming session at an annual WFTDA meeting. She recalled everyone sitting around a table:

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26 Silhouettes of actual WFTDA skaters were used in the advertisements for all 2013 tournaments. SKRG’s logo was not sexualized. Logos associated with some WFTDA leagues are more sexualized than the WFTDA logo. Links to all of the leagues considered members of the WFTDA can be found here: http://wftda.com/leagues.html
Everyone was throwing out words they felt were descriptors of who they are and what the organization is. And so just kind of those are the ones that stuck, the ones that kept coming up over and over again. And we felt like it does describe both the WFTDA organization and all the women.

The adoption of this new slogan reflected the desire to craft an organizational identity that distinguished and distanced modern derby from the past. Instead of conjuring conceptions of sexualized bad girls doing scripted scenes, the new slogan prompted fans and potential fans to think of the rollergirls as real athletes playing a sport, but still stressing the “skater owned and operated” philosophy of derby that enabled skaters to have a voice in the direction derby was going (Beaver 2012).

Crafting a Family-Friendly Image

The second stigma management strategy adopted by SKRG members to construct derby as a conventional sport centered on the redefinition of derby as a family-friendly activity. During an interview, the executive director of the WFTDA told me: “There are leagues that turn more towards the family-friendly or PG-13 model, but then there are other leagues that try to be a bit more edgy.” She said that each league’s image was dependent on “the audience that they are cultivating and the history and mentality of their league,” and the fan base. The WFTDA kept member leagues happy by being a flexible organization. The director described the organization as having a “commitment to staying unique at the home level.” She added that the requirements for being a member league were “very much on-paper requirements.”

Constructing SKRG as playing a conventional sport required making public bouts family friendly. The concern for being family friendly was addressed at the first SKRG league meeting that I attended in 2007. The conversation was sparked by a professional
hockey team’s refusal to sponsor the league. The hockey team’s marketing people said the skaters were not “family friendly.” After that, the league tried to “clean up” its image. At a later marketing meeting, the marketing director announced the dilemma:

Another marketing issue is the [hockey team]. We talked to them about sponsorship, and they flat out said NO, since we aren’t “family friendly” [he does air quotes when he says family friendly]. They said they had issues with some of the stickers on people’s helmets. Some examples include stickers with curse words. You can censor your helmets with tape. Just tape over a letter or two. Since we aren’t considered family friendly it really hurts us. I’ve gone through photo galleries on the site and blocked out some inappropriate stuff.

There was confusion about what “family friendly” meant and about how to respond to the accusation of not being family friendly. One skater responded in disbelief: “What the hell?! Half of our league has kids!! We’re family friendly.” To her, the presence of mothers in the league—mothers whose children are “derby kids” placed in “derby daycare” —meant that the league was family friendly. Another skater said, “Potential sponsors might not think that we are family friendly because of our image.” Another skater added, “Yeah, we’re doing things that are quote unquote unlady-like.” From her point of view, the denial of sponsorship resulted from the violation of gender expectations.

Another skater drew a distinction between being “family friendly” and “family appropriate.” She said: “There is a difference between being family friendly and being appropriate family entertainment. But really, who is offended with hot chicks hitting each other? It’s weird if you go on MAV TV.27 They have this totally misogynistic website, and

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27There was a link on the WFTDA website advertising MAV TV’s coverage of the 2007 National Tournament with the promotional tag “Watch it like a man, but hit like a lady.” Here is a link to the video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxIaruviU4Q The link was also on the MAV TV website: http://watchnow.mavtv.com/flash/fullscreen.aspx?languageSetting=en Board members discussed a heated debate on the WFTDA message board about the footage going to a “misogynistic men’s network” but I did not have access to that board.
then there is derby.” Rather than noting that male hockey players and female derby players are all athletes, this skater ignored the athleticism and instead reinforced the notion that derby is a sexualized spectacle. People are not offended by men being physically violent because it is consistent with masculinity, and the skater implied that people should not have a problem with women being physically violent, as long as they are “hot.” The eroticization of “girl on girl” action enticed some fans and sponsors, but may have deterred some organizations from being affiliated with the league. This denial of sponsorship pushed the league to reconsider its public image.

The marketing director’s desire to make the league family friendly was approved by some league members and disapproved by others. A B-Team skater said, “I’m concerned that this would be the first level of friendly and that there could be more levels of friendly. People might think it’s just not appropriate for girls to play a contact sport.” This skater was conscious of how women are negatively evaluated for challenging gender expectations and feared regulating their presentations. She expressed her concern that censorship to secure sponsorship could be a slippery slope.

To skaters, derby names are unique badges of identity and not to be trifled with (Fagundes 2011). Yet the marketing committee proposed that the league censor visiting 

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28 An all-star from another league told me during an interview: “It’s TV for men, by men. I was extremely pissed. I said I’d refuse to do interviews with them. I went to their website and there were like wet t-shirt contests. I wrote an email to the head of the WFTDA marketing, like, “What the hell is wrong with you? We don’t need publicity that bad.” To me it was the wrong place to affiliate ourselves with. I was absolutely blown away. I was so pissed. ESPN or ESPN2 would be fine, but MavTV?!” This skater was critical of marketing derby on a platform where women were positioned as sex objects instead of on a sports platform where they would be positioned as athletes.

29 In 2013, the WFTDA issued a press release announcing the broadcasting schedule for the second season of bouts that would be available through the website. According to the press release, the broadcasting website was “created out of the desire to strengthen the integrity and image of the sport of women’s flat track roller derby, and redefine roller derby broadcast standards to maximize enjoyment for fans around the world.”
skaters’ names because of the “family friendly” issue. A board member asked: “So are we going to censor skater names too? What if someone is Raging Cock? We can’t just cover up their name! And we can’t tell them to change it. That’s definitely going to be a problem.” In this situation, the need to secure sponsorship outweighed concern for the expression of individuality. A policy on censorship was adopted to enable policing the image of the league.

This episode led to revising the interleague contract for visiting leagues to include a warning that names could be regulated:

The Star Killer Rollergirls is a family friendly organization. Our bouts are attended by people of all ages. We require that any offensive or inappropriate images, words or phrases on your uniform or equipment be covered for the entirety of the bout. If you have a Derby name that may be offensive to our fans, our announcers reserve the right to exclude it from their commentary and SKRG may choose to omit it from the bout program and other materials. Star Killers will allow the skater to choose a substitute alias for the bout, if they would like to be included in the commentary and other materials. Any changes must comply with all publication deadlines. Final say will be given to the Head Referee with regards to appropriateness at the equipment check.

Skaters’ names are included in the programs, skaters’ names are announced before and during bouts, and skaters’ names appear on their shirts. These are traditional derby practices, ones that allow for expressions of creativity and the chance to signify an authentic derby identity.

During interviews, most skaters disdained sexualized names. One all-star explained: “I don’t like the names with the sexual connotations. I think that cheapens it.” Another all-star said: “I really hate the names that are sexual. I think we have enough things to overcome without sexual names.” To these all-stars, some names threaten the legitimacy of derby by being overtly sexual. Some skaters mentioned a “rule of thumb” that was based on their level

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30 This is a derby name that appears on the International Rollergirls’ Master Roster.
of comfort of sharing derby names with others. One all-star said, “For my own name, it had to be something that I would be okay telling my parents and my grandma.” After explaining an instance where her “boyfriend’s conservative parents” overheard “gross names” while she was watching bout footage at their house, she declared, “Any name that makes me blush around someone’s parents is sort of a bad name.” One all-star referenced specific names of all-stars from other WFTDA leagues and went on to say, “If I couldn’t say it to my boss or to my kid [pause], if I wouldn’t want to explain it to my child, then I wouldn’t want to have it.” She asked, “What if [my daughter] meets someone named Tara Hymen and she goes and tells her friends at school in front of her teacher, [pause] you know?” Being aligned with the family friendly code was important to this skater and mother.

Adopting Athletic Uniforms

The third strategy that league members adopted to construct a conventional sport image was to do a type of “cosmetic facework” to change their self-presentations, most visibly by adopting conventional athletic uniforms (Snow and Anderson 1987:1384). While some skaters liked the uniforms, others enjoyed the costuming elements of derby. The founder of the Derby News Network (a website dedicated to posting scores, bout previews and write-ups, and other world-wide derby news), explained how most leagues were adopting more conventional sports images:

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31 During a later marketing meeting an attendee brought up a “Buck Fush” sticker on a skater’s helmet. One member said, “If it’s not something that you’d say to your grandma, then it shouldn’t be on your helmet!” In agreement, another member said, “This is serious, this could deter sponsors. It’s not worth having a sticker on your helmet if it’s going to keep people away.” In opposition to further censorship, a different marketing committee member said, “Derby traditionalists know that the sport started from cursing like sailors and dirty tattoos.” The sticker was eventually covered. Profanity and “other adult content” was later edited out of skaters’ biographies posted on the league website.
It comes from the all-stars who want to play and want to be recognized as athletes. They realize that the more their attire looks like any other sport – even with some flair to it – the more they will be taken that way. I still think that you will see a lot more fishnets and make-up at the local teams [home team level], but I think that is fine. I think that is totally cool. But I think it is a positive that every team playing this weekend [WFTDA Championship Tournament 2008] looks like a sports team. You know, they don’t look like people in costumes like they often do for home teams. I think that is a good thing.

While at the WFTDA Championship Tournament, an SKRG marketing committee member said, “Texas looks so professional. That has been a wish of mine – to get SKRG to look that way.” After the tournament, several skaters suggested that they update their uniforms to “look more professional,” like the other leagues. As noted above, the league had autonomy, but as SKRG was transitioning to conventional sport elements for the all-stars, they allowed flexibility for skaters to enjoy campy elements while skating for home teams.

The majority of WFTDA member leagues’ all-star teams were transforming their image to be more consistent with professional sport uniforms and to look like other top-ranked leagues, like Texas (the league credited with starting flat-track derby). One veteran all-star skater explained the desire to have uniforms during an interview following our return home from Nationals:

I like what [two all-star teams from the tournament] did with their uniforms. I like that they just have their numbers on their backs. It makes it less about each individual skater and more about the team. The focus should be on athleticism at the national level, not skater names.

As league members recognized that other top-ranked WFTDA leagues had adopted standard athletic attire, the SKRG skaters pushing for the change gained momentum.

One all-star described how when the league was forming, everyone had a voice: “People submitted their ideas, and they sent them out, and everybody voted. Everybody
voted on *everything*. Like *every little thing.*”

For years, the attempt to value everyone’s opinions kept skaters who wanted to look more athletic from getting actual league uniforms.

By this time, however, league decision-making had streamlined, and the following discussion took place at a board meeting in December of 2008:

- **BoD 1:** We look ghetto. At competitions we don’t look professional.
- **BoD 2:** [Another all-star team] has matching helmets. I don’t think we need to go there, but we should be a streamlined team. You know, more uniform.
- **BoD 3:** But if we take socks and tights away, then we’re taking away individuality.
- **BoD 4:** What’s the word [pause] *uniform*!
- **BoD 5:** We’re not at the point where the sport is that serious.
- **BoD 3:** I don’t think that it’s fair to govern people’s tights in a volunteer sport. As [Our home team], we recommended doing black and purple socks and about three quarters of the team did.

Despite the reservations, the board of directors, mostly all-stars at the time, proposed uniform changes at a league meeting. The majority of skaters present also voted in favor of adopting a formal league jersey, later adopting the most popular of the three proposed options. Uniform bottoms were not mandated, partly because of additional costs and partly to reduce resistance.

In the early years, according to one skater, “[SKRG] uniforms were much more colorful and they weren’t *uniform,*” but now, “They are more athletic and cooler.” Another all-star stressed the importance of the league adopting sport jerseys. She told me, “I like

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32 Decision making within leagues varies. Beaver (2012) argues (and skaters from my league have also mentioned) that TXRG votes on everything, whereas SKRG permitted board members to make most decisions, but they typically would go to the league to get votes on uniforms, team restructuring, or decisions involving money. Beaver (2012:35) argues, and I would concur, that “voting on major decisions, in addition to skater control over the board of directors and other league committees, ensures that roller derby leagues are run “for the skaters.”
looking like an athlete and feeling like an athlete.” Yet another claimed, “I think of this as a sport. If we’re in it to empower women….I kinda like how we’ve gone into wearing uniforms. Not so much the fishnets….people should be able to have fun, but roller derby doesn’t need to be about your sexuality.” For this skater, claiming an athletic identity was more important than expressing her sexuality on the track. She wanted athletic affirmation, not validation for being sexy. Similarly, another all-star said, “I try to make sure [my jersey] looks good on me and I try to look like an athlete. I want to look like an athlete. I don’t want to look like a stripper on roller skates.” Adopting athletic-style uniforms helped derby to appear like other conventional sports, which helped skaters to look and feel like athletes. An all-star with previous sport experience said, “I think it makes us look more like athletes. And it makes me feel more like an athlete…wearing a jersey…cause that’s what I’ve wore when I played basketball.” The majority of all-stars were pleased by the move to wearing athletic jerseys, but a subset who wanted to preserve derby culture and “keep derby grassroots” resented the changes.

Some skaters—those who wanted to be edgy and athletic—struggled with this shift toward conventionality. Some all-stars missed the “individuality” involved in creating their own “uniforms,” but recognized that uniform jerseys made derby appear more legitimate. One all-star explained this tension during an interview:

I like having a jersey. Like, “Hey, we’re athletes too.” But I also like being able to wear the socks and whatever I want on the bottom. I like to spice it up as much as I want to. But this summer I was really trying to tame down the flair, because I felt like…well, I wondered if people think I don’t take this seriously. I definitely take this seriously, but it’s a lot of fun and silly too. But I’m at practice all the time and at the meetings, so obviously I take it seriously, but I thought maybe I’m not showing that I take it seriously.
As the league increasingly marketed derby to traditional sports fans, skaters gave more thought to how outsiders perceived their seriousness. Some skaters also worried about whether their teammates would perceive them as serious enough. Likewise, there was concern for audience approval. One marketing committee member said, “I’ve heard from a lot of the diehard fans that they miss the individuality. But, the people who come for the first time now see it as a sport. They see the unified team that looks professional, and they respect that.”

To broaden their appeal and draw a larger audience, SKRG members attempted to disidentify with the sexy bad girl image by manipulating their appearance—both in terms of the presentation of skaters and the online and print materials that represented the league—to reconstruct derby as a conventional sport. The reconstruction of modern roller derby was an attempt to destigmatize the derby identity. The subcultural members collaboratively projected a personal and organizational identity to counter challenges to their identity claims, often by removing or minimizing stigmatizing symbols (Goffman 1963), but this destigmatization/reconstruction process was resisted by a subset of subcultural members.

PRESERVING DERBY CULTURE

A subset of skaters, including the founder of the league and other key veterans, did not want derby to lose its “alternativeness.” During an interview, an original SKRG skater explained her feelings about the shift from spectacle to sport. She was sad that “every year more and more of the magic” went away. She feared derby was becoming “just like any other sport,” and to her, “roller derby was better than a sport” because of the “whole entertainment
aspect, and the outfits, and the crazy names.” These things were “part of the whole package” to the skater.

One skater who considered herself an athlete, but was invested in the “dress-up” aspects of derby, said, “If derby had a voice and could say one thing, it would be ‘I’m a real sport’.” She went on to say, “That is what people are always pushing, pushing, pushing.” She enjoyed the level of personal expression allowed in derby in comparison to her previous sport involvements. She told me, “If I’m not getting paid for it, I want to still be able to wear, like, the sparkly shit.” But she noted, “If you start paying me to do this, then I’ll do whatever…like if it became professional. But if I’m volunteering for this and taking my time and my money to do this, then I should be able to wear the uniform but do whatever else.”

These skaters were invested in protecting their subcultural identity. They attempted to preserve derby culture by protecting the old identity codes—the ones where rollergirls signified their membership through derby names and other “silly” subcultural markers.

Defending Derby Names

One way that skaters worked to preserve derby culture was by defending the use of derby names. Some skaters who embraced the “athlete” identity pressed for the use of real names. A skater posted part of a story from the Derby News Network on the league message board about another league opting to use real names instead of derby names:

> Notably, this match will feature a first for flat-track derby. While a few scattered skaters across the country have chosen to skate under their real names – notably Sarah Hipel (formerly Killbox) of Detroit and Julia Rosenwinkle (formerly Lucy Furr) of Windy City – this bout marks the first time that an All-Star team has taken that route in [sic] masse. Nearly all of the Denver players will be skating under their birth names.
This post elicited a lot of comments. The arguments in favor of keeping the derby names included valuing anonymity for professional reasons, keeping worlds separate, personal safety, and respecting derby culture.

A rookie skater said, “I would be wary of running into a client who I need to respect my professional credentials while trying to enjoy derby – aka wearing booty shorts and drinking at an after party.” The organizational context of derby and the context of work promote different gendered expectations, causing identity conflicts for the skaters. Another skater said, “It helps me separate my worlds. Caroline: Does not hit people, has a job, and a mortgage. Karla Marx: Hits people and is a scary person.” Similarly, another skater stated, “I have NO need to keep Derby a secret, but I do separate the lady who knocked other people over on a rink from the one who has to have a therapeutic phone voice at work.” These women valued derby because it allowed them to behave in sexualized and aggressive ways, without courting excessive danger or harming their employment prospects. As noted by Barbee and Cohen (2010), “Your derby name is a crucial part of your skating persona. For girls [sic] in occupations that might frown on derby, derby names also provide an excellent cover.”

Several skaters mentioned that the use of a derby name protected them from being looked up and stalked. A male volunteer stressed how organizational members’ safety may be at risk due to sexualized presentations in his post on the league message board. He wrote:

Derby has a clear sexual element. You wear skirts, show some skin, fishnets, etc. There’s a culture thing there. You are not dressed up like nuns racing remote controlled cars around a track. Anyone in the public eye is at risk for

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33 During an interview, a woman told me a story about a friend from another league who was fired due to her participation in roller derby. She said, “She worked for a Catholic School and they found what she did to be very inappropriate and they fired her for it. That’s kind of an example why having an alternate persona can sometimes protect you.”
being stalked / etc. Someone who’s [sic] alter ego has that sexual-edge to it has to be careful.

Derby is situated in a larger rape culture that blames women, especially those who dress in sexualized ways, for provoking stalking and sexual assault (Dunn 2002, Scully and Marolla 1984). Skater safety is often mentioned in discussions of volunteer recruitment, because of concern about “creepy dudes” who may volunteer only to get close to the women. The male volunteer’s statement reflects the double bind that the women find themselves in (Frye 1983). They sexualize themselves to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze, but then reasonably fear for their safety.

Other skaters saw derby names as being an essential part of derby. A “freshmeat” skater said, “I think it is part of the identity of roller derby itself. Part of my enjoyment as a fan of roller derby is seeing what kind of entertaining derby names other players have.” A marketing committee member said names were “an attractive part of the sport to some fans. It makes people have something to do with the program. They’ll remember the funny names.” One skater who listed both positives and negatives claimed, “I think our fans love the pseudonyms.” And the league founder asserted, “These people are hell bent on destroying every shred of what was once fun.”

The desire to use real names was stronger among those claiming an athletic identity. A “granny” skater stated, “If people put their real names on jerseys, I think I would want my real name on it too. Why? Because I go to practice 4+ times [a] week and I am in competition

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34 I was told of two instances of two SKRG skaters being followed home because of “fans” recognizing them due to bumper stickers or license plates with their derby names. This and the “creepy dude” phenomenon were brought up during an interview when a skater was discussing her desire to protect the use of derby names. She said, “But we are still women, and even though we are strong and awesome, there are creepy people – male and female – that might try to follow us home. Because this is not our paid profession, we don’t have the kind of process to block people out. We don’t have the same security. Not using our real names can keep us safe. We’ve had strange incidents where people have followed us home.”
with other athletes at athletic events.” This skater was less concerned about notoriety than
with being recognized for her dedication to athleticism. Another skater listed two reasons for
using real names on jerseys: “This is sort of the last association that roller derby has with
pro-wrestling, [and] paid athletes in sports that don’t have predetermined outcomes use their
real names.” Parallels between derby and mainstream professional sports were often invoked
to justify league decisions about programs, uniforms, and training.

Several skaters found it to be “psychically rewarding” to engage in the playful aspects
of derby, but were resistant to the idea of giving up their derby name, a central identity badge
(Bartky 1990; Wilkins 2008). A retired all-star and proponent of derby names thought it was
“snobby” for skaters to say, “I’m an athlete, I’m going to use my real name,” because it
implied she could not be an athlete while skating under a pseudonym. She said she was
“insulted” that her “pseudonym [was] not good enough,” and found insiders and outsiders
who judged her skating abilities based on her embracement of derby names to be “elitist.”

This skater embraced both an athletic identity and a derby identity. Several skaters were
invested in both athleticism and “kitschy elements” of derby. When I left the field, a handful
of SKRG skaters had begun skating under their given name. According to an article by
McManus (2011) posted on ESPNW.com, some members of Team USA “who normally
compete under pseudonyms are having their given names put on their jerseys” (See also
Respect”).
Saving Space for Fun

The second way that league members attempted to preserve derby culture was by saving space for the kinds of gags that are absent in mainstream sports. This is illustrated by an occasion when a bout program was sent out to the marketing committee for review before publishing. Bout programs normally conveyed messages about the league and about roller derby. Programs contained advertisements for sponsors, pictures of the skaters with their derby names, pictures of the different derby positions, description of the rules and how points are earned, pictures of the referees making penalty calls, WFTDA rankings, and the season schedule. On the one occasion where debate occurred over the content of a program, it was resolved in favor of the derby model, not the conventional sport model.

In this case, a fan of an opposing team referred to the Star Killers as the “Starlets.” In response, the league founder decided to represent (in the bout program) each SKRG All-Star player using the picture and name of a famous Hollywood starlet. There was an even split between people being for and against it when the program was sent out to be proofed. Several marketing committee members raised concerns that the fans would be confused and that marketing material was not the place to make inside jokes. The founder responded by expressing her frustration over derby becoming so serious:

Reason # 6,847 I can’t stand [the new venue] & the WFTDA & wish I hadn’t missed out on the skate rink days. Old school derby was so much better. Remember when we first went to see the Texas Rollergirls & how insane their bouts were & completely unserious their programs were & how nothing made sense & that was why it was so awesome? Oh wait, I guess y’all don’t. We’re a serious sport now. Yawn. I see these points. I just don’t agree with them. I think our fans will get bored if we don’t remember our prankster roots every now & then. Otherwise, we’re just hockey or basketball or another properly maintained sport. We’ve already lost 90% of the personality in our uniforms. Don’t even get me started on that topic. We’re SUPPOSED to be different. Maybe it won’t get us in the sports section, but it’s why our fans love us.
Here, the founder invoked the spectacle-filled days of the derby revival, arguing that derby’s difference from conventional sports was what garnered fans. The marketing director responded diplomatically, saying, “I can see both sides. We don’t want to disappoint a fan who wants to see a picture of their favorite skater. But then, if you can’t do something a little silly in derby, when can you do it?” In this case, potentially out of respect to the league founder, the spoof on femininity carried the day. Instead of mimicking conventional sport, the starlet spoof appeared in the program. However, not everyone’s wishes to remain “different” garnered as much respect or consideration.

