

BRUISES, & BUMPS BEDLAM

ON THE BANKED TRACK

STORY BY KEELY DAMARA

PHOTOS BY DANIEL VALENCIA

The squeaking of rolling wheels and the thumps of padded knees reverberate off of un-insulated walls. A whistle blows and Corazon Rios encourages a small group of women to keep their legs moving.

“Keep skating, keep skating—don’t stop skating!” Rios yells.





The Derby Dolls scrimmage at the former Doll Factory in Echo Park on March 12.

Some with fatigued, shaking legs and others with more experienced grace skate laps around the not-quite-oval banked track constructed by veteran skaters of the LA Derby Dolls roller derby league. The track reduces the Historic Filipinotown warehouse, affectionately dubbed the Doll Factory because of its past incarnation as an ice cream cone factory, to the size of a dollhouse.

A makeshift first-aid kit—a cart overflowing with bandages, ointments, painkillers and tampons—sits next to a shelf full of donated, gently used equipment for new skaters dubbed “fresh meat” to borrow before they invest in their own gear.

Rios is a certified personal trainer and runs her own outdoor fitness company, but to those who know her as “Cerabedlam,” “Bedlam” for short, she teaches the LA Derby Dolls Derby Por Vida fitness class every week at the Doll Factory. She has been skating with the Derby Dolls since the fall of 2010, getting her first taste of the banked track in the very class she now teaches.

“It was a very clumsy and full of falls process,” Rios said. “But even as soon as I stepped on the track—fell onto the track I should say, because that’s what happened—I just fell in love with it and I’ve been here ever since.”

Rios, a Monrovia native, attended PCC for postgraduate classes after completing her world arts and cultures B.A. at UCLA. She grew up playing contact sports like soccer and is no stranger to endurance training, but when an old roommate told her she should join the local roller derby league, she wasn’t so sure.

It wasn’t until 2010, a couple years after that seed was planted in her head, that she decided to check out the league as a way of cross training for marathons. She also missed the sense of community that team sports engender, something she was lacking in her adult life.

“Having this community of women from different backgrounds, different body types, different ages just coming together for the love of the sport—it was just truly amazing,” Rios said. “Just making our own family and community here on the banked track.”

Megan Costello, or “Belle Scorcho,” met Rios in the “fresh meat”

pool, which is the group of beginning skaters that train to be selected for subpool, with the ultimate goal of being drafted to a Derby Dolls team.

“Our official first friendship moment was our first fresh meat practice after making it in and I brought a banana to practice and I split it with her,” Costello said. “I think she called me the banana fairy.”

They soon discovered they had mutual friends, listened to the same music and had a mutual love for the band Weezer (hence Belle Scorcho). They went as far as to get “derby married” in a ceremony at Roller Con in Las Vegas a few years ago.

Taking a derby wife is a common roller derby tradition, which is basically just acknowledging your closest derby friend and confidant, the person who gets you through thick and thin on and off the track.

“One night at Roller Con they had a night where you could get derby married,” Costello said. “You’re derby married by one of the announcers—he goes by Dump Truck—and I think he was dressed in an Elvis costume and he derby married us.”

Roller derby has been around since the 50s and made a resurgence in the early 2000s as a legitimate sport beyond all the theatrics previously associated with it—costumes, stage names and, at one time, even scripted brawls. The LA Derby Dolls were among the first leagues to bring the sport back to the mainstream in 2004, keeping some of the old novelties of the game like the quirky stage names while pushing it forward athletically.

Banked track roller derby is a fast sport. A game is called a bout. A jam is a one-minute mad race for a jammer from each team to skate by as many blockers of the opposite team as possible, scoring a point for each blocker passed, without being blocked or penalized. The jammer the furthest ahead on the track of each jam is declared the lead jammer and can call off the jam at any point, giving them a huge strategic advantage. On the banked track, they can reach speeds up to six miles an hour faster than on the flat track. A lot can happen in a minute.

“There’s nothing like doing a crossover in the turns and feeling that speed pick up and skating,” said Rios. “There really isn’t.”

Roller derby is a very strategic game in addition to being physically exhausting, Rios said.

“Playing offense and defense at the same time—it’s such a mental challenge on top of the physical challenge of being on a sloped surface on eight wheels,” Rios said.

The current track was built in 2011 by a group of volunteer skaters with the help of their “Track Monkeys.” The Track Monkeys are a group of volunteers headed by Disco Tex who primarily consist of set designers, carpenters and handy people who lend their skill-sets to the maintenance of the track.

Just the vibration from skates rolling over the track can cause screws to come loose.

“Before each bout, you will see two people just hunched over looking at every single screw on the track making sure they are all screwed in. They will do that during half time, they will do it after the bout,” Rios said. “So somebody doesn’t run a risk of catching on them.”

Roller derby banked tracks take a beating. Skating takes its toll on the track, creating bows and dips in the wood. The current track is the third track for the Derby Dolls. The first track was an original roller derby track from the 1970s and the second track was designed and built by a member that was an architect.

The current track was disassembled in the Doll Factory and moved piece-by-piece to the Derby Doll’s new home, a warehouse on Alhambra Avenue in El Sereno, by skaters and volunteers in the beginning of April.

“I literally bled for that track,” Corazon said. “Blood, sweat and tears.”

The Doll Factory—previously occupied by ice cream cone maker Norse Dairy Systems—was not the first home of the Derby Dolls. They moved to the warehouse on Temple Street in 200. The Dolls have skated in mall parking lots and on rooftops downtown—

anywhere they could get permission to skate. When locations fell through, they would resort to skating in parking lots down by the beach.

Stephanie Villa, aka “Amber Alert!,” has been with the league since the very beginning in 2004. Villa just stepped down as the general manager of the league to pursue other career goals and said that cleaning out her office brought up a lot of old memories of struggling to find a permanent place to call home.

“When I came in we were always having location problems,”

Villa said. “We were always moving the track, we were always just trying to find places to bout.”

For the past year, the Doll Factory has been dark. No bouts, no workshops, no events. This is because the warehouse that the Dolls have called home for nearly eight