Although skaters were overwhelmingly concerned with being recognized for the training and skill required to play derby, several women, even those with previous sporting experience, were drawn to derby by the unconventional elements and were invested in preserving them. During an interview, one all-star skater said, “[Derby] is a perfect combination for me because I love sports and staying active, but then I also really like to dress up and express my personality.” Similarly, another all-star confessed that “like half of why [she] joined” was because she loved “having the name and the character.” Although this skater saw being physically active and participating in sports as a central part of her identity, she confessed, “I don’t know if I’d be playing derby if it weren’t for that combination of, like, personal expression and team sport.” An all-star with more previous experience in sport than most women in the league, said:

I want to play roller derby because I don’t want to play conventional sports. I’ve played conventional sports for decades on conventional teams. I don’t want that. My most favorite thing about roller derby is the amount of personal expression that the sport has. When you play team sports in school, things are pretty conservative.
For these skaters, the unconventional aspects of derby were attractive. Involvement in a skater controlled organization, rather than a school team or formally organized recreational league, gave women more flexibility in their presentations of self.

A subset of women liked being athletic and having an outlet for dressing up – something not possible with other sports. Much like goth women, most rollergirls enjoyed, at least initially, that they could “look and feel sexy without the risks that come with overtly sexualized self-presentations in other arenas” (Wilkins 2008:65). An all-star said, “It continues to push forward that it’s a real sport, but at the same time I don’t want to lose the kitchiness of it. ’Cause it’s kind of what makes it fun.” One original skater admitted having mixed feelings about the changes taking place. She said, “I’m kind of torn. It was fun to dress up, but it was a pain to make your own stuff. I like how it’s evolved, but it was a lot of fun to get together with the teams and put your own costu…[pause] you know, uniform together.”

POLICING AUTHENTICITY

Policing is “the protection of the meaning of an identity and enforcement of the code for signifying it” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:123). Skaters policed and contested the boundaries of the rollergirl identity by questioning others’ authenticity, which was frequently done by making intragroup and intergroup comparisons. Modern rollergirls defined their version of derby as more legitimate than old school derby, much in the same way rock climbers rely on symbolic boundaries between sport and traditional climbing (Bogardus 2012). Distinguishing flat-track derby from bank-track derby was something that both styles of skaters engaged in. Bank-track skaters defined themselves as authentic rollergirls and flat-track skaters defined themselves as authentic, but both groups saw one
another as inauthentic. Although the movie *Whip It* garnered mainstream attention for derby, the depiction of bank-track antics resulted in skaters having to explain that modern flat-track derby is different from bank-track derby. One all-star told me, “We already have that stereotype that people think we’re like that old derby where you fight. We’re still trying to break that stereotype.”

In reaction to stigma, league members tried to distance themselves from certain styles of derby and certain types of skaters. A former marketing director said, “We were always known as the most sport-minded of the early leagues, like of the initial 12.” I asked, “Why is that?” and he said:

> Because we did abandon the spectacle. We never fought. We never did anything like that. Not in our home stuff or our expos when we were trying to build our fan base. A lot of these leagues, the start-up early leagues, had the approach of spectacle to make sure that their tickets sold. Basically, to give that person who expected antics a little bit of that.

From his perspective, the SKRG were more legitimate than leagues that relied on fake fighting to sell tickets. At the end of 2009, when I interviewed the director of the marketing committee, she said, “I definitely think that the Star Killer Rollergirls’ marketing [committee] wants to have the image of [derby] being a sport and [derby] being legitimate.” Similarly, in reference to the league uniforms, another skater engaged in defensive othering (Schwalbe et al. 2000): “We don’t have anybody on the rink with their butts hanging out or boobs hanging out. I like that. Compared to a lot of other leagues, our uniforms are relatively conservative and practical.” This tactic paints SKRG as better than leagues with sexualized skater presentations.

In some instances, the family-friendly identity code was endorsed by noting problems with the names of skaters from other leagues. In attempts to present themselves and their
league as family friendly, league members often resorted to critiquing and denigrating the names of others:

All-Star 1: Someone’s name is Clit Eastwood. I think that is gross. I mean what do you do if your kid asks what a clit is? I’m glad that our league doesn’t really have such sexualized names.

All-Star 2: Yeah, I think it’s gross too. This is a sport, not spectacle. If you are trying to get laid then go to a bar and quit playing derby.

This highlights the family-friendly concern and the sport-versus-spectacle issue. The first skater used an “othering” (Schwalbe et al. 2000) strategy by saying, essentially, that the Star Killers are not like other leagues that use sexualized names. This strategy raised the skater and the league above “other” leagues that use sexualized names. The second skater expressed her disgust with sexualized names, and also dismissed skaters who were more interested in men’s attention than athletic competition. She implied that the Star Killers did not do that, but other leagues did. In other words, the SKRG skaters’ names are consistent with an athletic, family-friendly identity, but “Clit Eastwood” is not.

Similar to the rock climbing subculture, SKRG veterans did not uniformly resist change, but those who supported mainstreaming accused the resisters of not being in it for sports (Bogardus 2012). They criticized resisters for saying they just wanted to be a “rollergirl.” During an interview, one core member explained the phenomenon:

There are a handful of people—and I’d be willing to bet that it’s like this all over the country—that are here for the name. Like here for the rollergirl name. The, “Yeah, I’m a rollergirl. I get to wear cute fishnets, and blah blah blah.” It pisses me off because that is what makes the image of us what it is. People that don’t take it seriously as a sport make other people not take it seriously as a sport. I think that there’s a really fine line in our league between athletes and rollergirls. [What’s the line?] It’s mental. It’s what you’re here for. Whether you’re here to play your ass off and play a sport versus being here to make friends and have fun.
Much as in rock climbing, these comparisons were made to create symbolic boundaries between members and to evaluate others’ motives and, thereby, assess their authenticity (Bogardus 2012, Wilkins 2008). In the derby world, athleticism was increasingly glorified and costuming was policed, a marked change in just a few years (Cohen 2008).35

The kitschy elements that some people were drawn to were the ones that made others wary that people would not take derby seriously, and thus would not value their commitment. One all-star skater told me, “This is so important to me and I don’t want it to be a joke to anybody. I don’t want it to be perceived as a joke, cause it is, like, my life.” One skater explained how the history of spectacle undermined rollergirls’ claims to be athletes. She stated:

I don’t think that people still think it’s fake, but they think that we aren’t athletes. I don’t think they realize how hard we bust our asses to do this, you know. I don’t think that they realize that there are women doing this who have to find a babysitter for their three kids, and that they are that passionate about it. They don’t know that these girls go to three to five practices a week and still run in the morning or go to the gym and watch what they eat. All for derby!

One all-star skater told me, “I didn’t get into derby for social networking. And some people do, whether they want to admit it or not. I got into it because I’m a competitor and I want to play a sport and I want to be good.” Some league members were recruited by friends, but others, like the skater quoted above, were drawn to the competitive aspect. Another All-Star acknowledged that she “came into [derby] and treated it as a sport.” She admitted, “I still

35 An article titled “Eight Reasons You Shouldn’t Play Roller Derby,” posted on the Derby Life website highlighted the tension between costuming and athleticism. One reason noted: “You just want to wear fishnets and glitter. Roller derby is a real sport and we train hard. If you’re not interested in being an athlete, you should find a different hobby. That said, if you want to train hard AND wear fishnets and glitter, then this definitely IS the sport for you” (Dash 2011). Not all members of SKRG have agreed. Many SKRG skaters were coming to see derby names and sexy outfits as incompatible with affirmation of athletic identity through serious competition.
might have worn the fishnets, and it was fun to me, but I was there for the sport of it.” By making distinctions between those who participated in “the sport of it” versus those invested in dress-up elements, skaters drew boundaries between league members. Differences in priorities and visions for the future of derby were splitting the league.

A subset of skaters were concerned with derby being co-opted by outsiders, especially corporations. One skater recalled, “I remember a league meeting when I was fairly new that there were people that didn’t want to be commercial, and you know, they wanted all the dress-up and the persona to be a big part. And I see it as a whole shifting more toward just the sport side.” Other skaters objected to the idea of derby becoming a professional sport.

An all-star from another league said:

I don’t, personally, ever want it to become paid sport. I’m not interested in being paid to play roller derby. This is my hobby and I love it, but it remains my hobby and I think that that makes it better because it’s not my life. In our league it’s changed so much in the three years that I’ve been here into a real sport and that’s drawn a lot of girls away. But, it’s also drawn a lot of girls to us. So, I don’t know. It’s a toss-up.

One veteran All-Star told me, “I always joke, like, I’m never going to wear a McDonald’s logo on my uniform.” She declared, “That’s when I stop derby. I just don’t want it to get that big.” The increasing amounts of corporate sponsorship, both at the league level and throughout the WFTDA, concerned this skater. She drew distinctions between the types of sponsorship that were okay (“I don’t mind, like, Adam Wheels because the girl’s [the owner] a skater”) and those that were not due to ideological conflicts (“When it starts getting big…when [sponsors have] practices that are unethical and stuff like…like… Wal-Mart—oh, hell no!”). For this skater, supporting skater-owned businesses was essential to “keeping derby grassroots.”
A proponent of mainstreaming derby was willing to accept commercialization for the sake of legitimacy. She said, “If someone wants to freaking put their name on my uniform and fly me all over the country instead of me having to pay $500 for every trip I go on, then please do.” The skater embraced the possibility of securing sponsorship to relieve herself from the cost of participating in derby at the all-star level. She was “willing to deal with the commercialism as long as [she was] proud of what [she was] commercializing. If what we’re commercializing is derby *as a sport*, then go us.” When I asked what she would not be proud of, she responded, “The fishnets look, the fighting, for it to be a bunch of people who can’t really skate that well, but just look pretty doing it.”

By 2011, roller derby was starting to get more coverage in mainstream news outlets. Around the 2011 WFTDA Championship tournament, an ESPN-W author framed derby as a sport and focused on the increased entrance of athletes to the track (McManus 2011). The article focuses on Atomatrix, a woman with seventeen World Inline Skating titles whose league took home the WFTDA championship in 2009. Despite skating in face paint, her athleticism was not undermined in the eyes of fellow skaters. Instead, they often pointed to skaters like her, and others who received mainstream press coverage, to boost the credibility of the sport. When Suzy Hotrod (of Gotham Rollergirls and Team USA 2011 and 2014 World Cup Team) posed naked in the 2012 ESPN Body Issue, she was asked why she posed. She responded:

> It’s such good exposure for roller derby. It’s the best opportunity to show that our sport is genuinely athletic. I want people to know that we are athletes, and we live our lives like athletes. We training hard, like anyone else posing for this magazine. It’s not exactly the Olympics, but it’s legitimately a sport.

Despite the continued sexualization of female athletes and the disdain for skaters who exposed “too much skin,” members of the derby community were proud that ESPN had
classified one of their own as an athlete alongside women and men from the WNBA, LGPA, NBA, NFL, NHL, MLB, and USA Olympians. Similarly, the derby community responded positively when Bonnie Thunders, another Gotham Rollergirl and Team USA skater, was compared to LeBron James, an NBA player on HuffPost Live (Frye 2013). These instances served as evidence that roller derby was being recognized as a sport by mainstream sport media.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explained how sub-groups of organizational members can push for or resist organizational change that threatens their identity claims. My analysis reveals that skaters who wanted to claim an athletic identity constructed a conventional sport image by: (1) presenting derby as real sport; (2) crafting family-friendly image; and (3) by adopting athletic uniforms. Some skaters resisted these changes by attempting to preserve derby culture. They did this by: (1) defending the use of derby names; and (2) by saving space for fun. By presenting derby as real sport, skaters—both proponents and opponents of organizational change—were able to emphasize strategy and skill, thereby distancing themselves from roller derby of the past, which involved staged fighting and scripted play. In crafting a family-friendly image, the league repaired its organizational image, making it consistent with conventional sports. Finally, league members constructed a conventional sports image by adopting uniforms. This strategy almost created a self-fulfilling prophecy, making some skaters more likely to claim an athletic identity after “looking and feeling” like an athlete upon donning a uniform.
Through an analysis of the negotiation of subcultural identity codes within a network of democratic roller derby leagues, I have demonstrated how the desire for legitimacy and the need to attract fans and sponsors to finance organizational growth led to conflict between league members. I observed the collective construction and renegotiation of the rules for signifying a derby identity. Through the observation of individual, subgroup, and organizational acts of identity work and identity talk, I witnessed how skaters, the league, and derby culture transformed. Some league members actively pushed for strategies that would align derby with conventional sport and destigmatize and transform the discrediting identity “rollergirl.” While league members were generally invested in having outsiders recognize derby as real sport not everyone was happy with the professionalization of derby.

Destigmatization/reconstruction can be seen as a sub-process of subcultural identity work where subcultural participants use “aligning actions” to make their personal and social identities congruent (Stokes and Hewitt 1976, Anderson and Taylor 2010). Like other subcultural identity work processes, destigmatization is frequently contested by factions within the group. Also, like other identity work processes, the contest is often won by a dominant coalition that has greater numbers or access to a disproportionate share of organizational resources (Child 1972). The struggle for identity congruence—being recognized as authentic rollergirls playing a real sport—was fraught with intragroup conflict.

The literature on subcultures in general has overwhelmingly focused on boys and men, which also holds true for examinations of subcultural sports. Alternative and extreme sports are dominated by men, and even when women’s marginalized participation is examined, it is typically in comparison to that of men. I contribute to this literature by examining women’s experiences in a female dominated alternative sport, specifically the
strategies they use to manage stigma at the individual and organizational level and how they police authenticity. Like Donnelly (2006) and Bogardus (2012), I find that subcultural members do not uniformly resist change or police authenticity based on their veteran status or hardcore status in the scene.

My analysis builds on Ezzell’s (2009a) research on women rugby players. Ezzell argues that women rugby players engage in normative identification—“aligning themselves with the norms and values prescribed by dominants for a subordinated group”—by adopting a “heterosex-fit” identity (2009a:118). The ruggers construct a tough, yet heterosexual and feminine identity as a way to avoid lesbian stigma. Although the rollergirls also faced stigma for participating in a contact sport, they destigmatized their derby identities by desexualizing rather than sexualizing.

My research also contributes to the understanding of policing authenticity in subcultures. Researchers have documented how members of music subcultures draw distinctions between real members and “pretenders” (Fox 1987) and “sellouts” (McLeod 1999). These analyses suggest that status in the subculture depends on others’ perceptions of one’s “commitment to the lifestyle.” For rollergirls, however, how commitment was evaluated changed as the identity codes gave greater weight to athleticism. In the early years, everyone, including those who already had a foundation in skating, were essentially on the same playing field; everyone had to learn the rules and how to actually play derby. At that time, the atmosphere was non-competitive and communal. Commitment was evaluated based on one’s dedication to “spreading the derby gospel” to recruit skaters and attract fans and sponsors. As the WFTDA evolved, the focus shifted toward competition, and competitiveness was measured by dedication to training and to the team. Williams
(2006:191) found that (inter)Net-Straightedgers “expressed a belief that straightedge would remain limited and ineffective as a positive youth subculture if it remained tied to the hardcore music scene,” whereas Music-Straightedgers saw the music as being central to the movement. Skaters invested in athletic identification were similar to the Net-Straightedgers in that they were less concerned about the history of the movement and more focused on getting the message out there.

In the next chapter, I examine how members of the self-governed league, specifically members of the training committee, established formal policies to restrict opportunities to skate based on women’s increased investment in competitive play opportunities.
CHAPTER 3
CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

In the fall of 2005, the Star Killer Rollergirls competed in their first interleague bout, and lost. This was one of the earliest interleague games played in the country and a pivotal point in the league’s history. For the Star Killer Rollergirls and for all WFTDA leagues, 2006 was a turning point in terms of competitiveness because opportunities for interleague play increased. In early 2006, the SKRG All-Stars won the rematch bout on their home turf against the first interleague team they played (and lost to) in 2005. Following the creation of tournament play and subsequent rankings, some skaters desired to train for interleague competition, which consequently generated a new status hierarchy in the organization.

Skaters with athletic prowess—those who could contribute the most to winning games—were elevated in the organization and received preferential treatment. The desire to remain competitive with other leagues resulted in intragroup competition. Skaters competed against one another for spots on the SKRG All-Star roster and for playtime, which began to erode trust and morale in the previously cooperative organization.

In this chapter, I examine how the introduction of interleague competition shaped league interactions. Specifically, I analyze how members of an WFTDA league respond to shifting norms within a cooperative, democratic intra-organizational network. I show how

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36 The WFTDA issued a press release on the creation of a divisional system in the summer of 2013. According to the press release, “This system revamps the regional Playoff tournaments into a new organization-wide tournament seeding structure, which distributes leagues across Playoffs based on ranking, rather than geography. This Competitive Divisions System hinges on a new math-based, membership-wide ranking of member leagues via the WFTDA Rankings Calculator. Replacing geographic regions and opinion poll rankings with a math-based Divisions system allows the WFTDA structure to support the organization’s continued growth and promotes closer, more even competition in WFTDA-organized Playoff tournaments.” The transformation of the tournament structure was a frequently debated topic on derby related websites, especially in the comment sections on articles on the Derby News Network during and after the WFTDA tournament season.
league members transformed the collaborative organizational culture and how democracy was undermined as a result. I argue that egalitarian style interactions were replaced as organizational members began to compete for limited spots on the All-Star roster while attempting to increase the league’s ranking. I examine the rhetoric that league members used to prioritize competition and the language their leaguemates used to contest their efforts. I investigate how these negotiations were taking place in relation to shifting priorities occurring at the WFTDA level. Contextualizing the analysis this way creates a unique opportunity to explore how SKRG members negotiated intra-and inter-league competition and cooperation simultaneously.

I show how rapid growth at the national and global levels of women’s roller derby influenced the ways that members of an WFTDA league negotiated and resisted organizational change. League members’ responses to the growth and popularity of roller derby varied in relation to their locations within the organization and their definitions/perception of fairness. I demonstrate that a subset of SKRG—those on the training committee, together with other all-stars—proposed strategies that restricted access to opportunities for affirmation for other league members in attempts to prioritize all-star competition. Specifically, these league members were proponents of raising the bar, restricting membership, picking the best, compartmentalizing members, and securing commitment. Finally, I show how organizational members—both those in favor of the changes and those opposed—justified these organizational policies by appealing to cultural notions of competitiveness, athleticism, and victory.

I argue that an emerging investment in athletic identities and competitive processes (at both the league and WFTDA levels) resulted in the transformation of an organizational
culture originally committed to the collective empowerment of women into one that ranked women by athletic ability. Throughout the negotiation process, organizational members invested in the idea that roller derby should remain “grassroots” and “alternative” found themselves pitted against other members who sought to transform roller derby into a mainstreamed sport. My analysis reveals how athleticism became a type of organizational currency, which led to power and status differentials between league members. The shift toward out-group competition left some members of the league, which was originally intended to be democratic, feeling devalued and voiceless.

ORGANIZATIONAL TURNING POINTS

In the first two years of existence (Stage 1), the Star Killer Rollergirls faced two main organizational problems: (1) how to recruit enough women to fill two home teams; and (2) how to divide the women into two teams to hold a game (see Figure 4). To deal with the first problem, league members adopted an inclusive recruitment strategy. To deal with the second problem, training committee members shared the responsibility of distributing players of different abilities evenly across the two teams.

Prior to interleague play (during Stage 1, 2004-2005), SKRG had an open recruitment strategy and league members were willing to train any women who came to practice, regardless of their sports backgrounds or current skating abilities. A woman who attended one of the first league practices said, “There was this mentality that if you were interested, that they would teach you how to skate.” League enrollment was open, as one veteran described, “At that time, it was come with skates on and you’re on the league.” This inclusive practice created a welcoming environment for women, even those without
backgrounds in sports, to give derby a try. One skater recalled, “Everybody was just scrambling and trying to do the best they could. Everybody who was there was 100% into making the league work and working as hard as we could to become better skaters.” Learning derby together built league solidarity.

The formation of home teams created two sub-groups within the league. With the collective interest of putting on a bout, the training committee was given the responsibility of selecting the home team rosters. One veteran explained: “At the beginning we always tried to keep the teams even. We’d put a strong player here and a strong player there. We did it as a group, like the training committee. We tried to make the teams even to try to make the competition better by having them evenly matched.” Distributing strong players ensured that each team would have skaters who could guide and mentor less skilled skaters, a way to share the resources across the teams, and strengthen the league. The two teams were distinguished by unique team names, colors, logos, and themes. As teammates promoted derby together and trained together, they bonded. One skater said, “There was an emotional connection, a close-knit family feel.” Despite the inherent state of competition over the Star Trophy, which was given to the intra-league champion, members of both teams had a vested interest in the success of the league and worked cooperatively to promote and recruit on behalf of the league.

During Stage 2 (late 2005-2006), the Star Killer Rollergirls undertook interleague competition. In 2005, skaters who could afford out of state travel went to play another league. Interleague play opportunities created a new problem for SKRG: how to select the women who would represent the league. League members established performance requirements that standardized all-star eligibility.
Standardizing the rules to facilitate interleague play and increasing the legitimacy of derby as a sport were central goals of the first United League Coalition (which later became WFTDA) meeting in 2005. Leagues were popping up all over the country and skaters were trying to figure out rules as they went along. This made interleague play challenging because leagues devised different sets of rules. Prior to the adoption of formalized rules, eleven sets of rules were said to be posted online. Formal rules were adopted by the WFTDA in 2006, about which one skater commented, “The rules weren’t perfect. They had tons of holes in them, but it changed the conversation and suddenly legitimated the sport in a way. Before, there was a lot of variance in how people were playing the game.”

In 2006, the Star Killer Rollergirls experienced a second wave of growth due to the premiere of A&E’s reality show Rollergirls. The show boosted interest in roller derby. Although growth and popularity were part of the original league marketing goals, it was too much too fast. The league was not prepared to deal with the influx of organizational members. As one board member said, “We’re answering every problem when it comes up rather than it being a thought out process from the get go. It’s always been a react and fix. Derby evolved so quickly and out of nothing, so that’s how we had to develop. There wasn’t really any idea of structure in the beginning.” The influx of women created a strain on the training committee and its ability to focus on training for national competition. Committee members decided to institute tryouts to close the doors and focus on training the skaters they had. Then, they expanded intraleague play opportunities by creating a third home team. Skaters voted in support of these changes, and as one board member recalled, “We saw it as what was best for the league.”
NEGOTIATING ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

Following the creation of interleague play opportunities, league members transformed the league by raising the value of athleticism. In attempts to create a competitive all-star team to defend the league’s rankings, training committee members pushed five types of organizational change: (1) raising the bar; (2) restricting membership; (3) picking the best; (4) compartmentalizing members; and (5) securing commitment. These strategies were framed as protecting league interests, but were also about identity validation, in that some skaters sought athletic affirmation. The pursuit of being the best had the consequence of limiting others’ opportunities for participation in the league. During this period, members of the training committee prioritized competition by standardizing all-star eligibility by creating a performance requirement based on speed and endurance. In doing so, they restricted membership to the team based on ability.

Raising the Bar

Following the loss of their first interleague game, members of the training committee began setting a training agenda. As a veteran explained, “They beat us miserably, to death. We had a great time traveling up there and hanging out with the girls, but we lost miserably and that was really hard to take.” Another veteran echoed, “We got our asses kicked. They threw us around like rag dolls. We put the blame on training. We were all mad.” Despite the resonating disappointment, most enjoyed “the first taste of big competition.” Seeking to redeem themselves, the training committee proposed to “set the bar” and established a minimum performance requirement, which was the first strategy adopted to prioritize all-star competition.
One woman who “thought derby would be something fun” she’d do “for a little while” changed her mind after getting to travel, experience interleague competition, and play a competitive game. For her, and others, this first interleague game marked a turning point in the league. She explained:

They tossed us around a hell of a lot harder that we’d ever tossed ourselves around. They opened our eyes! We were like, “Oh, this shit is serious! This is real!” These girls were hitting us really hard and it wasn’t just shits and giggles to them. We stepped our training way, way up after that game.

The collective experience of the loss was used to rally support for drafting a more competitive team for the rematch. A former training director reflected, “We sat down at the time and had a training committee [meeting] that consisted of four people. We all decided together what the assessments were and said that if you can’t pass, you can’t play.” To make the all-star roster for the rematch game, skaters would need to complete twenty laps in 5:40.

A retired veteran and training committee member said, “When we were trying to establish assessments we knew that we were making it so that these girls were not going to pass. We had to start upping the standards and we hated to hurt people and cut people out, but we needed to do it.” Members of the training committee anticipated those unable to meet the standard would be upset, but as one retired veteran rationalized, “We wanted to win, not lower the bar so everyone makes [the team].”

Not surprisingly, the training committee received backlash. “There’s always been resistance,” said a veteran training committee member, “There are always arguments on where to set the bar.” A coach told me, “We set it for 5:40. It was the breaking point in the league. It was the only quantifiable thing we could measure.” One committee member said, “We basically looked at the league average and added ten seconds to it. It was something more than half the league should be able to meet, so it seemed fair.” The lap time was
presented to skaters as a fair and objective way to determine all-star eligibility because it was determined by a clock. Although intended to create a neutral way to select (or exclude) skaters, the policy was received by some as arbitrary and exclusionary. The training director from the time recalled, “There was an endurance time, and some of the bigger girls thought it was unfair that they had to be held to the same standards as everybody else. There was one skater in particular that kind of headed the angry committee. There were five to eight people that were mad to the point that they wanted me removed from the training director position.”

Proponents of setting a minimum standard declared it necessary “to be competitive” with other leagues. Detractors argued, for example, “Just because you can skate twenty laps fast doesn’t mean you’re a good derby player.” Following the instatement of the laptime requirement, the “head of the angry committee,” and a few others, left the league.

Despite the loss of members, most of the league wanted a competitive all-star roster, but occasionally resisters would speak. The first way the training committee justified the performance requirement was by discrediting the objector. One way they did this was by redefining resisters as uncommitted skaters. During an interview, I came across SKRG playing cards while sorting through a veteran’s derby memorabilia. The veteran flipped through and told me who was still around, who had transferred, and who had retired. “She hates SKRG,” said the veteran. She showed me the card and explained, “The competition got harder. She became the person who couldn’t keep up. She wasn’t willing to do the drills, so she didn’t make the roster. She thought it was wack, so she quit.” Skaters who left or spoke out against the policy often had their dedication questioned. Another training committee member recalled: “People were really pissed off and freaked out by it [All-Star assessments]. Only a few people, but that’s how it always is. There were a lot of people that just wanted to
be there for fun. They didn’t see the point in having to do all this stuff just to have fun.”

Discounting peers’ level of seriousness was a way to boost one’s own while simultaneously deflecting resistance.

The second way training committee members justified the performance requirement was by declaring “anyone can make it if they try hard enough.” One way they did this was by pointing to instances where others had made it. The push to increase performance requirements was often debated at training meetings. An all-star captain or coach would typically suggest adding something to make the current (laptime) performance requirement more difficult or “more like playing derby.” For example, an all-star captain proposed adding one type of fall (i.e., one knee drop, baseball slide, etc) per timed lap, and a former training director proposed on multiple occasions creating a timed obstacle course with jumps, slaloms, and falls. Skaters who objected to tougher requirements were often squelched by veteran all-stars, many of whom were captains and board members.

During one training meeting, a rookie skater asked how many women were interleague ineligible (meaning how many could not complete 20 laps in 5:40), which revived the old debate. The training director replied, “Twenty-six. There are a lot of girls that are where they are because they bust their ass. They shouldn’t be on the same playing field as someone who can’t.” The training director stressed the effort that some of the women put in, which implied that making the standard was both possible and fair. In objection, the rookie skater said, “Some of this is about body type. When you weigh 200 pounds it’s hard to go that fast.” Drawing on her own experiences, the training director replied, “When we decided on 5:40, I didn’t make it. I had to bust my ass to make it. We need to promote people to be better, to train. We need to set standards high and encourage them to meet their goals or to be
aware that there are 20 other girls that will.” The training director, although a woman smaller
in size, drew on her own experiences as evidence that hard work pays off.

Another all-star interjected, “Is derby a sport or a hobby? The whole spirit is both, but I can’t cater to both. I want people who have time and effort, but you need it to be a challenge too.” Sympathetically, one all-star responded, “I feel like there are people who will never make 5:40 that work harder than I ever had to because they haven’t played sports. I’ve played sports since I was a little girl. I know how to push myself.” Her acknowledgment that the playing field was not really level was quickly countered by women, an all-star and the training director, who did not play sports before derby:

    Training Director: I never did.
    All-Star 1: Me either.
    All-Star 3: With any sport there will be talent and dedication. That’s just sports.

Even when standardization was challenged, dissenting efforts were silenced by proponents who argued it was just the “nature of sports.”

Restricting Membership

After the A&E show Rollergirls aired, SKRG had “a flood of girls come and start skating.” A training committee member explained, “Back before that, we could have one girl trickle in who was low-level and one girl trickle in who was high-level. We could take the time then to get the girl who was really low…to get her up.” Prior to the airing of the show, league members could manage training new comers despite their differences in skill level, but as the training director said, “When you have ten or fifteen girls coming in, each at different levels [pause], it just gets really hard to try to figure out how to train them
efficiently while still skating and training ourselves.” As derby grew in popularity, the league abandoned open recruitment. League members voted to “close the doors and start having tryouts” to prioritize all-star training while managing growth. Tryouts were held two to three times a year. Some women tried out on multiple occasions and, after making the league, took nine months to a year to get good enough to play a game.

By adopting tryouts, the Star Killer Rollergirls restricted membership to the league, thereby creating the first formal barrier to becoming a rollergirl. All-Stars who served as assessors used the opportunity to filter out skaters who they perceived would develop at a slow rate or those seen as flaky or uncommitted. Focusing on a smaller cohort enabled the all-stars to continue training for national competition while teaching new people the foundational skills. The establishment of tryouts was the first step away from the inclusivity that attracted many of the original skaters to SKRG.

Seeking to regulate league entrance, assessors evaluated women’s demonstration of eight skills, and extended invitations only to some women (see Table 4). Typically, six to fifteen women would show up for tryouts, some of whom had been attending open practices. After putting on their gear and warming up, the women were broken into two groups. Tryout skaters were scored zero to five by two groups of assessors, typically comprised of four to five training committee members, mostly all-stars. Before tryouts, assessors typically met to discuss women who would be trying out, their expectations for admission, and reminders, such as, “We can’t accept fourteen levels of skaters. We have to accept the best of the bunch!” Assessors, despite what was reiterated before tryouts, seemed to be looking for different things when assessing the women. This discrepancy was evident by variations in scores, comments during tryouts, and most clearly during backstage discussions. After
tryouts, assessors would meet in the “party room” to discuss who to welcome to the league and who to decline (in most cases, at least temporarily) entrance to the league. Typically, during skill demonstrations it was easy to tell who had a foundation in the skills (and was “ready”) and who was not, but there were usually one or two marginal performers over whom assessors disagreed.

In the interest of “getting a return on their investment,” training committee members started holding interest meetings where veteran skaters and the current training director discussed their expectations with prospective recruits. At one such meeting, a veteran all-star explained to the women in attendance:

We accept a group of people and try to have everyone progress together at tryouts. We cut it off at a skill level. So say a group of you tryout and there are a few that are awesome and some that are mediocre, we’ll probably take the good ones and let the rest of you keep practicing with us ‘til the next round of tryouts. We are particular about assessments. You can always tryout again in 6 months. The more time that you spend practicing the more likely that you’ll be ready, most of the people that make the tryouts have come to practices beforehand.

This skater emphasized that the tryout assessors would be making their decisions based on skill, and that skaters who “made” tryouts were those who showed dedication to their training by attending practices before tryouts. So, even at this stage, demands for athleticism were ramping up.

At one league meeting, the training director announced that the upcoming home team draft would be selective and happening in private between captains and coaches. She said, “Captains will make the decisions based on what is best for their teams. We don’t want you to make it onto a team just to sit on the bench and rot.” The competition at the home team level had also increased and a growing imbalance in playing time was occurring too. Not all assessors were on board with the increasing demands. Unwillingness to draft skaters
contradicted claims of being inclusive. Often captains claimed their unwillingness to draft skaters was to protect the women’s interest. New skaters became frustrated when their peers progressed more quickly through assessments (see Table 4) and made it onto team rosters sooner.\textsuperscript{37} From this point of view, making the league to “rot on the bench” would be worse than delayed entry.

Alternatively, proponents of drafting argued that their skills would get up to par faster if they were “given a home.” In their view, being invited to join the league and being drafted to a home team would speed up a skater’s progress because their skills would be nurtured by teammates who would have an interest in developing them. During an interview, I asked one former captain about a skater who was often used as an example. She said:

She tried out like six times before she made it. She doesn’t come enough. She’s deluded. She thinks that she’s really good. [Q: Will someone tell her she won’t be drafted?] We had an email string about that. Like, “Is someone going to tell her that maybe this isn’t the sport for her?” And someone else said, “We can’t tell her shit,” and someone else said, “She has the right to keep trying if she wants.” That was kind of the end of it. People were like, “As long as she understands that we’re not going to be on point helping her” and “As long as she’s not taking time away from what we need to be doing.”

In this instance, skaters who resisted the push towards exclusivity won the battle. The skater was able to continue participating in practices, but it was made clear that most all-stars would write her off and would be unwilling to help her progress.

The new standard of acceptability became the willingness of captains and coaches to draft a tryout skater. At a later training meeting, the following exchange took place:

All-Star 1: We shouldn’t pass people just because we feel sorry for them.

\textsuperscript{37} Some women tried out on multiple occasions (tryouts are only held two or three times a year). After making the league, some women took more than a year to progress through the assessments necessary to play a game. I am aware of one woman (with prior sports experience) who joined the league and qualified for game play in about six months.
Coach: This is the evolution of the league. The bar is getting set higher.

All-Star 2: The competition is higher and they have to prove themselves more.

When one skater in attendance objected to being selective, another skater replied, “What is this, ‘no skater left behind?’” Assessors who resisted tougher tryout requirements argued in favor of women who they saw as “having potential,” citing well-respected national level skaters who started as “wall-hangers.” Assessors who wanted stricter standards reminded “soft assessors” of “problem skaters,” stating, “Remember [x-skater] and how no one wanted to draft her? Would you draft this person on your team?” Labeling opponents “soft” was a way to sanction the assessors for prioritizing the women’s feelings over prioritizing all-star training.

Despite some assessors’ calculated efforts to raise the bar for admission, expressions of opposition were often based in emotions (Sugrue 1982). In more than one instance, tryout women with marginal skills were accepted into the league because assessors would “feel bad for them.” At one tryout date, when assessors were debating whether to accept a tryout woman, a coach said:

Each and every one of those skaters that we go back and forth on ends up being a problem. They had okay skill and “great potential” [mocking tone], but that has always bit us in the ass. Every time we let them squeak by there is hell to pay for it. We might want to consider blind voting instead of talking about it, because every time people end up changing their opinions because of how others vote in front of them. The last woman standing ends up backing down. It should be a blind vote. People have friends trying out who they want in the league.

All-Star: Yes, people become emotionally attached. We’re essentially a business organization. We need to think about if we will get a return on the people we’re letting in.

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38 A term referring to people who are so unbalanced on skates that they have to hold on to the wall for stability purposes.
In efforts to suppress feeling bad for declining some women entry, all-star captains would remind skaters that their own training was more important. For example, one captain rationalized the rejection of three women, stating, “We aren’t at a place where we can lose focus on the high-end training.” In support of denying them access, an assessor echoed, “We spend a lot of time looking for reasons for the Nos.” Another assessor said, “I don’t think that we need to be so concerned about their feelings.” One assessor said, “I have a sympathetic bone where I want to let everyone in, but we need to remind each other because I’ll be like, ‘awww, she’s trying so hard.’” Rather than spending time arguing over whom to admit, most all-stars would have preferred the agenda be dedicated to drills and strategy.

The second way that members of the training committee restricted membership was by recruiting selectively. SKRG started out inclusionary for all women, then became exclusionary at both the league and WFTDA levels. As the bar for competitive play and athleticism was raised, league members began recruiting selectively. One veteran all-star explained to me how the training committee’s approach toward recruiting skaters changed over the years. She said:

Derby was basically a big ol’ word-a-mouth forever. Now we actually actively recruit. We go to [the University’s] gym and other gyms, instead of going to a bar to find people. I think that the league is looking for all different levels of women. When we first joined, I remember that the big spiel was that you didn’t have to be athletic. It was almost exclusionary to athletes. You didn’t have to be good at this or know how to do this….you could just come. I like the push towards athletes. It’s really motivating for someone who is a sports freak who wants to train hard to play.

As the focus shifted to interleague play, recruitment efforts became more focused on attracting athletic women to derby. SKRG skaters originally went out to bars “dressed derby” and handed out flyers to “girls who looked edgy,” but eventually the training committee members pushed to target “athletically minded” women.
The shift toward selective recruitment was further evident during a workshop the league hosted in 2007 for newly forming leagues. The former production manager offered her advice: “Everyone’s first thought is always to go out and recruit at bars, but perhaps you should try some local gyms first. You want people that are athletic, not just drunks that think it is cool. Pay attention to which aspect you are selling. The aggression? Sisterhood? Athleticism? What you stress determines what you’ll bring.” Within SKRG and throughout the WFTDA, tensions grew between skaters who wanted derby to remain inclusive and those who wanted to focus primarily on interleague training.

Picking the Best

Following the first tournament in 2006, league members were able to measure their abilities against other leagues from across the country. According to a veteran, “Along with creating the rules that year, we created rankings, and so, suddenly the games meant something. You weren’t just playing for fun or for bragging rights. Suddenly this was going to mean something.” Rankings were used as a justification for drafting the best fourteen skaters onto the SKRG All-Star game day roster. One skater said:

We came out of the tournament with a huge training focus. Suddenly there was a lot of judgment, whereas before we were just playing. We might have looked at who was the best and who was the worst so that we could make the teams even, but suddenly we were looking at it in terms of who is the best and who is the worst so that we can win every time. *We must win every time.*

After the first tournament, the majority of skaters voted to create a team of the best fourteen skaters to represent the league. One veteran all-star explained: “Once I realized that we could play other teams in the nation, I got really serious about the discipline of it. I think other people did too. I wanted to train harder, faster, stronger, and that developed over time.”
Interleague play provided opportunities for social comparison and athletic affirmation for some skaters, and in turn, greater motivation to train.

Standardization fueled internal competitiveness as skaters fought for limited spots on the roster and for limited playtime. After holding the first tournament event, one WFTDA board member said, “Everyone became more nationally competitive, and so everything just became more about interleague play (playing other leagues) than intraleague (home team) play.” One training committee member said, “We left feeling really good, like we had a shot to be one of the best in the country. We stayed there [in the rankings] for a while, and even moved up the next year.” As interleague play became increasingly standardized by the WFTDA, conflict between league members blossomed. First, skaters competed over a limited number of spots on the all-star roster, and second, home team (intraleauge) competition began undermining all-star (interleague) competition and league cohesion. The “best 14” philosophy and the “play to win” model seeped into the home teams. Captains and coaches began to selectively draft their home team rosters and distribute playtime in a manner that favored all-stars. One former home team captain shared:

I had to struggle with the captains of the other teams. I remember a meeting where we sat down and we were trying to figure out balancing the teams. It really became a struggle. I felt like the other captains were trying to weight their team. I don’t know if it was intentional or just sort of an emotional need to win. I felt like I was working on behalf of my players. I sort of felt drained by the process, like that struggle, because I felt like I was the face of my team and I owed them a lot. From that perspective, I got really wrapped up emotional in it [sic]. I was in this struggle with them to get what was right for my team.

Here, we see the emotional undercurrents shaping roster selection (Sugrue 1982). The emotional struggle involved was too much, as the skater vowed never to captain again. Another home team captain reported “hating” draft meetings. She said, “No one would agree
on anything because everyone wanted what they wanted, and I get that, but it was just a big standstill. It was horrible, and, I didn’t like that part, but I liked being a good leader.” As the focus shifted towards competition, the decision-making process became less about reaching a consensus and doing what was best for the league, and instead became more about doing what was best for one’s home team. Captains wanted to draft the best players to secure wins for their team, which meant battling over resources.

The prioritization of interleague play by some league members was cultivating a competitive organization, which was threatening its survival. In just four seasons, skaters had transformed the league culture from inclusive and democratic to competitive and stratified by athleticism. The increased level of competition, even at the home team level, was dividing the all-stars and fracturing the league. Skaters had differing priorities and visions for the league: some supported maintaining the inclusive, “fun” focus of the league, while others prioritized competition and winning. In order to continue to prioritize all-star competition with member retention and organizational survival, SKRG board members and training committee members attempted to restructure the league and implement new standards for the all-stars.

Compartmentalizing Membership

During the period of my fieldwork (2007-2010), debate raged about restructuring the league. This issue came up at training meetings, board of director meetings, and league meetings. The escalating focus on all-star competition was stimulating grievances over the privileging of all-stars, especially regarding disparities in playtime. Training committee members aimed to devise a solution that would enable SKRG to continue to “play the best,”
while also boosting home teams, thereby silencing complaints of inequity. As the board of directors started planning for the 2008 season, debates took place about the usefulness of home teams, especially as they were becoming labeled as “divisive” by skaters. The board of directors proposed, and skaters eventually voted in support of, creating a second interleague team (the B-Team) to give more skaters opportunities to play throughout the year. Similarly, the majority of league members eventually voted to keep home teams, but it was a conflict ridden process.

To appease skaters who had become unsatisfied with the all-star players dominating the track during home season, the Star Killer Rollergirls created a second interleague team (the B-Team) with the goal of training more skaters by adopting an equal playtime philosophy. Although the B-Team would be playing other leagues, game outcomes did not impact league rankings, because the WFTDA only permits one sanctioned team per league. An elected co-captain explained her vision at the first B-Team meeting: “My goal is that if you’re going to [upcoming game] that you’re playing. It’s not going to be about playing the same ten people over and over again while you leave the other four on the bench.” The B-Team was constructed as a place for skaters to value equity over victory, a sacrifice the all-star team was unwilling to make. Although some all-stars fundamentally disagreed with this philosophy on principle, they supported the establishment of the B-Team because it enabled them to continue playing the best to win.

Factions developed between skaters who wanted to keep home teams and those who wanted to eliminate them. Some people wanted to get rid of home teams to focus only on interleague play, whereas other skaters wanted to add a fourth home team to expand opportunities for intraleague play. The investment in home teams, at least for some skaters
and fans, was about the “grassroots start of the league.” One outspoken proponent of keeping
home teams said, “I love home teams. I mean, that’s how we started.” During the debate, a
league announcer often reminded proponents of home team elimination: “Home teams are a
legacy in our league. The ODFs [Old Derby Fans] are committed to them. You don’t want to
forget about your fans!” Other proponents of keeping home teams argued that top-ranked
leagues, including the reigning two-time WFTDA champion league, had home teams, so they
were obviously good for training. During a heated league meeting a skater announced,
“There isn’t one team in the top twenty that doesn’t have home teams!” An all-star who was
even more passionate about keeping home teams declared:

I will fight to the death for home teams. It’s a different experience. B-Team is
fun, but on home teams—even if you suck so bad and no one wants you—you’re still a [says home team name]. You’re not on there because of your
skill level. You’re on there because you need to get the skill and some people
need that home. Some people will only get play in home games. People are
hanging on and it’s important to keep them.

In support of this position, an advocate of home teams said during an interview, “It’s bullshit
for home teams to be like interleague. Our home season is supposed to be for training, so I
made the argument that there is no equity in training with such a gross inequity in play time.”
According to this skater, a woman who played in only eight jams her entire first season,
“People are not going to just get better.” From her point of view, skaters got their best
training during games, so they were being denied the opportunity to get better, perhaps
unintentionally, by more athletically inclined skaters who were restricting opportunities for
themselves to progress.

Several league members argued that interleague competition impeded success in
interleague competition. Even proponents of home teams acknowledged the destructive
consequences. The training director was in favor of prioritizing interleague competition and wanted to eliminate home teams. She said:

I know that some people really like them, but if we are going to continue to compete at a national level we need to be training for interleague all year round, and home season tears the league apart. There are people that are eligible that have expressed zero interest in being on the B-Team, which to me means that they don’t care about getting better. They just want to be able to say that they are a roller girl. To keep our rankings up we need to be training new skaters to be eligible for the A-Team.

All-star skaters had difficulty coming together to compete against other leagues because divides remained based on players’ home team affiliations. As one all-star coach explained, “It was perceived that if the elected captains were from a certain home team that more people from their home team—even if they weren’t more deserving—would get picked for the fourteen based on their [home team] color.” There was hesitation to share strategy and to develop a leaguemate’s skill because she may be your home team rival and due to the fear of losing one’s spot on the roster.

Despite concerns for sub-group allegiances and intra-group competition undermining the cohesion of the all-star team, skaters eventually voted to keep the home teams, to continue holding public bouts at the larger venue, and to have the training committee rebalance teams. At the training meeting following the league meeting, the committee was brainstorming ideas for making home teams more productive and fair. Because some skaters are “married to their home teams,” there was a lot of resistance to putting everyone in the draft and starting the home team rosters from scratch. As an alternative, it was suggested that a few core members be left on every team and the rest be put in the draft. The former training

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39 Prior to restructuring the league, SKRG’s season was divided into intraleague and interleague. The all-stars would spend half of the year practicing with their home team and competing against one another. Then, when it was time for interleague season, the best skaters from the three home teams were selected for the all-star roster.
director said, “We have to realize that we are all SKRG regardless of what home team we are on.” Another All-Star skater made the same point: “We need to stop being so individualistic. This is about SKRG, you need to do what’s best for the league.” This statement gives priority to league membership as the basis for a skater’s roller girl identity.

The board of directors solicited ideas from the skaters on how to select the rosters for the four home teams. Board members knew some veterans who had been skating for the same home team for the last four to five years were resistant to changing teams. At the board meeting in August, the skaters’ survey feedback was discussed and the following exchange took place:

Bod 1: People will get moved and they’re going to be pissed off. I don’t want to be a part of it.

Bod 2: People hate the balance reshuffle that we did last season too.

Bod 3: People are going to hate it, period.

Bod 4: And there are a handful of people who don’t care, who just want to play derby.

Bod 5: There are people who don’t want to say that they want because they’re afraid it will hurt their teammates’ feelings.

Bod 6: If people have it forced on them they won’t feel like they turned their backs on their teammates.

Bod 7: And it’s less political that way. You’re not going to be able to make 50 people happy.

The board was concerned about keeping organizational members satisfied with their participation, but also about the future direction and continued success of the league. Although clearing the rosters and putting everyone into the draft pool to create home team rosters from scratch was often acknowledged as being the best option by the training
After experiencing high turnover, partly due to the home team debates and overall morale of the league, there were no longer enough skaters to fill three home teams. Again, skaters decided to vote about whether to keep home teams and to rebalance the rosters, thus rekindling the same debates. Home team identity investments were now threatening the collective identity of the league and the future success of the organization. During the discussions at the training meeting it was unclear what it was about the home teams that some skaters were so invested in, so I asked: “For people who want to stay on home teams, is it about the team or your teammates?” The responses highlight the identity conflicts:

All-Star 1: For me, it’s about the people. I want to be with my core group of girls. They are like my family. They are my home. I know I can fall back on them. I love the league. I’ve been a part of it for 4.5 years. I’m not going anywhere. I feel like I get lost in the league though, and my home team is my grounding.

Bod 1: For me, it is the opposite. I think [home team color]. It’s about my team. I’m a [says team name]. I’ve been a [says team name] and I want to stay a [says team name].

All-Star 2: There is too much emotion wrapped up in this. People need to quit the tears and do what’s best for the league.

All-Star 1: Some people are motivated to get better because they want to make the A-Team. Some people, like me, are motivated by their home team.

All-Star 3: So you don’t want the league to rebalance the home teams because you’re emotionally invested in your team?

40 The board sent out an anonymous survey to determine how many skaters would be willing to make the move, which was often conveyed as “being for the greater good of the league.” At the August training meeting, the results from the survey were discussed. The training director announced: “17 people said that they’d be willing to go to the 4th team out of the 25 who actually voted. Marketing really wants to keep teams how they are for the sake of fans. I personally want to go with what the skaters want.” Although the decision regarding home teams would affect approximately 50 skaters, only about half of the skaters responded for the request for feedback.
All-Star 1: Yes, I’d rather lose with my team and be with my girls.
A clear divide existed among the all-star players about how the league should evolve, and no resolution was reached at this training meeting. All-star skaters who resisted the rebalancing of home teams were perceived by some of their teammates as unwilling to do “what was best for the league.”

Leading up to the draft, league members kept saying, “We need to do what is best for the league.” In other words, rebalancing the teams would be a way to improve everyone’s training, which would better the entire league. However, going into the draft the negotiations centered on strengthening the roster of the weakest team (a team lacking veteran skaters and all-star skaters). Despite going into the draft with the intention to rebalance all the teams, everyone argued from the perspective of making their team the most competitive, which undermined the goal of doing “what was best for the league.” Intragroup competition was threatening the collective identity of the Star Killer Rollergirls.

Securing Commitment

The tension between being fair or competitive became a fault line in the league, fracturing the all-stars before the 2008 tournament season. For the first time in the league’s history the all-stars had more losses than wins during the season. On the flight to the tournament, a rookie all-star told me, “I’m not even sure if I’ll get to play at all this weekend. I’m glad that I’m on the roster, but I understand that these games are about winning. We need to make it to Nationals.” Team leaders were focused on qualifying for the national tournament and, consistent with what was thought to be the shared strategy, decided to put the best skaters on the track. Although the rookie above was proud merely to have made the
roster, several veteran skaters were not happy with game day roster decisions and playtime distribution.

In response to policy changes at the WFTDA level\textsuperscript{41} and after witnessing the steep competition between top teams during the WFTDA tournament season in 2008, the training committee, especially the training director, pushed a proposal for all-star skaters to attend specific practices \textit{as a team} to begin training for next year’s tournament. During an interview, he explained his reasoning for the stricter attendance proposal:

\begin{quote}
I was just trying to train people to function more like a team. Instead of people coming to three different practices a week, I was trying to make it the same three practices. Unfortunately, with it being all volunteer, everybody working, and everything else, like family stuff, it’s pretty much impossible. We push it, but it’s always not going to work for somebody. It’s hard to push anything that will exclude one person, because it’s volunteer.
\end{quote}

In previous seasons, the only attendance expectation was making any ten out of thirty practices prior to the deadline for submitting the all-star roster. The push to change was resisted by some top skaters, people who previously pushed the exclusionary measures.

To compensate for the retirement of several top all-star veterans, the training director attempted to secure commitment by implementing a mandatory attendance policy (two scrimmage practices and one speed practice a week). He sent the proposal to the training committee members via email and at the next meeting explained:

\begin{quote}
The idea is to have the whole interleague team at practice at the same time. I realize how hard it is to be on the interleague team. We’re losing four of our
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{41} In the spring of 2008, the majority of WFTDA member leagues voted to make it mandatory for all-star rosters to be submitted quarterly so that leagues knew who they would be training against. This policy change at the WFTDA level changed the SKRG All-Star roster selection process because skaters had to commit to training and bout availability, including travel games, for three months. When this was first discussed at a board meeting, the league WFTDA representative exclaimed, “We’ve voted against this for three years now. It’s hard to do a roster when you have to take in to consideration injuries, work, and family!” The training director responded, “It’s hard to only pick 20 when we have 35 eligible.” The chairman said, “You’d have to be able to go to all the travel games.” Making the commitment to travel to all interleague games was seen as a filtering system by the training director: “I guess if people can’t come it helps pick the roster.”
jammers. We’re going to have to work hard. People are going to have to want this. They need to know the commitment up front for playing for a competitive national team.

A board member in attendance announced, “I’ve had people say they’d rather run for captain and play for the B-Team than be on the A-Team just to sit on the bench.” A skater who frequently made the twenty person roster, but rarely made the game day roster, said, “If we do this policy and start losing girls from the A-Team and they take over the B-Team, how will they get to play?” The concern, in other words, was that some good skaters would drop down to the B-Team, where they could get more playing time and more respect. In turn, some B-Team skaters worried that they would be pushed out of their spots.

When the training director announced the proposed attendance policy at the quarterly league meeting, all-star skaters staked out various positions:

All-Star 1: It’s tough. I agree that you can’t be a good team without practicing together. In general, I don’t miss practice because I don’t feel like going. I can only miss two Thursdays unless I change my work schedule. But then I’d miss speed [practice]. For me, personally, requiring and setting such strict requirements will result in us losing girls. I won’t be able to play.

Training Director: We’ll lose girls, but we’ll practice as a team.

All-Star 2: I won’t make it either. But, I’d probably just play on B. But, if we’re going to play at a national level and be competitive, I do think we need a strict practice policy.

All-Star 3 [to All-Star 1]: If you can’t make attendance would it mean…would people just quit the league?

While some members of the training committee supported the director’s new vision, others sought to maintain the current standards. Veterans (and rookies) who feared exclusion

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42 Although all-star rosters included twenty skaters, the game day roster was narrowed to fourteen skaters and two alternates. The bottom six skaters were called the “bubble skaters.” They were in an awkward position. Most B-Team players saw them as threatening because they qualified for spots on the B-Team, while most all-stars did not treat them like part of the team.
resisted the policy, while those who wanted to make qualitative changes to their training (Chambliss 1989)—requiring all-stars to practice less, but together—saw the benefits as outweighing the potential loss of current teammates.

Training committee members resurfaced the proposal as the league dropped in the rankings. In fact, the proposal was debated throughout the next season, bringing skaters to tears on more than one occasion. The policy never passed and the ten-in-thirty practice requirement stayed in place. However, a one-hour “all-star only practice” was added on a weekend morning, which now meant the women would be at the rink for 3.5 hours, often attending a committee meeting or team meeting afterwards. The following conversation took place at a training meeting:

All Star 1: Other leagues have a mandatory A-Team practice. This isn’t about exclusion [of B-Team skaters].

All-Star 2: Six practices is a bitch for people who work. I feel judged for why I don’t come. You expect the A-Team to come no matter what.

All-Star 3: We bring you up every time we talk about attendance.

All-Star 2: I work all the time. I do derby and I gave up my social life.

All-Star 4: And family life!

All-Star 1: I do too. We all make sacrifices. I feel personally rewarded for making myself better and making the team better. That’s what makes it worth it.

The mandatory attendance policy that the training director tried to pass would have required attending three practices a week as a team. Because it did not pass, the all-stars continued to attend any of the five practices they could make based on their individual schedules. Now, skaters who opposed the three mandatory practices were evaluated by captains and coaches based on six practices, even though the minimum remained ten out of thirty practices.
Despite the importance training committee members had been placing on attendance, in one instance captains used discretion in interpreting the league’s returning skater policy to select a woman returning from retirement for a tournament roster. The returning skater policy mandated skaters make attendance (“10 in 30”) to be eligible for roster placement, but the skater in question was “inactive” (meaning she had not been attending practices and stopped volunteering). An all-star in support of drafting her despite her inactive status exclaimed, “I hate fucking ourselves with rules.” “It’s an ethical decision,” responded a B-Team player. “Is it about fairness or having the best possible roster for winning?” In this instance, winning was more important, as three skaters voted that making ten practices should be required, while four voted for skaters to be able to return automatically, and five abstained. One all-star recalled:

> It was for our own selfish reasons that we put her on that team. Shit, we wanted to win. It’s sports, not be friends time. [Q: How did the team react?] The top half of the roster supported the decision, but the bottom-ranked half that’s been working their ass off to get on that roster was upset. And, you know, they had reason to be.

This skater, who only one season prior was upset with her own lack of tournament playtime, rationalized the decision to select the skater because, “it’s sports.” The top half of the roster consisted of veterans accustomed to “playing to win.” However, the bottom half of the roster was promoted from the B-Team where they were used to getting equal playtime. The larger number of women abstaining from the vote reflected the growing fear skaters felt about speaking out against the direction the league was taking. As time went on, strategies that league members adopted to solve some organizational problems unintentionally created new ones.
CONSEQUENCES OF CULTIVATING A COMPETITIVE CULTURE

SKRG was not the only league prioritizing interleague play—the opportunity to compete against other leagues—over home team competition, and they also were not the only ones experiencing internal league conflict over how to evolve. One veteran said the early success of SKRG’s All-Stars had detrimental effects. She said:

One of the big things that you saw a lot in 2004 and 2005 was that as leagues were recruiting women there was sort of this “all body types have a place in derby.” And they would say, “You’re this skinny, tiny, little short girl – you might make a good jammer” and “You’re this really big girl, you could be a good blocker.” There was definitely this sort of attitude of all shapes and sizes welcome…there’s a place for all of you. Doing well at the [first tournament] changed the orientation of the league, because a lot of the “We’re doing this for fun,” “We’re accepting of all people,” “Even if you don’t know how to skate, come join us” changed in 2006. Our attitude toward playing and training changed and suddenly there wasn’t much forgiveness towards different body types or different learning curves. You don’t really hear about that now. Most leagues have stopped doing open enrollment.

Only a few years earlier, all women, regardless of their skating abilities, were able to become rollergirls. Now, only those who could pass tryouts would be able to begin the process of claiming a skater identity. A B-Team skater said, “The league should drive training. The training committee should not drive the philosophy of the league. It should be about making people better skaters, not determining who they let on the team. That’s not training. That’s a different philosophy.”

In the early seasons, when the SKRG All-Stars were doing well, skaters were in support of having the best skaters represent the league in competition against other leagues. A veteran all-star explained: “It’s always been in the interest of the all-stars to play our best players, to do what we needed to do to win. If that meant playing the same ten players over and over again, while four sat the bench most of the time, then that’s what we did.” When this strategy won games for the team, some skaters even understood being benched “for the
good of the team.” But as top B-Team skaters were promoted to replace retiring all-stars, tensions grew. A split developed over whether playtime should be divided equally or on the basis of skating ability.

League members did not hold shared conceptions of fairness. During an interview, an all-star coach described how derby was different from any sport he had experience with: “When you talk to the female athletes who come [to derby] from other sports, they are aware that this is the only place where there is even of a question of being allowed to play if you aren’t the best player.” A rookie all-star with an extensive background in sports was equally baffled by the tension over playtime in the league. She said, “I want to win and I think everyone wants to win. How I see it is, you ought to play the people who you know in the end result will win the game for you.” One veteran all-star said, “I think everyone’s understanding of what is fair is different.” In her opinion the league needed to “come to a middle ground.” She explained, “To be competitive, we’re going to have to work a lot fucking harder than we do, and if we’re going to be fair then we need to accept the fact that we’re not going to be competitive.” As shown above, not all skaters could prioritize all-star training based on different work and family contingencies.

One B-Team captain said, “I like to win, but I feel like, if someone’s putting her heart and soul into this game and is improving, that you have to let them play. I feel like the A-Team forgets that and they have a lot of people who are warming the bench that I would love to take back to the [B-Team].” This captain defined benching all-stars as “wasting talent.” A former all-star asserted, “I disagree with using eleven out of fourteen [players]. If you have fourteen, you should use fourteen. Play your fucking fourteen!” Similarly, another skater said, “We play the same half of the team over and over and the other half of the team just
sits. None of the other top teams do that.” These skaters all took the position that playing everyone would “train a deep bench,” which would better for the league in the long run even if they lost games in the meantime.

Predictably, organizational leaders who opposed the continued prioritization of all-star competition at “all costs” were more likely to speak out than non-leaders, especially non-veterans. As the barrier to enter the league became less permeable, the league chairperson made a final plea (via email) to consider the implications of restrictive entrance to the league. She wrote:

It seems as though each year, and as each tryout rolls around we are setting the bar higher and higher. As the number of skaters in our league have dropped and probably will continue to be effected by pregnancies, injuries, retirements, etc., I fear that we are not cultivating enough replacements to keep the league viable. I’d like us to really rethink the direction we have been going for the last few years – is this really the best route for SKRG?

Another veteran skater who also served on the board felt comfortable challenging proposals and decisions via email and face-to-face at meetings. As disapproval with the all-star leadership, the training committee, and the board members rose, other league members often confided in her about their disapproval of ideas and decisions. She told me, “People are scared to say anything because they don’t want to never have a shot of being on the all-stars. [There is a] fear of even getting less playtime, so no one feels like they can say what is on their mind.”

To a limited extent, veteran status (at least for all-stars) made skaters more comfortable with the idea of speaking out, but not necessarily more inclined to publicly critique league practices. A veteran who never held a formal leadership position in the league, but nonetheless was confident expressing her opinion said:
That has definitely come from being around these girls longer, knowing what to say and what not to say around them. I never try to piss anybody off, but I’m not going to not say something. I just have to find a way to word it so they don’t get upset. I love it enough that I’m willing to work around it.

Here, this skater conveys that she has learned how to tailor expression of her concerns to avoid unwanted emotional reactions from captains and teammates (Hochschild 1979). A rookie to the all-star team was aware of the power differentials between skaters in the league, but was not willing to speak up because she wanted to play. From her point of view:

You kind of have your all-star, all-stars that shine more than others. And so, they get more play time, and they are like, the only voices from the all-stars that you hear. You have a whole roster of all-stars, but you only hear the voices of like four or five.

One skater, regardless of her relative “newbie” status, felt her dedication to the league gave her some ground to speak from. Although involved less than a year, her steady practice attendance and commitment to volunteering garnered respect. She felt her opinion was heard, but said alternatively, “Someone else who has not as been as consistent as I have, but who is still in the league or something, they might not be taken as seriously.” As decision making became less shared and more like the top-down model of conventional sports, interpersonal tensions developed on the all-stars and spread throughout the league, undermining their ability to compete effectively.

CONCLUSION

Members of the Star Killer Rollergirls believed that being a top-ranked league was central to defining the organization as successful. In pursuit of climbing the ranks, members of the training committee sought to prioritize all-star competition. While the league could have continued practicing inclusive recruitment, universal training, and shared decision making, the availability of interleague play opportunities shifted the focus of the league.
Training committee members transformed the league culture and the focus of the skaters by raising the bar for entry, restricting membership, picking the best, compartmentalizing members, and securing commitment. Adopting cultural notions of competition, victory, and athleticism affected members’ participation and the culture of the league.

My analysis demonstrates how emphasizing competition and codified standards of membership, recruitment, and opportunity had the unintentional consequence of reproducing patterns of “social closure” found in conventional sport. These organizational strategies were useful for temporarily prioritizing all-star competition, but by structuring the league around competition, they reproduced cultural notions of athleticism that typically exclude women from sport. By selecting the all-star roster through raising the bar, picking the best, and securing commitment, they stratified organizational members who were previously equal, and excluded from participation women who could not skate or dedicate so much time to derby.

My analysis contributes to sociological understanding of how intra- and inter-group and inter- and intra-organizational competition and cooperation threaten progressive goals (such as collaboration and empowerment) often touted by alternative organizations (see Kleinman 1996, Sumerau 2012). Proponents of prioritizing all-star competition used sports rhetoric and made comparisons to the competitive model of sport to justify the cultivation of a competitive organizational culture that excluded their leaguemates, while elevating themselves.

My findings extend research on intergroup conflict and cooperation. In the classic Robbers Cave study (Sherif et al. 1961), boys were split into two groups that competed against one another in a series of games, but were able to overcome inter-group friction to
collaborate on a superordinate goal. Generally, conventional team sports are rife with the conflict found in the friction phase of this experimental design. Most research on team sport examines intragroup cooperation and intergroup competition, or in other words, how the individuals on the team work together to defeat an opponent (Kohn 1992). Due to the structure of inter and intraleague competition, derby provides a unique context to further explore the relationship between intergroup conflict and cooperation.

Unlike Robbers Cave, SKRG initially created a cooperative group, which then divided into two sub-groups that competed while maintaining the superordinate goal of league survival. Interleague competition created outgroups for SKRG to play and created an elevated group (all-stars) within the league made of members of the subgroups. The relationships between these groups were all shaped by the larger democratic, cooperative organization of the WFTDA.

In the next chapter, I examine how skaters balanced their participation in roller derby with work, intimate relationships, and family. Skaters’ differential abilities to dedicate time to derby and the increased disparity in time on the track made some league members feel that the league was “by some skaters, for other skaters.” I discuss the organizational strategies that board members adopted to restore the sense of equity and to improve league morale.
CHAPTER 4
WHEELING AND DEALING: NEGOTIATING PARTICIPATION IN SERIOUS LEISURE

Some scholars argue that there has been an increase in leisure time in the U.S. (Robinson and Godbey 1999), while others argue that Americans are working more and playing less (Schor 1992). Despite the debate, findings consistently show that women have less time for leisure than men (Grzywacz and Marks 2000, Hochschild 1989, Mattingly and Bianchi 2003) and that women are likely to prioritize their family members’ leisure over their own (Chafetz and Kotarba 1995, Henderson et al. 1996, Henderson, Hodges, and Kivel 2002, Larson, Gillman, and Richards 1997, Mattingly and Bianchi 2003, Stalp 2006). Furthermore, men’s and women’s potential interest and involvement in serious leisure is constrained by different work and family responsibilities (Anderson 2011, Stalp 2006, Bartram 2001).

According to Arlie Hochschild (1989:9), “Women more often juggle three spheres—job, children, and housework—while most men juggle two—job and children.” For women, this means having to negotiate and balance three spheres, which impose on their time for leisure. These “time binds” create pressures and conflicts for workers, especially single mothers and fathers (Jacobs and Gerson 2004, Hochschild 1997). According to Anderson (2011:135), “In short, the pursuit of leisure—and especially serious leisure—can be difficult to sustain in the context of contemporary work and family life, particularly for parents employed full-time.” The majority of the skaters in SKRG league worked full-time and a significant proportion had children, so most skaters had work and family responsibilities to balance, in addition to derby.

This chapter examines how skaters managed participation in a democratically organized serious leisure organization (Stebbins 1979). I analyze the strategies that skaters
and volunteers adopted to balance their participation in a demanding amateur sport, one that required about 15 hours of training and unpaid labor per week. Then, I show how the organization adopted strategies to police organizational equity to realign the league division of labor with the WFTDA philosophy of “by the skaters, for the skaters.” I end with a discussion of how inequity in the league reflected a larger cultural tendency to devalue labor conventionally associated with women.

SERIOUS LEISURE IMMERSION

When skaters first entered roller derby, they tended to become completely absorbed. In skaters’ accounts of their involvement, comparing derby to a disease or addiction was common. I learned about “the itch” the first time I attended a league practice. A veteran pointed toward a new skater and said, “She used to be a ref and now she’s trying to make tryouts to be skater. She’s got ‘the itch.’ [The itch?] Yes! Some people start skating and just get hooked. It’s contagious. Be careful, you might get it!” A derby photographer described this phenomenon on his blog:

Roller derby, as you know, is a highly contagious viral infection — a pleasurable one, but an infection nonetheless. Mere exposure to derby practically guarantees its transmission, and immunity is rare. Infection typically follows a three-stage progression: In Stage I, the virus gets under your skin and causes a recurring derby itch that must be scratched. In Stage II, the virus enters the bloodstream and triggers an autoimmune response known as derby fever. Finally in Stage III, the virus occupies the brain, causing the host to seek out new victims and actively spread the infection. This is the stage I find myself in, and happily the disease is incurable.

When I asked one skater how she first got involved, she replied, “I don’t know. It’s just an addiction. I’m addicted. It’s taken over my life!” At first, this addiction to
derby seemed to make skaters and volunteers willing to do a significant amount of unpaid labor for the league in exchange for the opportunity to participate in the sport.

Derby became an all-encompassing activity for skaters. An all-star from another league told me, “You have friends before you join roller derby, but then roller derby consumes your life.” She explained, “You’re practicing three times a week, you have to be a part of a committee, you’re bouting on weekends, and you’re traveling on weekends.” Between volunteering and practicing, the skater said, “It consumes you. It’s really hard to maintain those friendships with people who don’t understand your craziness and your obsession over roller derby!” One skater, who also served on the board, said, “Derby is like having a 20-hour-a-week job after your real job. You have practice. You have to check your email every day. You have at least one meeting a week and, on bad weeks, maybe three or four.” As I became immersed in the league, I reflected on my own struggles to balance derby and life. Once I gained full access to the league, I was attending two to four meetings a week, most of which lasted three to four hours.

In the early years, a veteran skater recalled, “Everybody was so enthusiastic and involved. We were each other’s only friends.” Starting the league and learning derby required a lot of unpaid labor, but she said, “It was small enough that we’d get together and

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43 Throughout my project, I was in the field an average of five to six hours a week, and I spent another two to four hours a week monitoring email, Listservs, message boards, and blogs. My time in the field drastically increased as game day approached, due to extra meetings and time at bouts. On bout weekends, I was typically in the field on Friday nights at a sponsorship location hosting a greeting party for the visiting league and from 8 a.m. on Saturday to 2 a.m. or from laying down the track to the after party. Sometimes, SKRG would host a “hangover bout” on Sunday mornings, which would give the visiting league the chance to play another all-star league that may have traveled to play them. This strategy was commonly developed to make the most of traveling to play a game. Alternatively, the SKRG All-Stars often flew to one location to play a league and rented vehicles to travel to play nearby leagues, sometimes playing two to four sanctioned bouts in one weekend. For the most part, I did not attend practices consistently during my fieldwork (except when I did “freshmeat” training), but skaters were expected to attend a minimum of three a week and some all-stars admitted feeling pressured to attend five practices a week. As tournament season approached, training ramped up and the frequency of training meetings, team meetings, and bout viewings increased.
do whatever we needed to do. It was more of a labor of love. Everyone wanted to participate so we could skate!” In the beginning, the excitement detracted from the unpaid/volunteer work being done. During an interview, a veteran who was living with her mother when she joined the league explained how she became immersed in derby:

> When I first started – it seems like everybody goes through this – when you first start, you kind of like get *really* immersed in it, like, “this is this *big* new thing in my life.” Now, it’s just part of my life. But at that time, it was this big thing that had just been added on. It was new, novel, and exciting! The league was just building up too, so I felt like I was part of something that was building and growing. My Mom would be like, “Somebody called. Somebody from the cult called.” [Cult?] She called it a cult cause we were all *so* into it. Everything I did was about the league, it seemed.

When people first came to the league, they experienced a honeymoon period and were captivated by this big new thing in their life. Veterans expressed a sense of ownership and pride in how they built the league and kept it going over the years. One skater recalled a similar overwhelming sense of excitement:

> At first it was like, it was so much fun. You just didn’t even realize all the commitment that you’re putting into it. You’re just like, “Oh, I have to go because we have practice and I have a meeting.” Before we knew it, we were like working work schedules around going to games and stuff. I got a job so I could pay for…just a part time job to pay for practice and whatnot. It was a lot of fun, and I don’t know, just exciting!

Joining the league had a major impact on her family, but for a few seasons the fun and friendships deflected attention from the unpaid labor they did for the league and the efforts they put into organizing their lives around derby.

> Participation in roller derby required unpaid labor, which was often difficult to balance with paid work. As the league grew and marketing efforts expanded to attract more fans, so did the amount of work required to produce bouts at the new, larger venue.
According to one board member, league members were frequently unaware of the amount of work required to produce a bout and keep the league functioning:

I don’t think a lot of people realize how volunteer it is. It’s 100% volunteer! I don’t think they [the public] realize it because we do a really good job putting on these professional bouts. We have these really nice programs and posters. I don’t think they realize its rollergirls sitting up in the middle of the night designing something and using her lunch hour to pick it up. In fact, I’m not even sure some of our skaters are aware of that!

Participating in derby required significantly more time than just playing a leisurely game of pick-up basketball. Balancing derby with other spheres of life was even more complicated for skaters who competed in away games. An all-star from another league explained:

All of the other sports I’ve played have been competitive, but they’ve never been owned by women and here we are [at this tournament] responsible for this whole sport. We’re responsible for running our leagues and home teams. It is so hard to keep it going, but it really has to be a labor of love and you have to be devoted or otherwise it doesn’t work. It is more of a complete experience, not just a sport.

Beaver (2012:45) claims that by establishing leagues that operate according to a by-the-skater-for-the-skater ethic, rollergirls have “created a non-alienated sport for women.” For the most part, skaters loved derby so much that they were willing to do anything necessary to play the game.

**BALANCING PARTICIPATION IN SERIOUS LEISURE**

Building on Hochschild’s (1979, 1989) economy of gratitude perspective, I show that league members adopt strategies at the individual level and the organizational level to negotiate their participation in roller derby much like dual-income couples. To balance their participation in roller derby with work, intimate relationships, and family, skaters adopted various strategies: (1) doing derby at work; (2) scheduling work around derby; (3) quitting
paid work; (4) doing derby together; (5) keeping derby separate; (6) dating derby; and (7) framing skating as good parenting. The self-preservation strategies that enabled some skaters to manage their participation in derby had the unintended consequence of leaving a core group of league members having to pick up slack. To keep the organization running and to keep members happy, board members tried to create a more equal division of labor and they tried to foster an economy of gratitude in the league by: (1) implementing mandatory volunteering; (2) selling derby devotion to new skaters and volunteers; and (3) by throwing volunteer appreciation parties. Following a discussion of the individual and organizational level strategies, I discuss the positive and negative aspects of leisure spillover.

Balancing Derby and Work

Skaters, especially those competing at the all-star level, struggled to fulfill both their derby commitments and their job obligations. An all-star from another league was so serious about derby that when she was searching for jobs she said, “I wasn’t looking for jobs in areas that didn’t have a fairly competitive roller derby team.” Skaters adopted three main strategies for balancing the training and business aspects of their participation in serious leisure with paid work: doing derby at work, scheduling work around derby, and quitting paid work.

Doing Derby at Work

The most common strategy for fitting derby into one’s life was to do derby work during paid work hours. Most skaters and volunteers admitted that they incorporated their unpaid derby work into their paid work schedules. One former board member told me, “It’s rewarding to help move the league forward, but it’s
challenging because it’s a lot of work.” She explained that a major challenge was fielding all the emails that came across the league Listserv on a daily basis. She said, “It is usually a lot of work even during work hours. If you have an employer who doesn’t mind you checking a non-work email during your break or your lunch hour, then it's cool. But if you don’t, it can be tricky.” At a board meeting, a coach declared, “I love my job because I can do, like, eight hours of derby stuff a week. I don’t think I start my real work until about eleven.” Another board member echoed his sentiment stating, “Yeah, I check my derby email at work constantly. I could probably make more money working somewhere else, but then I couldn’t get away with what I do now.”

One veteran explained that work life, not family life, conflicted with her derby participation, but that her boss was supportive and allowed flexibility in her schedule to travel with the team. As she said:

It’s more often that I can’t go [to practice] because [of my kid] than because of work, but still that’s only been a handful of times. I’ve probably missed scrimmage practice five times ever in five years. But it’s easy [to make practice] because of my job. My boss is awesome. It was harder at my old job because I couldn’t do my derby work from [there] because I couldn’t be online all day, so it made it harder to do my [paid work and unpaid derby work] jobs.

This dedicated board member and all-star evaluated her current job as better because it did not conflict with her practice schedule and because it enabled her to stay on top of her board responsibilities while on the clock. Another board member who adopted the strategy of doing derby at work confessed that it caused problems. Doing derby tasks at work was distracting and might have cost her a promotion. She explained:

I do have to say I haven’t been able to focus as much on work, at work. My derby email was staying up all the time. I do a lot of [board] work there. Um,
and I’ve slacked off a little bit. I really need to refocus on work, but I just always have it in my head that work’s not what makes me happy. It pays my bills. I have to do it. But it’s not what makes me happy. Derby really brings me a joy that nothing else does. So, that was always my argument for focusing so much on derby. But, work’s important and I recently got passed up for a promotion that I was sure was mine. It was never a question in my mind, so when that happened, it was kind of a blow. I think it almost hurt more than maybe tearing my ACL and I wasn’t expecting that feeling, but I think ‘cause it’s something I always took for granted, you know, I’ve always kind of excelled at work.

For this woman, prioritizing derby over work, and even losing a promotion because of it, was justified because it was what made her happy. Some skaters admitted prioritizing work over derby only because it paid for their derby-related bills.

*Scheduling Work around Derby*

The second way that skaters and volunteers balanced derby and paid work was by scheduling work around derby. For example, a woman who worked in a pharmacy said, “I work a 12.5-hour day two days a week so that I can get to practice on time.” Another skater told me, “I’ve always decided to choose my jobs based around derby.” This skater worked at a chain grocery store, which offered her insurance, a prerequisite for her derby involvement. She said, “I don’t have to work forty hours a week if I don’t want to. I’m able to take time off whenever. They’re really flexible towards my derby schedule.” Telling employers “up-front” about derby was something most skaters did. A skater of six years said, “Every job I’ve ever gone into since I’ve been in derby…I’ve let them know up front that it’s something that I do, and that I have to be there on these days.” These skaters’ strategies allowed them to prioritize all-star training and negotiate time off for away games and tournaments.

Not all skaters, however, could prioritize derby so easily. For example, a skater who made her living as a real estate agent said, “If someone wants to see a million-dollar house at
7:30 on Thursday night, then you can go ahead and assume that I won’t be at practice. Life happens, and derby is just a part of it.” Inability to prioritize derby above work or to incorporate it into one’s work schedule had negative consequences for some skaters who were trying to get on the all-star roster or earn more playtime. When she was unable to successfully schedule work around derby, one veteran all-star explained to me that her derby retirement happened unintentionally:

Officially I took a month off because my work schedule meant I wouldn't meet the attendance requirement for the next game. But not going to practice felt good. So I never went back. Post-divorce, I was struggling to redefine myself. I needed a superhuman level of loyalty from the sport and from my friends on the team and that was impossible for them to meet. The attendance policy seemed like a personal attack.

Teammates often questioned a player’s dedication based on her commitment to train with the team. As discussed in Chapter 3, one all-star coach attempted to implement an attendance policy making certain practices, such as scrimmage, mandatory. This would have eliminated the option of choosing which ten out of thirty practices to attend. For this woman, it would have meant getting cut from the roster. Prioritizing leisure was not always compatible with the demands of the other spheres.

Quitting Paid Work

The least common strategy used to accommodate derby was quitting paid work. This strategy required a certain amount of class privilege. The one skater who used this strategy fell behind on her derby duties because of work. Derby also spilled over into her evening time. She said:

Oh, I quit my job…my paying job, to do bout production. I wasn’t at the computer during the day, so I found myself working eight hours there and then another five hours at night on the computer, catching up on emails and
doing all of the board work. Finally, I was like, “I can’t do it all!” So, I quit and pretty much worked full time on bout production. It was weird, because it was like having a full-time job, but I wasn’t getting any money for it.

The practice of scaling back at work or quitting altogether is referred to as downshifting (Stebbins 1998). This veteran board member was able to quit her paying job because she had a husband who supported her participation in leisure and because they could afford it.

Balancing Derby with Intimate Relationships and Family

For women, the pursuit of serious leisure is often stifled by marriage. Mattingly and Bianchi (2003:1017) argue that marriage “dramatically curtails” the leisure time available to women, but not men. Involvement in leisure can be a “point of contention” for women because of how it disrupts family dynamics (Stalp and Conti 2011:408). A skater involved since the first season said, “I’ve seen relationships break up over derby. I’ve seen some husbands who are resentful about it, some husbands who get involved, some who don’t want anything to do with it, and some who support it, but don’t get involved.” Skaters adopted several strategies to avoid and reduce relationship tensions caused by their participation in derby. These strategies included doing derby together, keeping derby separate, dating derby, framing skating as good parenting, and cutting back involvement.

**Doing Derby Together**

The first strategy skaters and volunteers adopted to balance family and derby was doing derby together. Joint involvement entailed incorporating derby into the household, making it possible for couples to spend time together while dedicating hours a week to the league. Skaters’ partners were involved to varying degrees. Three “derby husbands” were
core volunteers, serving as a coach, a board member, and a utility worker for bout production. Anderson (2011:143) explains how skydivers experience the “risk of AIDS, the skydiving acronym for altitude induced divorce syndrome.” In attempts to avoid relationship conflicts, several skydivers, including Anderson himself, discussed how they tried to get family members interested in skydiving so that it could be a shared hobby. This strategy worked for skaters who had supportive partners, although some skaters had “hands-off supportive” partners.

Joint involvement was reported by several male partners and by league mates as a way to avoid becoming a “derby widow.” The term “derby widow” evolved from gaming culture. A skater explained, “There’s this video game called World of Warcraft. There’s this common thing where dudes play so much that their wives never see them. They’re called Warcraft Widows.” In derby, however, the term was applied to men who lost their female partners to all-encompassing leisure. Because skaters were always “working on roller derby,” a woman explained, “their husbands never see them.” She said, “They’re called Derby Widowers because it’s like the woman’s married to the sport now.” “That widower thing,” a male volunteer (whose wife skated) told me, “came from the Texas guys who lost their wives to derby.”

Because derby was all-consuming, partners often chose to get involved in the league. To avoid widowhood, one husband-volunteer claimed:

It’s very time consuming and can get to be a drain. It is volunteering. It is fun. It’s competitive, but you end up spending a lot of time – a lot more time than ordinary people do – like people who don’t find themselves trapped in an all-consuming hobby that takes over their life. Your other aspects of life just shrivel up and wilt. It’s very odd. It’s hard to balance, but we try to do things together.
This husband was heavily involved in the league. Derby was more than “just a hobby” for his wife; it was a major part of this couple’s relationship. To fit derby into their lives, his wife, a skater and board member, said, “With everything else, we just try and let each other know ahead of time when we need to be in places.” She continued: “He got involved because he didn’t see me a lot when I started. That’s why he got involved, but now, I go to practices, but not all the same ones he coaches for. If it’s too much, then we take some breaks and not go.”

This couple adopted the strategy of joint involvement, albeit in different aspects of the league. When derby became “too much,” they both cut back their involvement.

Several skaters cited partner support and involvement as making their own involvement possible. For instance, while interviewing a husband and a wife together, the topic of balance came up. He said, “I think the only way that it’s balanced is the fact that [my wife] and I are doing it together.” She remarked, “And that we love it together! Because if we didn’t, we’d be in some trouble!” He echoed, “Yeah, if it weren’t for that mutual love and commitment, we wouldn’t be able to balance it.” This conversation resonated true for other couples that I interviewed as well. Another veteran all-star declared, “I would have quit a long time ago if I wasn’t married to [my husband]. I would have definitely quit derby!” When I asked why, she replied, “Number one is because he is part of it.” Another veteran all-star said, “[My husband] is so supportive of me, and of what I want to do, that I wouldn’t have been able to keep going [if he was not].” This skater recognized that her husband’s support enabled her continued participation in derby. She said, “Some people don’t have that. Like I said, some people get divorced because of it—because of the strain of derby.”

Engaging in this type of pragmatic comparison enabled this skater to advance her derby career and also interpret her husband’s involvement as a “gift” (Hochschild 1989).
Keeping Derby Separate

Some skaters kept derby separate from their relationships. Compartmentalizing derby enabled skaters to shield their relationship from derby spillover. This strategy was used by skaters with hands-on and hands-off supportive partners. A number of skaters said that their partners were not involved, but “supported them from a distance.” One veteran said her partner was “hands-off supportive.” She described both of them as being “busy” and “supportive of one another’s hobbies.” “He supports me indirectly,” she said, “because he doesn’t make me feel guilty, like I hear [about] some of the other skaters’ husbands and boyfriends.” For some skaters, not getting a guilt trip was seen as a gift (Hochschild 1989). During interviews many skaters expressed gratitude for this “hands-off” type support.

A veteran of six years with a loosely involved partner (he photographed bouts) explained her strategy of keeping derby from spilling into their home life:

- His attitude has always been directly proportional to my attitude. If I come home and I’m grumpy and bitching about practice and I’m bitching about meetings, then he’s not very happy about derby. We try to have date night once a week. We have really made an effort this past year to have non-derby things to do. As much as we like derby people, and we socialize with a lot of derby people, we’ve also tried to do a supper club, which is some derby people and some non-derby people, but it is a complete non-derby focus.

Despite the loose involvement of her partner, this skater adopted a proactive emotion-work strategy to control how her partner viewed her participation. As a couple, they spent time with derby and non-derby friends, but kept dinner conversation from being entirely derby focused. A veteran skater whose long-term partner was “hand-off supportive” kept derby separate (I met her partner only once during my three years in the field). She said keeping derby separate helped:

- You know, my whole life isn’t, like, I have this whole separate relationship and this whole separate life from derby. And, it, it truly, is a refuge. I come
here [home], and you see, all this derby stuff’s in a box. I have a person I can come and talk to, and, he has his own hobbies. I think that’s another reason I probably don’t get burned out as quickly.

When I interviewed several of the couples who did derby together, their households were decorated with derby memorabilia. Derby was a part of their relationships. However, this skater found it worked better to make her home life a sanctuary from derby.

Some skaters expressed gratitude for a partner who “got it” and provided support as needed. For another couple, pursuing hobbies separately eased the tension that derby caused in others’ intimate relationships. During an interview, the skater explained, “I think he loves that I love something so much. I think he is amazed by my commitment to it. Um, but you know, he is in a band. He gets it! He understands the passion for it.” Because her partner “gets it,” she does not have to account for her participation in an all-consuming amateur sport. This couple’s shared understanding of their separate leisure time reduced her need to justify her involvement. For a lesbian skater with a partner who occasionally attended games and league functions, the strategy of keeping derby separate failed when she found herself out on injury. She said:

Not having derby is hurting my relationship. I think it’s really important that as a couple you maintain your autonomy. Now the nights and times that where I would have derby I’m there [home], so she’s not getting her alone time and her space. When I started derby, I guarantee you no one else has ever said this, she said, “It made our relationship better.” She’s really happy to see me excited about something.

For this couple, the lack of separate leisure time was damaging to their relationship. While out on injury, this woman intruded on her partner’s leisure time, causing tension in their relationship.
Dating Derby

The third strategy that skaters adopted to balance their participation in derby with intimate relationships was to choose dating partners from within the derby community. Serious leisure participants often try to avoid relationship conflict by avoiding dating or marrying non-participants (Anderson 2011). As one all-star with six years of involvement said, “Since joining roller derby, I’ve only really been involved with someone who has already been in the community and knows what to expect out of roller derby…Someone who has already played an active role in leagues.” Similarly, another skater said, “It would mean the world to me to find a man who was genuinely, like, digging it and not just there because I was.” Two skaters who were dating confessed that derby spilled into their home lives. Doing derby together made balancing involvement easier. One member of the couple said, “Well, it’s easy because, you know, they’re always there. You don’t have to worry about not spending time with them and that kind of stuff. We have the same group of friends.”

Occasionally, however, dating derby required additional negotiation over whether both parties would continue their involvement after the relationship ended, and, if so, how. Several breakups and divorces occurred while I was in the field, and usually both people continued their involvement. One skater explained that, after going through a separation, negotiating dual involvement was hard. She said, “My ex-husband, who had never really enjoyed being involved with the team, suddenly found renewed interest in training and coaching the girls, and that was difficult for me.” The strategy of dating derby and doing derby could backfire if/when an intimate relationship crumbled.
Skating as Good Parenting

Mothers reframed their participation in the league as a form of good parenting. During an interview, a veteran skater stressed, “There’s not much time between work, kids, homework, and all this [derby] stuff?” Similarly, an all-star said, “Between work, derby, and [my kid], I really have to be careful. [My kid] comes first always, it doesn’t matter.” In order to balance her responsibilities, she told me, “You have to fine-tune everything down to all of the minutes in your day.” In the early years, the league provided “derby daycare” staffed with “roller nannies” who volunteered their time so that the mothers (and partners) could focus on the bout. One skater’s teenage daughter often babysat children at the practice facility so that the mothers could train. Framing skating as good parenting helped mothers to justify their involvement and mitigate the guilt they felt for prioritizing leisure above parental duties.

Skating, as some women saw it, made them better mothers. But, leaving kids behind to attend practice was a difficult experience shared by other mothers, not all of whom had supportive partners. During interviews, all of the mothers brought up “feeling guilty” at some point in their derby career. Some mothers tried to suppress their guilt. One mother said:

Sometimes [my daughter] will say, “Please don’t go to practice! Can’t you hang out with me?” It’s a guilt thing. I talked to [my husband] about it not too long ago. I feel these pullings. He said, “No, this is something that comes once in a life time. And the kids, it’s great for them to see you doing something other than just hanging out, scrapbooking, playing online, or whatever.” He said it was something that they’d always remember, even if they don’t pay attention now.

This skater’s husband valued his wife’s participation in roller derby and tried to help her suppress her guilt. Many skaters, including this woman, justified their participation in derby by claiming that derby made them better mothers and better role models for their daughters.
Years after the above interview took place, both the skater’s son and daughter started skating with the local junior derby league.

Prioritizing time with children was shared by all the mothers I interviewed. One skater said, “I worry a lot about making sure that [my daughter] is getting enough of my time and that I’m not putting her off on someone else so that I can go do derby,” then added, “I also know that if I didn’t do something for myself, I would lose my mind, and be a bad parent.” She elaborated:

I think she’s getting something good from it just like I am. Hopefully, it’s going to make her athletic and make her want to do sports. That’s my hope, that I’m setting a good example for her. She’s seeing that I really care about this. It’s not my job and I’m not getting paid for it, but it’s something that I really, really love and it requires a lot of my time and energy, but it makes me strong.

This sentiment was shared. One woman said she valued “Dedicating those two hours a day just for myself,” and insisted, “Derby makes us stronger. Not just physically, but mentally too. We become stronger in many ways because of derby.” According to some skaters, derby made them better mothers because it gave them an outlet to remove stress so that they did not take it out on their families. Framing derby as making skaters better mothers helped to mitigate the guilt that mothers felt for prioritizing leisure time.

The self-preservation strategies that skaters adopted to enable them to manage their participation in serious leisure resulted in additional labor for their already overburdened leaguemates. Some all-stars intentionally avoided getting involved with running the league. They did the bare minimum necessary to participate. One skater admitted, “Maybe selfishly I haven’t taken on as much as some people, you know, in the business side of things,” while another said, “I’m not as involved in the business aspects of derby as a lot of people are, and I think that’s what keeps me fresh a lot better.” Another all-star stated frankly, “In the past I
just got so frustrated dealing with people because there could be so much drama. I just elected not to be a part of that drama and it was a time commitment that I wasn’t willing to give. I was focusing on other areas of my life and I didn’t want to make the space in my life to do it.” These skaters saw their main contribution to the league as the skill they brought to the all-star team. Focusing on their own training and avoiding the day to day of the league enabled them to stay fresh while their leaguemates did most of the league labor. Skaters’ differential abilities and levels of willingness to fit practice and league work into their lives created problems for the organization. To maintain harmony and keep things from falling apart, the Star Killer Rollergirls had to find a way to address the problem of inequity in league labor.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR RESTORING EQUITY

Despite embrace of the WFTDA slogan “by the skaters, for the skaters” and the “do-it-ourselves” ethos in the derby community (Beaver 2012), there was an unequal division of labor between skaters and volunteers and a discrepant return of rewards (time on the track actually playing the game) and gratitude. This disparity between skaters and volunteers increased as the league grew in size and as the focus shifted toward all-star competition (as shown in chapter 3). As the disparities in labor and rewards grew, so did resentments and tensions. Disenchanted league members thus began to say that the league was run “by some skaters, for other skaters.”

Some skaters were indeed over-benefiting at the expense of their leaguemates. A heavily involved veteran stated, “When stuff is getting done, it’s always the same people, you know? And then you have the people who show up to reap the benefits of the hard work
that the same people put in, and I think that’s not fair.” In principle, most league members liked that the league was run “by the skaters, for the skaters” and agreed that everyone should be helping the league operate. For example, a veteran stated, “Everybody should be doing something. The league doesn’t run itself. Like I said, we aren’t owned by a company. If you want the glory of being out there being in [the venue] skating, then you better put in some effort to make it all happen.” This skater, and the majority of her leaguemates, embraced a baseline expectation that everyone should help make the league run—or forfeit the chance to skate. As some league members continued to find themselves under-benefiting so that others could skate, league morale deteriorated (Sprecher 1992).

One veteran skater charged with community event planning said, “I don’t feel appreciated when I think about how much time…What is the reward? You know, is my time on the rink having fun enough to balance exactly how much time I’m spending on the bullshit?” This skater questioned if the amount of unpaid work she did for the league was worth the [too little] time she spent playing the game. She was particularly frustrated with seeing the same people sacrifice their time on weekends and evenings to participate in parades and fundraising events. Similarly, a board member stated, “If we could get everyone that’s involved in the league to actually do stuff, like more than their piddly bout-day job, then we’d have a much stronger league.” The inequity was especially irritating when people received the same rewards regardless of the effort they put in.

The league responded to the inequity in several ways. First, they sold derby devotion to women who were interested in joining the league. Second, they threw two to three volunteer appreciation parties a year, usually at a sponsorship location or a skater’s house with a pool. Finally, they implemented mandatory volunteer hours to qualify for game
rosters. Ultimately, these strategies were temporary fixes that did not solve the inequity problem.

Selling Derby Devotion

The Star Killer Rollergirls adopted the organizational strategy of selling derby devotion to women who wanted to become skaters. This strategy relied on using emotions as “a resource to secure commitment” (Wolkomir 2001). League members sold derby devotion to both recruit and retain enough skaters and volunteers to keep the “skater owned and operated” league functional. New skaters were told to expect to dedicate hours each week to practice, email correspondence, and committee work. The purpose of this strategy was to preempt resentment new skaters might feel about the amount of work they had to do before earning the gratification of skating on a team.

Participation in serious leisure requires dedication (Stebbins 1998). Veteran members of subcultural sporting communities often police infrequent and/or sporadic involvement, especially of new participants (Donnelly and Young 1988, Anderson 2011). In an article posted on a derby blog, the author warns prospective skaters of eight reasons not to get involved with derby (Dash 2011). She concludes, “Roller derby will completely take over your life, and what's more, you'll let it. It's that awesome. But if you don't have the time to commit, then you'll be letting down your teammates and leaguemates who depend on you to be at practice and help your league run.” SKRG adopted the organizational strategy of selling derby devotion in order to reduce the risk of losing rookie skaters. As noted in chapters 2 and 3, people generally held misconceptions of roller derby, and all-stars were frequently wary of women who wanted to get involved just to claim the identity “rollergirl.”
Prior to tryouts, training committee members met with women who wanted to skate for the league. Women in attendance were told what kind of equipment they would need, where and when practices were held, and how much time would be required of them. At one meeting, the training director said, “The more time you put in, the better you’ll be. Put in as much time to get out what you want to get out. If you want to make the league, you got to put in a lot of time.” Concurrently, interest meetings started being held at sponsorship locations, where bout footage was shown to potential skaters. At one of these meetings, the training director explained, “Practice a lot. But it’s worth it. When you see what you put in and then what you get out of it, you realize that it’s well worth it. I won’t lie, the first few months are the hardest because you don’t get to reap all of the benefits yet.” After passing tryouts women were required to attend a minimum of ten out of every thirty practices and, in addition, do volunteer work for the league. For most new skaters it took an average of nine months before they mastered the skills necessary to receive contact and “play” derby at practice. The chance to play was what all of the work was for.

The training director sent women who passed tryouts a long email outlining what accepting membership into the league entailed. The following is an excerpt from one such email:

Being a part of this league is an incredible experience and a lot of fun, but it will take a lot of hard work and dedication, and we want this to be clear from the start. Please consider all points carefully before accepting, skaters are expected to contribute 6-10 hours (or more) of work for the League each month in addition to volunteering on bout day. Skaters that do not volunteer on bout day without an approved excuse from the Board of Directors may not be allowed to participate in the next bout. Becoming part of this league is challenging, and can at times seem life-consuming but I can't imagine anything else being more rewarding.
The email was intended to clarify organizational expectations for membership. This strategy was to deter anyone from joining who was not going to take it seriously, and was adopted to address the problem of new skaters quitting after becoming overwhelmed with derby’s time demands.

The expectation for serious commitment in roller derby is shared with other extreme sports (Wheaton 2003, Anderson 2011). A board member explained, “I think the people who end up leaving...they walk in and see whatever their expectations were and whatever they thought it was going to be and they realized, ‘Oh, this is actually a lot of work. Ain’t what I signed up for, I just wanted the fun part.’ It’s really time consuming and demanding.” To prevent discrepant expectations, league members tried to pre-filter incoming skaters and to indoctrinate/socialize newcomers to avoid investing training time in women who would not stay with SKRG long term. Selling derby devotion to new skaters was a strategy for “mobilizing fun” (Fine 1989), which helped offset the delay of gratification while recruits mastered basic skills. During this time, SKRG crafted a sense of fun and sociability with league involvement.

Implementing Mandatory “Volunteering”

The policy board members implemented to restore equity was “work to skate.” After hours of debate and hundreds of email exchanges occurring over a year, the board created this policy to assuage the feelings of inequity and under-appreciation. Following from the WFTDA philosophy of “by the skaters, for the skaters,” the board decided that all skaters would need to have a regular job to help the league, but more specifically, every skater was supposed to have a bout-day job. These jobs could include working in the ticket booth, doing
morning set up, being “ask me girls” during the games, and doing post-game clean up. The point was for the skaters to help out the non-skating volunteers, rather than just showing up to skate without pitching in.

Gripes about the growing disparity between skaters’ efforts to help run the league grew louder as my time in the field went on. At a board meeting in the spring of 2008, the chairperson noted the inequity in volunteering. When discussing bout production, he said, “For bout-day jobs, go figure. It’s the same twenty people that do everything. Are we at the point where we need to get people to volunteer to be allowed to skate?” Another board member replied, “I can only think of two [who are an issue]. A whole lot do a whole bunch, then a few do a little, and those two just don’t do anything.” The board members agreed that there was inequity in volunteering and wanted to establish a policy requiring that everyone volunteer. Some board members proposed that those who did not “do their fair share” be penalized by losing their skating privileges, while other board members feared that implementing such a policy would push (good all-star) skaters away if they started punishing them. Even those who supported the policy in principle worried that enforcing the policy would require more work for already overburdened board members. Tracking and enforcing this policy would be one more task falling on an already overburdened board member. Due to these concerns, the “work to skate” policy was tabled.

Later in the year, board members revisited the discussion of league inequity. During a board meeting, one board member stated:

Participation in general is struggling. There are people that don’t do anything and I’m getting to the point that if you don’t do have a bout-day job, then you won’t be skating. Everyone needs to do something, because I’m sick of doing it all myself. I’m tired. I’m at the point where I’m getting ready to just assign people jobs.
Despite the consensus that league labor should be shared more evenly, board members were reluctant to assign jobs to skaters because they worried it might cause them to quit the league. One board member frequently noted that other leagues assigned jobs to their skaters to avoid these issues. But SKRG continued to give skaters a choice, believing it was less likely to cause trouble.

The following spring, several long-term marketing committee members resigned from their duties. Their highly specialized, graphic design skills were not easily replaceable. At the next board meeting, the marketing director said, “We’re all suffering right now [starts crying]. We might need to hire people to do the jobs that we can’t fill. Not everyone does graphic design. I can’t go to practice, do my real job, and then do 40 hours of this every week.” Echoing her concerns, the league chairperson said, “Certain people in the league do 20 hours of this a week, and then their training suffers as a result. This is a serious point. We’re styling ourselves more as a professional organization with an all-volunteer staff.” At this meeting, the board members voted to adopt the “work to skate” policy after a year and a half of debate.

At the next league meeting, skaters voted in favor of the policy, despite concerns raised on behalf of skaters with children. Like most policies in the league, the “work to skate” policy was brought up, put in place, and not really enforced. One board member explained to me in an interview, “The board at that time had passed a thing saying that if you didn’t put up so many flyers or you didn’t do x, y, and z before the game, then you couldn’t play.” A skater violated the policy and the board member explained that she was not sanctioned:
The home teams at the time basically responded back and asked if they could do the assignment for [her]. There was this sort of chagrined like, “Well, you’re defeating the whole purpose of us passing this ‘everyone has to work’ rule.” And the response was “but if our team has to play without her then we aren’t going to have one of our best jammers and we might not win.” There really is that kind of punishing the team aspect. And instead of it getting that far, the team basically said, “Instead of having this one player get punished or whatever, we’re just going to do it.”

Because of the desire to win a home game, one that did not even impact the league rankings, the policy and an equal division of labor were undermined. Despite the egalitarian ideals of the league, the athletic abilities of the policy violator shaped the response to her offense. Teammates of this player wanted to make a special allowance for this skater because she was one of the best in the league. As shown in chapter 3, the competitive ideology being adopted by the league was causing tension.

In another instance, three skaters were charged with violating the “work to skate” policy for not completing a two-hour volunteer shift during a scrimmage event that took place from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. In the past, skaters accused the board of using too much discretion in enforcing policies, being “too soft,” and of letting things slide too often. Overwhelmingly, the board wanted to hold these violators accountable for not fulfilling their volunteering requirement. One board member said, “I think we have to be hard asses on those 3 players....sucks, but I don't know what else to do. I’m open to hearing others’ suggestions, but it is especially not fair to all of us who work (injured, playing, whatever) when a couple of people get away with it.” If injured skaters (who were unable to skate in the game) could manage to volunteer, then it was especially unfair for active and able skaters to be rewarded with the opportunity to skate, despite not doing bout-day jobs.

Two of the three skaters had a reputation for not helping out, one of whom appealed the board’s decision to exclude her from the upcoming home game. The other replied that it
was not worth the energy to appeal. Her team captain replied and stressed the importance of signing up: “Ultimately it’s not even about writing your name on a list, but it’s about respect for this league and the way it operates. And I do not feel like you respect any of us or what we do to keep this league going.” Some skaters and volunteers picked up their slack. These policy violations generated more than one hundred emails for the already overburdened board members. The bout director echoed, “I’d like people to take the policy seriously. We’ve officially spent more time talking about these people than they put forth with their time helping in any way.” Again, the board received backlash from skaters who would miss the opportunity to skate with the well-respected veteran all-star who appealed the board’s decision to bench her. As a result, the board relented and allowed her to skate if she did additional “volunteer” work to compensate for her violation. In this way, they reinforced an inequity that benefited players who were dominant on the track.

Throwing Volunteer Appreciation Parties

To keep incoming skaters and seasoned volunteers invested in helping out the league, SKRG threw volunteer appreciation parties. These parties were typically hosted at a sponsorship location during the colder months and a pool-equipped skater’s house during the summer. The point of the appreciation parties was to acknowledge the amount of work that volunteers (non-skaters) did for the league. Often the event was a potluck, where skaters cooked dishes for the volunteers, who were not required to bring anything. When these parties were at bars, skaters often bought volunteers drinks. Despite some skaters’ genuine attempts to express their gratitude, these events did not compensate for volunteers’ secondary
status in the league. Some volunteers felt as though some members of the league acknowledged their presence only on these rare party occasions.

Several skaters and volunteers acknowledged status differences among league members. One veteran skater said, “I think volunteers get taken advantage of. I’m not surprised when they get frustrated and leave. I mean, we’re all volunteers, but our skaters are volunteering to do things like be on the board or to create flyers, but they get paid with the glory. But, I gotta say, for me…after a couple of years, it’s not paying the imaginary bills.” Similarly, a “derby husband” who coached, attended practices, and traveled with the all-stars throughout my time in the field, echoed this sentiment:

If you are a volunteer for long enough you can see that the people have all been bitten by a derby girl once or twice, but they are still here. Eventually, people get bitten enough and walk way. It’s interesting to watch. They are very interested, very involved, very motivated, and then all of a sudden the burnout starts to happen…There are skaters and then there are volunteers. They are definitely a tier-and-a-half below.

Despite attempts to sell derby devotion and to shower volunteers with appreciation and gratitude, volunteers’ devotion dwindled.

Despite the adoption of these organizational strategies, inequity persisted in the league. Top skaters continued to over-benefit (Sprecher 1992), not only getting more time on the track, but also by evading league responsibilities. The strategy of selling derby devotion worked effectively on skaters who progressed through the assessment levels quickly and were able to scrimmage. But for a growing number of veteran skaters who found themselves doing more work for the league for a decreasing amount of time on the track, this strategy was not effective. The attempt to mandate volunteering was undermined by the competitive goals of league members. Status differentials and inequity continued.
As the work load increased and the enthusiasm wore off, skaters (especially those not receiving much playtime) got burned out. Some skaters eventually reached a breaking point where participation in roller derby was no longer healthy. A retired skater told me she had to “get away from it altogether” because “it was driving me insane to spend so much time skating and working.” She said, “I was putting off my paying job as a contractor to do derby work for free, since there wasn’t anybody else to do it. It was all work and frustration. These people were not our friends anymore; they were our co-workers. We didn’t have time to be friends anymore.” Derby was no longer fun for this skater. It had become all (unpaid) “work and no play.” The social aspects that were so appealing in the early seasons had been lost. The spillover from derby was becoming increasingly negative, instead of positive, as it once was.

SERIOUS LEISURE SPILLOVER

Participation in roller derby results in both positive and negative spillover for skaters (Stevens et al. 2007). Some women reported that participation enhanced their confidence levels at work and made them better mothers, but others reported that derby detracted from their performance as workers and mothers. In interviews, skaters reported both positive and negative forms of leisure-to-work spillover. Derby, especially for board members, spilled into work. One board member admitted that the strategy of doing derby at work may have gotten her passed up for a promotion:

I do have to say I haven’t been able to focus as much as work. My derby email was staying up all the time. I really need to refocus on work, but I just always have it in my head that work’s not what makes me happy. It pays my bills. I have to do it. But, it’s not what makes me happy. Derby really brings me a joy that nothing else does. So, that was always my argument for focusing so much
on derby. But work’s important, and, I recently got passed up for a promotion that I was sure was mine. Um, it was never a question in my mind, so when that happened, it was kind of a blow. I think it almost hurt more than maybe tearing my ACL and I wasn’t expecting that feeling, but I think ‘cause it’s something I always took for granted, you know? I’ve always, kind of excelled at work.

This woman was passionate about derby. Her desire to excel at skating and to help run the league drew energy away from her professional life. In this instance, her participation in derby limited her ability to climb the career ladder.

However, derby was also reported to be a source of positive spillover. An all-star from another league found participation in derby empowering, which she credited with benefiting her career:

It makes me confident and some of it transitions over to my professional life. I look at how I can lead a team and how I can be a trainer and a coach for the team. I look at the confidence in what I am saying and how passionate about it and um…seeing how that differs in my professional life where I’m not as confident in that role, but I could become more confident in that role.

This skater found that derby enhanced her work skills. She was a well-respected all-star and a skater for Team USA who often led skills workshops worldwide. Exceling in sports boosted her confidence in the professional sphere.

An SKRG veteran all-star who worked in a male-dominated profession also experienced a similar status enhancement and increased sense of confidence from her participation in top-level competition. She said:

I’ve always been a confident person, but this sort of added the cherry on top! I don’t have to get physically pushy or anything at work [laughs], but as far as confidence, you know, being a young professional in a complicated field there are times when I feel inadequate for sure. And because I have become so accomplished at derby, there’s no challenger that I’m afraid of or feel out competed by out on the track…I’m not saying there aren’t, I’m just saying I don’t get that feeling, whether it’s true or not. So yeah, I take that confidence
into this realm where I feel less confident...that I am good enough, that I can make it to the top, and that I can compete.

This transference of confidence from derby to the professional sphere was experienced by other skaters as well. Another veteran said, “What I’ve learned through derby, like, the patience, the tolerance, and the emotional control...derby has taught me so much about how to work with people in business and how to not, you know, go off on somebody.” This woman adapted the “shut up and skate” philosophy, which she then generalized to doing emotional labor in her customer service job (Hochschild 1983).

The sense of community derived from participating in the league was important to mothers and it was a major source of positive derby-to-family spillover. As noted in chapter 1, mothers found it satisfying to “be more than just a mom.” In addition to identity rewards, mothers typically praised the social benefits of derby. One mother said, “That’s one thing about derby that is really awesome...all the kids are growing up in the derby family. [My husband’s] mom was a quilter, and she had a quilting group, so he is still friends with all the kids who were part of her group.” Being “derby kids” created a built-in network of friends, which was a major benefit of derby for this mother with part-time custody. She explained, “It’s good, because when [my daughter] comes down she still has those friends, because I don’t have any other friends outside derby, so that’s how I balance it out.” Social affiliation, therefore, was also a benefit for the partners and children of some skaters.

Negative derby-to-work spillover was also reported. When derby caused too much relationship or family conflict, skaters often cut back their involvement with the league in some way. This strategy was adopted when the home sphere spilled into the leisure sphere, or vice versa. Skaters cut back in several ways: reducing their attendance at practice, avoiding leadership positions, and skipping out on meetings and community events. This strategy was
used to mollify a partner or to reduce the guilt associated with prioritizing derby over one’s children. After returning to the paid labor market, a veteran all-star who served on the board found it difficult to maintain her level of involvement. She struggled to do her derby committee work because she couldn’t do it at work. She said:

It didn’t work, and that’s part of the reason that I ended up quitting. I wasn’t working at the time. When I was skating and on the board, I wasn’t working. I was doing it [derby] full time. It was an issue, ‘cause, you know, I’m at home and I really needed to get a job, but I was working derby full time. At the time, it worked out kind of well for me. I should have been working, but I kind of got away with it for a while because my husband was working. I started working and I couldn’t be on the computer all day. Well, I couldn’t be on derby all day. I wouldn’t be able to balance it now, and especially not if I was trying to do the board work. I know there’s girls that do so much that are single moms. I don’t know how they do it. I really don’t. It was a lot to handle.

She ended up retiring from derby because she was unable to balance everything, despite not having any children. Similarly, when mothers couldn’t balance derby with motherhood, they often reduced their involvement in the business aspects of derby, or they cut back on attending practice.

While away at tournaments, skaters often shared their struggles balancing top-level competition and the detrimental effects it was having on their relationships. During an interview, one veteran all-star commented, “You see so many break ups in derby, but there are relationships that are strong.” In her observations, “The relationships that work are where they [partners] want you to succeed in your thing.” Regarding failed relationships, she said, “Derby doesn’t help, but most people don’t break up because of derby.” Instead, “Derby just made it possible for that person to break away.” When I asked what she meant, she explained, “I think a lot of women come in and find self-esteem.” Some skaters cut back involvement to appease partners and others decided to end relationships so that they could
continue to pursue their derby careers. One all-star initially cut back her involvement, but then eventually split from her partner.

It was the timing in my life. I just went through a lot of personal changes. I feel like so much more badass than I’ve ever felt before, like in my confidence, in myself, in my figure, in my womanhood, in my sexuality, and in myself overall. I feel like more of a woman. It just didn’t work out anymore because I feel like I got a lot bigger, brighter, better, and stronger overall in my life, and roller derby’s been a huge component. He just didn’t grow with me in that regard.

Her participation in derby caused her to experience self-growth and, subsequently, growth out of a confining relationship.

Skaters who chose to cut back their derby participation prioritized their relationships over derby, but this was not without internal conflict. One B-Team veteran who wanted to become a better player explained how she struggled to balance derby with her marriage:

It’s hard to explain to somebody that, “Yes, you are more important to me than this sport, but at the same time I can’t throw this off on your whims. Like in any serious situation, you are absolutely going to be the top priority. Like if you’ve got a serious issue and derby’s got a serious issue, your serious issue takes precedence over derby.” I feel emotionally conflicted about that a lot. It’s one of those things where like, “Okay, I may never be the best player I can be in this sport because I have to balance that.”

A difficulty of participation in serious leisure is self-evaluation and coming to terms with one’s level of success (Anderson 2011). During interviews, multiple skaters explained that it was “draining,” “exhausting,” “frustrating,” and “irritating” having to explain why they invested so much time in derby. Having to account for their time required that the women additionally balance “the third shift” by doing the emotion work necessary to continue their involvement in derby, while managing the tensions they felt at home (Hochschild 1989).

Mothers adopted the strategy of cutting back when the demands of motherhood beckoned. Begrudgingly, some mothers cut back on attending practice when there was too
much to juggle. One mother said, “When I joined the league, they had been skating for months, so they were more advanced than I was. I wanted to catch up with the girls.” As a former competitive body builder, it was a priority for her to not only “catch up,” but also to excel at derby as she had done in other sports. Initially, she attended five practices a week. Her husband supported her at first, but eventually said it was “too much,” so she reduced it to three practices a week. Similarly, another skater said her partner “felt pretty abandoned” when she was attending fifteen to twenty practices a month. She eventually agreed to meet only the minimum requirement (ten practices out of every thirty) to qualify for the roster.

One skater explained how her boyfriend was originally supportive of her participation in derby, “but once it started taking time from him” and she started making friends, “he couldn’t decide if he wanted to be supportive of it. Like, he knew he was supposed to, but he got really jealous and really insecure about it.” She prided herself on attending five practices a week throughout her first two years of involvement, but after going through a separation stopped going to speed practice. “Cutting back on practice,” she said, “was what I really needed to do. Being at home with [my daughter] then was really the best thing I could have done. It was worth it to me.” She expected her derby career to suffer from her reduction in practice. She said, “I kind of went into that year with the attitude I wasn’t going to be on the all-stars anymore because I couldn’t give the kind of time that it takes.” She retained her position on the all-star roster, but not all skaters were able to manage that feat.

As one all-star’s children aged and got involved in afterschool activities, it became increasingly hard to fit derby into her schedule, and her captains no longer saw her as committed to the team. For one skater, everything became “insane” when she picked up another business. She said, “I had derby, my son was still in Boy Scouts and karate.
Something was going to fall at the wayside. It wasn’t going to be my son and it couldn’t have been my businesses, because I had to make money.” Juggling two businesses, motherhood, and all-star level play was too much. She said, “My commitment totally left derby because I was just spread too thin.” Although she “did enough to play and to be semi-good,” she said, “I could see the girls that I started with kinda leaving me behind.” Unlike the skater above, doing “enough to play” was not enough for this skater to keep her position on the roster. She continued to play on the B-Team, then, after becoming a grandmother, she reduced involvement further and eventually retired. Similar to patterns in paid work, women with a commitment to family were often evaluated by their peers to be less than ideal teammates (Budig and England 2001). This motherhood penalty was especially true at the all-star level.

Skaters also cut back their participation in the league when they were pregnant. Pregnancy was a complicated issue for skaters to negotiate with their leaguemates, and one that created new struggles for jointly involved couples. A pregnant skater explained her choice to be off skates: “There are a bunch of other people off skates right now that I think are having it harder than me, because they are injured and frustrated. I’m not mad that I’m off. I was kind of happy, honestly, because I was thinking that I could just take this big long break.” Pregnancy provided an honored account for being off skates. The soon to-be-mother planned to get back on skates after the birth of her child. Her husband coached for the league, and he too planned to reduce his involvement. She said, “He’ll have to watch the baby while I skate. He’ll have to stay home and not coach, because it’s not like we can put the baby out there on the floor! There’s going to have to be some give and take there.” The support of her husband and his involvement in the league not only made her participation possible, it also eased her transition to motherhood and, eventually, back to the rink.
Not all expectant mothers wanted to be off skates. After returning from a tournament, one mother who was not intentionally trying to get pregnant realized she was. She told her teammates and asked to scrimmage one last day. “When I left [practice],” she said, “I was really mad because nobody would hit me.” Pregnancy put this skater’s derby career on hold, right when the skater “felt like [she] was at the high point of [her] derby career.” The newly elected captain “felt out of the loop for nine months, like I had no control over the team.” She was ready to get back on skates because “These new girls came in while I was out and they were kicking ass.” She returned to derby nine days after giving birth. She said, “I just wanted to dive back into it, no matter whether my freakin’ equilibrium and shit was ready for it or not. Just the length of time it took my muscles to get up to par…I was angry.” Being off skates threatened this skater’s athletic identity. She suffered a major blow to her ego when she did not make the next all-star roster and a rookie skater did.

Maintaining continued involvement at the all-star level was difficult, especially as training ramped up for tournaments. Despite the support of their partners, some mothers still confessed to weighing the benefits of their participation against their guilt. One skater, who was able to balance top-level competition with raising two children, began to struggle following the birth of her third child. After retiring, she explained to me: “It didn’t seem that bad traveling [with the all-stars] until after I had [my third child].” At this point in her skating career, the league had a good season and had progressed on to the WFTDA Championship

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44 Skaters who suffered derby injuries also dreaded time off skates. Some skaters shared information about their injuries on social media, often keeping track of the number of days they had been off skates. For instance, one woman said, “82 days ago I had ACL surgery. It’s been 96 days since I have skated.” Skaters’ posts often included detailed medical information and countdowns until they would be cleared to skate. When skaters reported post-surgery progress, they received many supportive comments from people all over the “derby-verse.”
Tournament. With the increased pressure to train and travel, she said, “I felt like it was really hard. Because, like, from the time that he was an infant I felt like I was leaving him all the time. A lot of times I still look back and I feel like I missed the whole first year of his life because derby took over.” Another skater experienced a similar inability to balance motherhood and top competition. She said, “It didn’t use to bother me so much because I didn’t think that they [her kids] noticed that I was gone, ‘cause it was a couple of hours here, a couple of hours there, or a weekend here or a weekend there.” As her children aged, this mother also decided to unlace her skates. Family responsibilities spilled over into derby, leaving mothers, especially single skaters or ones with unsupportive partners, at a disadvantage.

CONCLUSION

The members of SKRG tried to make roller derby fit into their lives as best they could. Skaters and volunteers adopted an array of strategies to balance their participation in derby with their other responsibilities. Some of their strategies, however, resulted in an unequal division of league labor. While the WFTDA member league was run “by the skaters, for the skaters,” a disproportionate share of the league labor was consistently done by a small group of participants. As a result, board members implemented a work-to-skate policy making “volunteering” mandatory for skaters. However, the competitive organizational culture examined in chapter 3 undermined the policy. The unequal work load persisted despite the attempt to enforce equity. This inequity was sustained by a larger gender ideology that privileges masculinity while devaluing tasks and characteristics associated with femininity.
Competitive ideology—the idea that the SKRG All-Stars should play to win—shaped the league division of labor and enforcement of the work-to-skate policy. Competitive play within a democratically organized, volunteer run league both shaped the perceived inequity and restrained how league members, especially the board of directors, addressed it. From a distributive justice standpoint, league members did not have a shared baseline expectation. Although league members seemed to agree, at least in principle, that everyone should be doing something to help the league function, not everyone shared an understanding of how rewards should be distributed based on inputs. One principle says, “The more you put into the league, the more rewards you should get from it,” while the other principle says, “The more you contribute to the team's competitiveness, the more rewards you should get.” When the all-stars were highly ranked and winning games, skaters were more tolerant of the latter principle, but as the league dropped in the rankings so did members’ tolerance of inequity. Everyone felt emotionally rewarded when the all-stars won and were more forgiving of the inequity.

My analysis shows a disconnect between the organizational rhetoric of “by the skaters, for the skaters” and reality, which was more like “by some skaters, for other skaters.” Beaver (2012:38-39) argues, “By maintaining skater-owned and skater-operated leagues, rollergirls retain control over the production process, the bouts that they produce, and the rewards of their labor.” Although he acknowledges the barriers to skaters’ participation in derby, he gives little attention to the inequity between inputs and outputs for the skaters. What I found is that the skaters and volunteers who did the most work to put on bouts were not, in most cases, the people who got the most time on the track as a reward.
The division of league labor reflects the larger culture’s devaluing of feminine labor, or labor conventionally associated with women. The athletic skaters’ contributions on the track—a form of masculine labor—excused them from doing league labor much in the way that men’s breadwinning excuses them from household labor (Hochschild 1989). Within the league, the “volunteer” labor tended to consist of housekeeping tasks that would typically be done by women and it was generally undervalued and underappreciated. Tichenor’s (2005) observed links between money and power within marriage parallel the connection between athletic ability and power within SKRG. Winning is central to the institution of sport, and those who contribute to wins claim privileges. As in the domestic sphere, some top skaters used their athletic capital to buy their way out of doing the less glamorous chores.

Even in a mostly female, all-volunteer sporting organization, commitment to family makes women less than “ideal workers” or, in this case, teammates. The labor that board members and core league members did was “invisible” (Daniels 1987). The unequal division of unpaid labor resulted in alienating conditions for women seeking leisure. Non-skating volunteers willingly agreed to do unpaid labor so that women could play derby. But even the majority of skating volunteers found themselves doing unpaid labor so that others—a portion of the all-stars—could skate. The distribution of time on the track became a source of tension for league members who had conflicting ideas about the value of competition and about fitting rewards for doing necessary labor.

While self-preservation strategies were usually successful for the individual skater, they also had the consequence of creating additional unpaid labor for skaters and volunteers who became over-extended by “trying to do it all” over the years. When select all-stars “skated by” on their contributions to the business aspects of the league, they exploited their
leaguemates. Prioritizing competitiveness over equity resulted in an uneven exchange on investments for a growing number of skaters who were dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent doing unpaid labor for the league, especially when they received little appreciation and/or time on the track in return. By prioritizing competitiveness and winning, the Star Killer Rollergirls inevitably relegated fairness and equity to second place.

In the next chapter, I will summarize my substantive analysis chapters. I will discuss how my findings contribute to the sociological understanding of the role of identity in organizational change. I will review how my findings contribute to the literature, especially to the negotiated order perspective by illuminating the relationship between identity investments, external pressures, and organizational change. My analysis shows how gender and identity are key parts of the negotiation of organizational change.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF IDENTITY IN NEGOTIATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE
In chapter 2, I showed how league members worked to overcome the challenges they faced in marketing roller derby to outsiders. Skaters adopted stigma management strategies to construct derby as a legitimate sport and to craft a family-friendly image that would attract more sponsors and larger audiences. These image-crafting efforts involved adopting athletic uniforms and dropping some of the more sexualized aspects of derby. A subset of skaters tried to preserve older incarnations of derby culture by defending derby names and stressing fun over competition. As part of this contested process of impression management, league members renegotiated derby identity codes, changing what it meant to be a rollergirl. My analysis in chapter 2 thus focused mainly on the micro level, emphasizing the meanings skaters attached to the identity “rollergirl” and their struggles to experience themselves as authentic rollergirls, given these changes in meaning.

In chapter 3, I examined how skaters’ deepening investment in athletic identities transformed the organization. Mapping changes at the WFTDA level, around interleague competition and rankings, I show how national-level agendas led to changes at the local level. Skaters with athletic capital acquired privilege within the organization and gained more negotiating power in the organization. The local league also raised the bar for tryouts, began selecting the best athletes, created A-level and B-level teams, and demanded a higher level of athletic commitment. These strategies in turn led to a more hierarchical, less democratic organization structure—contrary to the league’s founding philosophy. My analysis here shows how extra-organizational changes can give rise to intra-organizational identity struggles that eventually produce major organizational changes.
In chapter 4, I examined how skaters negotiated a work-family-leisure balance. As derby became more popular and focused on competition, the league began to demand more from the skaters. By adopting a variety of integration and compartmentalization strategies at the individual level, skaters were able to fit derby into their lives. I also showed that these strategies had the unintended consequence of creating extra unpaid labor for leaguemates. The league responded by selling derby devotion to new league members and adopting a “work to skate” policy to compel all skaters to do a fair share of the work. Despite their efforts to police inequity, the enforcement was discretionary at best and showed favoritism toward the all-stars. My analysis in this chapter again showed how inequalities outside of the organization produced conflicts and inequities within it.

In this final chapter, I will draw out the implications of these findings for understanding the relationships between external inequalities, organizationally based identities, and organizational change more generally. The processes I observed among the Star Killer Rollergirls are, in many regards, generic. Similar processes are likely to occur in other organizations struggling to adapt to political, economic, and cultural changes in their environments. My analyses add to the existing literature by more fully illuminating the role of identity investments in mediating between external pressures and internal change. Change comes about, I will argue, when external pressures make it difficult for organizations to allow members to maintain previous identity investments without jeopardizing organizational success.
IDENTITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The Star Killer Rollergirls operated in a cultural environment that could fairly be called sexist, or patriarchal, in that women’s activities, including women’s sports, are generally taken less seriously than men’s activities, including men’s sports (Johnson 2006). It was this environment that compelled women skaters to adopt the sexualized elements of derby in the first place. This sexualized spectacle was thought to be necessary to attract an audience (Breeze 2013, Beaver 2014). The same sexist cultural environment also prepared women skaters to accept sexualized spectacle as the price to be paid for being able to participate in derby. But as the activity grew in popularity, it became more complicated and expensive to carry on: larger venues and better equipment were needed, as were budgets for travel and publicity. This meant that more sponsors were needed, and some sponsors wanted derby to present a more wholesome image. To keep the activity going and growing, those involved—skaters, volunteer staff, fans—had to adapt.

Ironically, it was the initial success of derby, sexualized spectacle and all, that began to compel changes. As the league attempted to secure a larger audience, there was pressure to adopt a more conventional sports image to appeal to mainstream sports fans. As some skaters were invested in keeping derby alternative, these changes put their identity investments at risk. Others—those who wanted to be seen as athletes playing a sport—were motivated to change their image. For derby traditionalists, being alternative and “edgy” was central to signifying an authentic rollergirl identity, but most also wanted to be seen as playing a real sport. Because derby was not widely recognized as a legitimate sport, skaters were devalued. The “denial of validation” by outsiders, especially a professional hockey team, caused league members to reevaluate, reinterpret, and repackage derby (cf. Strauss 1959:35). The external
pressures to change the league image and skaters’ presentations put derby traditionalists’ identity investments at risk.

According to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:126), “People who wish to claim an identity must have chances to signify, to be seen signifying, to have their acts of signification interpreted as they wish, and to have their claims affirmed by an audience that matters.” People derive emotional rewards from their identity investments (Satterlund 2012), especially when they get affirmation from other subcultural group members (Donnelly and Young 1988). Satterlund (2012) showed how white, middle-class boxers derived satisfaction from participating in a “real, but not too real,” experience (see also Ezzell 2009a). Skaters invested in the alternative, edgy image wanted to protect the “silly” and sexualized ways of signifying a derby identity. These women found it psychically rewarding to wear “boutfits” and “derby drag” and wanted to protect their investment in this non-conformist identity. These emotional rewards led them resist other league members’ efforts to reconstruct the league image and what it meant to be a roller girl.

As Glynn (2008:414) has noted, attention to “the link between institutional theorizing and organizational identity remains relatively unexplored.” While research has examined how stakeholders’ concerns shape organizational change and/or responses to external pressures (Scott and Lane 2000, Brickson 2005), little is known about the relationship between external pressures and the conflicting identity investments of organizational members. Modern organizational approaches, such as population ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1977), neo-institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1977, DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and resource dependency (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), explain how organizational environment “influences organizational outcomes by imposing constraints and demanding
adaptation as the price of survival” (Hatch 1997:63). Though negotiated order (Strauss et al. 1963) seeks to open the black box of process that is left closed by non-interactionist approaches, even negotiated order researchers have yet to adequately theorize how identity investments enable and restrain organizational change.

Organizational change is inevitable and occurs through a process of contested negotiation (Strauss et al. 1963). People are motivated to engage in negotiations that will lead to self-serving outcomes (Gecas and Burke 1995), such as protecting their identity investments and pushing for opportunities to affirm their identities. Weiss (2001:393) argues that sports participants are motivated by “identity reinforcement,” which is “based on external satisfactions associated mainly with displaying special skills in sports and receiving approval, status, or material rewards for performing well.” As shown in chapters 2 and 3, skaters became invested in being recognized as athletes playing a sport, and, in turn, those with athletic capital pushed for organizational changes that would give them more opportunities to have their athletic identities affirmed.

My research also shows how identity can be used as a resource in negotiating organizational change and why it matters who has the power to use identity as a tool in negotiations. As all-star league members cultivated a competitive culture, the derby identity code came to require signifying athleticism. This shift reflected the organizational dominance achieved by a coalition of all-stars. This dominant coalition possessed what Hallet (2003) refers to as symbolic power, which is “the power to define the situation in which the interactions that comprise the negotiated order take place” (2003:133). Skaters with athletic capital used their symbolic power to shift and transform the organizational culture in a way that reflected their identity needs. While previous studies have shown how members or
workers adapt to the organization, my study demonstrates that some members of organizations can force the organization to adapt to them.

Current work on organizational decision-making that takes identity into consideration treats identity as static. Building on Abbott’s (1991) research addressing multiprofessionality and intergroup conflict, Glynn (2000) examined the role of identity in negotiations between members of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra leading up to and following its 1996 strike. She argues that organization members relied on “identity preservation strategies,” which reflected their prioritizing of musician versus board member identities. Being a board member meant that their identity investments reflected capitalist interests, whereas the musicians framed their investments as artistic and as being driven by musical excellence and a desire to help the public appreciate the arts. She shows how the differing identity investments of organizational members shaped members’ negotiation of organizational conflict.

Similarly, Kramer’s (1994) study of the Challenger explosion also portrays identities as static (see also Vaughn 1996). In this case, personal motivations and pressures to attain organizational goals—the external pressures combined with conflicting identity investments—contributed to the explosion and loss of lives. Although Kramer did not draw explicitly on negotiated order theory, his nested approach demonstrates how external pressures, inter-organizational tensions, and identity investments constrain decision-making. Members of the different organizations involved in the launch had different identity investments to protect, and following the explosion, also drew on “identity-preserving strategies” (Glynn 2000). Through my meso-domain analysis, we can see how identity investments are fluid, instead of static, giving organizational sociologists a better understanding of the reciprocal relationship between organizations and their members’ needs.
My study advances our understanding of organizational conflict by illuminating how members can experience identity transformations through their participation in the organization and how identity needs emerge from these transformations.

Sociologists’ understanding of organizational growth and change could benefit from giving more attention to how the identity investments of organizational members shape negotiations. Although identity is implicit in many studies (e.g., Reskin 1988 and Padavic 1991), the organizational literature looks at change without adequately addressing the role of identity or the fluidity of organizational members’ identity investments. As I have shown, there is a dynamic relationship between group members’ identity needs and organizational change. As organizational members seek to obtain and maintain identity rewards, they push the organization to provide them. As the organization changes and provides new opportunities for identity affirmation, group members may experience identity transformations and, as a result, push for further organizational change to increase their opportunities for further identity rewards. However, as I have shown, factions can develop among organizational members because change often means that some members’ identities will be threatened. Additionally, external pressures may lead to changes in the kinds of identities that are most valued and, therefore, who possesses symbolic power and steers organizational change in directions that advance their interests.

My findings extend Child’s (1972) strategic choice theory of organizational structure by showing how external changes and identity negotiations change power relations within organizations. As SKRG became more focused on interleague competition, skaters who were invested in athleticism sought more opportunities to have their athletic identities affirmed. While looking like athletes playing a sport made some skaters feel more like athletes,
external validation such as rankings or recognition by sports media outlets, was also important. A dominant coalition (Child 1972) of all-stars influenced league decision-making to serve their interests. They had the symbolic power to frame their choices as representing “what was best for the league.” This enabled them to stifle resistance because they could label dissenters as having the wrong or selfish priorities.

EXTERNAL FORCES AND INTERNAL VALUATION

It is difficult for organizations, even those with progressive agendas, to keep race, class, and gender inequalities outside of the organization from creeping in (Kleinman 1996, Gengler 2012, Sumerau 2012, Wilkins 2008). My research demonstrates how a democratically organized women’s leisure organization was affected by external inequalities. Differences in members’ work, income, and status (i.e., single, mother, etc.) shaped their abilities to commit to practicing and volunteering, which in turn impacted roster decisions and skaters’ abilities to signify their athletic identities. This parallels the “ideal worker” problem that arises in other organizations. The ideal worker and ideal athlete rest on similar principles. The ability to dedicate oneself to a job or a sport is often based on gendered and classed expectations (Acker 1990). Having external support made it possible for some skaters to invest more in roller derby than others.

Cultural ideologies adopted by organizations make a difference for what people will argue is important within the organization. As shown in chapter 3, as interleague competition ramped up, time demands increased, especially for all-stars, creating conflicting identity expectations for skaters who were full-time workers and mothers. Skaters used the rhetoric of competition as a resource to advance their interests within the league. All-stars who argued
that they should always jam the best players referenced competitive practices found in conventional sports to back their position. Skaters who insisted on playing to win were able to dismiss others skaters’ claims that it was unfair to let a few skaters dominate the track when so many others were paying, practicing, and doing unpaid labor. Claiming that “it was just the nature of sports” to reward athletic ability squelched the dissent.

Skaters used rhetoric derived from ideologies present in mainstream sports. Cultural notions of competition were reflected in the rhetoric that skaters used to argue for the league changes they wanted. Similarly, Hochschild (1989) found that broader cultural changes shaped gender ideologies adopted by wives and husbands and their perceptions of fairness in the division of household labor. The same kind of process was evident as SKRG and other WFTDA member leagues shifted toward a competitive model of roller derby. Adopting this competitive model shaped skaters’ conceptions of fairness and the satisfaction they derived from league participation. In Hochschild’s (1989) terms, league members no longer shared the same “baseline expectations” as the league grew and became focused on being nationally and internationally competitive.

All-stars who were athletically adept brought a degree of conventional legitimacy to the league. The skaters’ athleticism became a resource for the skaters, the team, and the league, and garnered them more respect and power in league negotiations. The all-stars were the primary “breadwinners” of the organization, their contributions to winning and boosting the league’s rankings were respected more than the unpaid work that other league members did to keep the organization afloat. Skaters with more to offer—those who contributed to wins—became more valuable to the league and helped signify organizational legitimacy. In
this way, the WFTDA’s progressive mission of women’s empowerment was undermined by the patriarchal valuation of competition and winning.

Some all-star skaters defined their dedication to training and their abilities on the track as a gift to the league. However, not all leaguemates valued it as a gift. To define their athleticism as a gift, all-stars drew on cultural rhetoric that implied that athletes, not the coaches or trainers, made the team win. Cultural notions of competition confer status on athletes. Just as asymmetric rules of honor make it so that a “husband’s glory reflects on his wife,” cultural notions of competition create asymmetric rules of honor that confer greater status on all-star skaters. When the SKRG All-Stars won a game, everyone in the league enjoyed a boost in status. Skaters based their sense of pride on winning. It affirmed and validated their athletic identities. However, B-Team skaters could not transfer glory in the same way because their games did not count for rankings. B-Team skaters wanted their contributions to the league and their games to matter as much as the all-stars’ games, but the rules made this impossible.

Sherryl Kleinman’s (1996) analysis of an alternative health organization—Renewal—showed the struggle that members faced in maintaining an alternative organizational identity, while simultaneously wanting to be recognized as legitimate health professionals. Being a “legitimate alternative” was a balancing act that required the adoption of elements from conventional organizations. For some of the organizational members, she argued, “the worth of Renewal and their worth as individuals depended on whether they believed they were ‘doing something different’” (Kleinman 1996:5). She found that men’s contributions were more valued than women’s and that male practitioners gained extra status because they were seen as making greater sacrifices for the alternative health organization than female staff
members. Their space, time, and voices thus were seen as more valuable than those of the female staff, who often were not paid for their labor. Similarly, my study shows how labor within progressive organizations is still valued based on gendered expectations.

THE EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY CODES

According to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:123), defining [an identity] is “the creation of a social representation that brings an identity into existence.” The derby identity came into existence in the early 20th century, but has changed greatly since then. The identity codes or the “set of rules for signifying” the identity, were initially determined by team owners. Even the derby revival that took place in Austin, Texas, in the early 2000s was shaped by the Bad Girl, Good Woman production company whose owners became the team captains and dictated the home team themes to skaters. At first, the DIY nature of the “flat track revolution” permitted leagues to vote on team names and themes, giving individual skaters more flexibility to design and create their own “boutfits.” However, as I showed in chapter 2, the skater owned and operated league eventually began changing the rules for how to signify a rollergirl identity and uphold the preferred image of the league.

Because there are conflicting rules for signifying the identities “woman” and “athlete” (Blinde and Taub 1992, Cahn 1994, Choi 2000), rollergirls found themselves in a bind (Frye 1983). Most female athletes conform to gender expectations by doing compensatory gender, or, in other words, taking on the “apologetic model,” which entails females making themselves less threatening—and still appealing—to men by emphasizing their femininity (Broad 2001, Ezzell 2009a, Griffin 2002, Messner 2002). Scholars studying
roller derby have mostly argued that the skaters intentionally mimic femininity as an act of resistance (Finley 2010, Carlson 2010, Peluso 2011, see Cohen 2008 for an exception). However, I argue that due to organizational constraints and shifting goals, what it means to be a “rollergirl” has changed over time, and so too has its associated identity code.

Organizations are constantly changing, as are the images they work to present (Hatch and Schultz 2002). My findings highlight the reciprocal processes through which individual, collective, and intra-organizational identities transform, specifically the “ongoing dialogue as organizational members and leaders construct identity in the face of changing demands, situations, and mindsets” (Knapp et al. 2013:336). As organizational goals shift, participants have to adapt to the changes taking place or they will be pushed to the sidelines or out of the organization. Organization members negotiate their identities within the context of institutions that value different types of identity performances (Hallett 2003), but organizational members also push organizational identities to shift to meet their identity needs.

My analysis illuminates how the conflicting identity investments of skaters shaped decision-making in the democratic organization. As the desire for external rewards (i.e., athletic affirmation and organizational legitimacy) becomes too powerful to resist, enacting oppositional identity codes becomes problematic. As subcultures and organizations experience mainstreaming, members experience identity dilemmas and are forced to adapt or exit the organization. As derby mainstreamed, a shrinking minority of skaters sought to preserve derby culture and defined the changes to the community as “selling out.” Opportunities for athletic affirmation fueled organizational negotiations. My findings contribute to existing work on relational inequality, while contributing new insights.
Relational inequality scholars explain the reproduction of inequality by making people and their relationships with one another the focus of organizational analysis. Tomaskovic-Devey (2014) outlines an interactional-organizational-institutional perspective. Adding attention to social-psychological processes and using an intersectional lens, he elaborates on Tilly’s categorical inequality argument by explaining how exploitation and opportunity hoarding involve two organizational inequality mechanisms—resource pooling and claims-making. The Star Killer Rollergirls participated in claims-making for the scarce resource of playtime instead of material rewards. Skaters with athletic capital dominated leadership positions within the league (i.e., team captains and training director) and were in a better position to make claims that protected their identity investments and to provide them with the most opportunities for athletic affirmation. Hoarding playtime and opportunities for identity rewards was framed as what was “best for the league.”

Skaters who were invested in the alternative, sexualized presentations experienced “identity threats” (Elsbach 2003) as the SKRG and other top WFTDA leagues adopted more conventionally athletic presentations. As noted by Ezzell (2009b:125), “experiencing a challenge to an identity we claim as central to our sense of self can inspire resistance to the (perceived) threat.” I argue that identity deprivation threats were used to elicit compliance by organizational leaders, which undermined the democratic principles of the league. By withholding opportunities to play (and by extension for identity rewards), organizational leaders were able to silence resistance and “deny an individual or group the capacity to make a claim at all (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014:59l). All-stars depended on winning games and doing well in the rankings to help affirm their athletic identities. However, they experienced
identity threats as the league began dropping in the rankings. As a result, their claims started carrying less weight.

Shapiro (2003) has called for researchers to give more attention to identity change processes taking place within the ideological context of oppositional communities. Following Shapiro (2003:268), my analysis further details “how the active performance of new identities has the potential to transform the identities of participants.” The stigma management strategies that skaters adopted at both the individual level and league level were forms of oppositional identity work. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:141) define oppositional identity work as “trying to transform discrediting identities into crediting ones, that is, to redefine those identities so they come to be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character.” Members put forward claims that protected their identity investments and access to identity rewards, but conflicting identity investments resulted in divisions in the league that undermined solidarity.

Previous research demonstrates how social movements (Burke and Bernstein 2014, Coy and Hedeen 2005) and alternative sports (Humphreys 1997, Rinehart 2003) can become co-opted by outsiders. My findings detail how this process unfolds within a democratic intra-organizational setting and the gendered-identity based resistance it entails. Within a relatively short period, the flat track revolution experienced radical changes. Efforts to destigmatize the derby identity led those who joined the league in search of alternative identity rewards to feel marginalized as time went by. My research shows not only how oppositional identities form, but also how efforts to maintain them can be undermined from inside the organization due to changes in membership and pressures to go mainstream.
EVALUATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

My research examined how one member league of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association negotiated organizational growth, change, and conflict. Although the focus of my research was on the Star Killer Rollergirls, I traveled with the all-stars to away games and tournaments, I interviewed men and women skaters, volunteers from other leagues, and WFTDA representatives, and closely followed several derby websites and blogs to gain a broader understanding of the “flat track revolution.” I was closely involved with the inner workings of the league and was embedded within the derby community for nearly three years. I continued to participate on the periphery after formally leaving the field in the spring of 2010.

This study focused primarily on skaters and volunteers within one WFTDA member league. While I contextualized my analysis of how order was negotiated in SKRG by providing historical context and intra-organizational context, there are data collection limitations. Because I was not a skater, I was not able to gain access to the annual WFTDA conference. My opportunity to observe negotiations between WFTDA member leagues was thus limited. Although I was able to attend tournaments and observe backstage meetings (i.e., captains’ and coaches’ meetings with referees), I was unable to see skater representatives from all WFTDA member leagues openly discuss organizational policy and change firsthand.

While I believe my decision not to skate enhanced my access to all realms of league negotiations, it kept me from serving as a league representative to the annual WFTDA conference. Due to this limitation, much of my analysis is based on materials dispersed through the WFTDA Listserv, the SKRG Listserv, the league discussion board, and through
conversations with SKRG representatives who attended the meetings. Unfortunately, I was able to see only those motions that passed, but was unable to see the discussions on the private WFTDA discussion boards or to hear the conversations firsthand at the WFTDA conference. As a skater, I would have been permitted to attend the annual conference as a league representative, which would have provided me with additional intra-organizational context.

A second limitation of my study is that the data come only from skaters who were actively involved in the league during the period of my fieldwork, between 2007 and 2010. While I interviewed skaters and volunteers who quit, retired, or transferred to other leagues during this period, I did not track down skaters who left SKRG before 2007. Some of the skaters I interviewed had retired but were still involved in the league in some capacity, such as coaching or volunteering. Skaters who quit before I entered the field may have offered different perspectives on the early days of the organization. My analysis is thus limited because I relied on current league members to discuss former skaters’ dissatisfactions instead of collecting original accounts.

A third limitation of my study is that I was unable to develop a fuller comparison with men’s roller derby. More interviews and backstage observational data might have allowed me to determine whether men’s leagues or co-ed leagues experience the same conflicts when negotiating change. A fuller comparison would help to reveal how gender shapes negotiations in democratic organizations. Future researchers should give attention to how the gender composition of an organization with a feminist or progressive mission influences processes of negotiation and organizational change.
My research improves considerably, however, on previous studies of roller derby. Research done by derby outsiders, such as Finley’s (2010) analysis of gender maneuvering or Beaver’s (2010) examination of the DIY ethos of the derby community, has relied primarily on interview data and has missed the complexities of derby presentations and league divisions of labor documented in my dissertation. Although the research done by skaters themselves has offered a more in-depth understanding of the derby community, most of it oversimplifies the story as one of resistance to the gender order. However, as my analysis demonstrates, skaters’ strategies for managing stigma, being competitive, and fitting derby into their lives all had intended and unintended consequences, some of which reinforced inequality. Drawing on Schippers’s (2002, 2007) concept of “gender maneuvering,” Finley (2010) sees the sexualized presentations of rollergirls as a purposeful choice to buck the gender order (see also Carlson 2010). Many rollergirls might agree.

Yet, as I have demonstrated, the situation is more complicated. In Female Chauvinist Pigs, Levy (2005) examines “raunch culture,” arguing that women embrace and engage in practices sold to them as liberating and empowering, but that under closer examination this participation can been seen as reinforcing women’s disempowerment. Instead of interpreting derby outfits and derby personas as active mocking strategies of resistance (Carlson 2010, Finley 2010), I argue they are forms of subordinate adaptation (Schwalbe et al. 2000; see also Ezzell 2009a) that serve to reproduce the gender order rather than challenge it in any serious way. Beaver (2014) is correct in saying that there is an exercise of choice when rollergirls adopt sexy personas to attract fans. But, as my research shows, these choices are highly constrained by context—external demands for either a sexy/edgy or family-friendly image—and by intra-organizational struggles. As these forces play out over time, choices shift.
Rollergirls initially used self-sexualization as a marketing strategy, but eventually moved away from this to establish organizational legitimacy and affirm their athletic identities. As a result, attachment to the “sexualized spectacle” version of roller derby continues to wane.

Britton and Logan (2008:118) urged researchers to “see the processes whereby organizations maintain and reproduce inequalities.” I have tried to respond to this call by looking at how gender ideologies shape identity struggles that in turn affect the distribution of organizational rewards. I also looked at how masculine qualities achieved hegemony in a progressive women’s organization. My analysis thus suggests how the negotiated order perspective, which has generally overlooked gender (see Margolis 1985 and Sugrue 1982 for exceptions), can incorporate gender by paying attention to how a sexist context matters for what happens within an organization.

My research also addresses a larger question: Why do people continue to participate in organizations intended to empower them that instead end up marginalizing them? Typically, people quit when they feel that they get less out of participation than they put in. It would thus have seemed rational for skaters to quit when they felt like they were putting more into the league than they were “getting out” of their participation. But derby had become too important to how skaters saw themselves, and they didn’t know how to withdraw without incurring serious identity costs. Taking identity investments into account when examining issues of distributive and procedural justice in other settings could help researchers understand why participants don’t leave voluntary organizations, despite appearing to under-benefit. It would be worthwhile to examine other settings in which people’s identity investments affect their willingness to tolerate arrangements that are experienced as unfair in some way (cf. Schwalbe 2015: 187-193).
The organizational literature that examines emotions often focuses on how workers do emotional labor on behalf of their employers, such as Hochschild’s (1983) groundbreaking study of flight attendants and bill collectors. Other studies have examined fast food and insurance workers (Leidner 1993), corporate managers (Jackall 1988), medical students (Smith and Kleinman 1989), and animal lovers who volunteer at a kill-shelter (Arluke 1994). My dissertation shows why it is important to consider how identity deprivation threats can be used to compel cooperation, suppress dissent, and press for organizational change. Future research needs to give more attention to intangible benefits of emotional and identity rewards as an explanation for organizational stability and change.

My research has implications for future studies of conflicting ideas about equity. Organizational researchers need to gain deeper insight into how cultural ideologies shape people’s conceptions of fairness (Hegtvedt and Isom 2014). Skaters’ different interpretations of the WFTDA’s “by the skaters, for the skaters” philosophy and the league mission influenced what they expected themselves and others to put into and get out of their participation in the league. Embrace of a competitive vs. inclusive model of sport also shaped members’ expectations regarding fair input and fair reward. And, as noted earlier, gender ideology mattered most of all. Even in an egalitarian organization run by women, labor conventionally defined as masculine—competing hard, trying to dominate others—was increasingly valued as the organization became more conventional, while housekeeping and emotion work were devalued. Future researchers should consider how new ideologies—for example, neoliberalism—are shaping struggles for equity within organizations.

In her 2012 presidential address to Sociologists for Women in Society, Patricia Yancey Martin (2013:282) said that she had had a unique opportunity to examine how the
organization negotiated change and struggled to “align its values and goals with its structures and practices.” As she went on to say, “If Sociologists for Women in Society is a feminist bureaucracy, we can say that feminism guides us, bureaucracy structures us, and reconciling the two challenges us” (p. 289). This process also required, Martin said, “commitment, time, emotion, energy, and tolerance of people and actions that we sometimes dislike and may believe are wrong.” One reason for these tensions is that many SWS members are committed to their identities as feminists, but longstanding divisions between different waves of feminism mean that people see issues differently.

The Star Killer Roller Girls, though not identifying explicitly as a feminist organization, experienced a similar change process. Adopting the competitive sports model restructured leagues, created conflicts, and required much negotiation of change. The conflicts and need for negotiation arose in large part because of the different identity investments of the people involved. That we can see these processes unfolding in organizations as different as a roller derby league and a professional academic association suggests that these processes are generic. This dissertation has closely examined these processes in one context. It remains for future researchers to explore and elaborate on how they operate elsewhere, perhaps in any setting where people create valued identities and then face pressures for change that put those identities at risk.
Table 1. Fieldwork (June 2007 – March 2010).*

<table>
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<td>Board of Directors Meetings</td>
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<td>Training Committee Meetings</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sponsorship Committee Meetings</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bout Production Meetings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Meetings</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(home &amp; interleague)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy Committee Meetings</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest/Recruitment Meetings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Meeting</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouts</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bout Viewings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tournaments**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Tournament</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Cost Derby Extravaganza</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFTDA Eastern Regionals</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFTDA Nationals/ Championship</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice &amp; Scrimmages</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tryouts</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Team Drafts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer and Awards Parties</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Events</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
* I attended my last bout as a researcher and volunteer in November 2010, but continued attending bout through 2012 and remained on the league Listserves until June 2012.
** At tournaments, I attended meetings with SKRG coaches and referees, which enabled me to see backstage negotiations between various WFTDA league members.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired TXRG Skater and 1st WFTDA President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>TXRG Skater (since 2002) and WFTDA Executive Director (since 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Founding Member of Derby News Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Founder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Skater and Training Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Skater and Finance Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Skater and Bout Production Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Captain, Training Director, and WFTDA Liaison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Indian</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star, B-Team Skater, Bout Production Director, Marketing Director, SKRG Chairperson, and WFTDA Liaison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star and Marketing Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star and Sponsorship Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Captain and Sponsorship Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Captain and Skater Representative on Board of Directors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Captain and Skater Representative on Board of Directors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Skater and Skater Representative on Board of Directors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Skater and Bout Production Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Skater and WFTDA Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Skater, Coach, and Bout Production Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Rookie All-Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>SKRG B-Team Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Rookie All-Star and B-Team Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina/Black</td>
<td>SKRG All-Star and B-Team Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>All-Star from Another League and Team USA Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired SKRG Original</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired SKRG Original</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired SKRG Original and Referee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired SKRG All-Star Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired SKRG All-Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Retired SKRG Home Team Skater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Referee, WFTDA Referee, SKRG Chairperson, and Derby Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Referee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG and WFTDA Referee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Non-Skating Official and Derby Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Track Crew and Derby Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Coach and Derby Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Marketing Director, SKRG Mascot, and Derby Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Announcer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Coach and Training Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Stats Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>SKRG Volunteer and Volunteer for Other Leagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>TXRG Announcer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ID #</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Coach of WFTDA All-Star Team and Team USA World Cup 2011/2014 Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Skater and Coach of WFTDA All-Star Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Team captain and WFTDA Referee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Team captain, Referee for Women’s Bouts, and Co-Founding Member of the Men’s Derby Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Co-Founder of Co-Ed League and Co-Founding Member of the Men’s Derby Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Skater</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Old School Derby Skater and Team Manager for Four Decades</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. WFTDA 2012 Demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Plays Roller Derby?</th>
<th>Who Watches Roller Derby?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59% are 25-34</td>
<td>38% are 25-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41% are 35-54</td>
<td>41% are 35-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84% have at least some post-secondary education</td>
<td>84% have at least some post-secondary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24% have graduate degrees</td>
<td>22% have graduate degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37% are married</td>
<td>61% women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependent Children</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dependent Children</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% have children &lt; 18</td>
<td>27% have children &lt; 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Information was gathered from skater and fan responses to the WFTDA demographic survey in 2012 and was publicly available through the Media Kit on the WFTDA website: http://wftda.com/files/wftda-media-kit.pdf
Table 4. 2009 SKRG Assessment Requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tryouts</th>
<th>Each assessor assigned zero to five points to each woman based on demonstration of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Forward skating/Propelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• One-foot glides (both feet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Crossovers (both directions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Backwards skating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Turns (mohawk or jump)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Squats (three for 30-seconds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stops (T-Stop, plow stop, hockey stop, or toe stop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Strength assessment (stationary one-knee drops and baseball slides)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Skate twenty laps on the derby track</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1: Scrimmage Eligibility</th>
<th>Basic Skating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forward and Backward Skating, One Foot Glides, Propelling, Crossovers, Turns (mohawk and jump in both directions), Sprint off line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agility/Derby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slaloms, Squats, Two foot jump over 3&quot; object and from 1 foot to the other, Snake drill, Dodging Unexpected Obstacles, Leaning on another skater while propelling/not tripping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T-Stop, Plow Stop, Attempt Hockey Slide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Falls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One Knee, Two Knee, Forward Slide, Baseball Slide, Corner Fall, 180 Knee turn (3 second recovery, no hands, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 laps on derby track (100 meter) in 1 minute, 20 derby laps under 5:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rules Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assesses understanding of WFTDA rules.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 2: Bout Eligibility</th>
<th>B-Team Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eligible players nominate and elect two team captains who then determine rosters from the eligible pool of skaters with the assistance of coaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A-Team Selection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Must skate 25 laps in under 5 minutes and must have played in two public bouts to be eligible. Eligible players nominate and elect two team captains from the pool of eligible players who then select the roster from the eligible pool of skaters with all interleague and intraleague coaches. The team then nominates and elects two coaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Skaters were given six months to pass level 1 assessments. Skaters who did not pass level 2 assessments within 6 months of passing level 1 assessment were moved back to level one. In 2013, the WFTDA released new minimum skater requirements which had to be passed by any all-star playing in a sanction games (and was strongly recommended for skaters participating in interleague or intraleague games and was recommended for skaters to demonstrate the minimum skills before participating in contact or scrimmage drills). The press release and corresponding skills can be found here: http://wftda.com/news/wftda-updates-minimum-skills-requirements
Note: The rosters for the all-stars and the b-team are made up of eligible skaters from the Cotillion Killers, the Pummeling Princesses, and the Jam Burglars. The all-stars and the b-team compete against other leagues, but only WFTDA sanctioned all-star’s games impact national rankings for the league.

Figure 1. Star Killer Rollergirls’ League Structure.
Figure 2. Negotiated Order of SKRG
Figure 3. WFTDA Logo
Stage 1:
League Formation and Sub-Group Formation

Stage 2:
Out-Group Formation and Intra-Group Competition

Figure 4. Organizational Turning Points
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APPENDICES
Appendix A. Email for the Board of Directors about Gaining Access.

This is the original email sent from former and current board member, to the rest of the Star Killer Rollergirl board of directors on my behalf:

Hey guys,

A good friend of mine and [****]'s, Kylie Parrotta is a Grad Student in Sociology at NCSU and she’s getting ready to start her final research project. She’s thinking about doing the project on Women in sports, specifically focusing on our dynamic little group of rollergirls. So, she wanted to see if she could get permission to hang out near the bench during this weekends game to get a different perspective. She’s been to many games before, but would like an opportunity to take some notes from a different perspective. She said she would also be able to volunteer if have any positions that still need to be filled that would give her a different perspective.

This would just be preliminary research, nothing too intrusive, but if she finds the angle she’s looking for then down the road she would ultimately like to do interviews, attend meetings and other things that would be interactive with the league. She’s a long time fan, a smart cookie and really wants to do her project on rollergirls. So, let me know what you guys think about letting her hang behind the bench this Saturday.

If you have any specific questions about the project, feel free to reply back to her at klparrot@sa.ncsu.edu.

Thanks,
Later,
[signed with derby name]

Responses in order:

maybe it’s just because i know and love her, but i love the idea! i think this could be something very cool for the league! i would like to make sure that the team is comfortable with it before committing though!

I reckon if you say she’s okay, she’s probably okay. She knows she can’t touch the skaters, right? And she probably has to sign a waiver.

I’ll sign a waiver that says she can touch me. Seriously, I think it would be a great thing for the league. So I'm in favor.

I am in favor, too!
Appendix B. Chair’s Resignation Email.
Dear [SKRG],

It is with utmost regret that I tender my resignation of Chair of the BOD. I have been trying to hang in there until the end of my term (when new chair is elected Jan2011) and then retire but I don't see any benefit in that course of action. Per bylaws, my position may be filled by the BOD in the interim, or stay vacant until elections in January. I will work to archive any business related paperwork and pass off ongoing responsibilities and tie up loose ends over the next week.

Lately I am at a loss as to how to do anything in this league. Every single decision the BOD makes is questioned and I am quickly losing faith in our ability to do any work. Do we need to hold a monthly league meeting instead of a BOD meeting? Do we have to have the entire league's input on every single decision? If so, then by all means, restructure the league and do so. But in the interim, please allow the people you elected to do a job to do their job.

Your elected leaders are elected for a reason - you have empowered them to act on your behalf. While we have been working towards having open dialogues and transparency, that does not translate into a constant ongoing criticism and critique of others actions. Just because you have the ability to complain doesn't always mean it is the best course of action.

We are all volunteers here, doing the best job that we can. We are giving up our free time to try and find time to do work on behalf of the league. We don't have an instruction manual. The decisions the BOD makes are not hasty off the cuff calls. We thoughtfully discuss the issues, try and see all sides, look at long term repercussions. Are we always right? No. Should you have the right to complain or comment on our actions? Yes. But please try to do so constructively. And please bear in mind when you do so that we aren't making mistakes on purpose or maliciously. We truly are doing our damnedest to make the best possible decisions on behalf of the league.

I went to a Quaker school, and one of the tenets of Quakerism is that anyone can talk in meeting (aka church) when moved to do so. I was powerfully struck by this one idea that before you speak, you hold that thought within you for a moment as if in a crucible to burn away all that is irrelevant, petty, and unessential. And then express yourself.

I challenge you all to do that within this league. Burn away all the petty crap. Get to the essentials. Talk to one another. But please be respectful along the way.

I wish you all the very best,
[signed with real name]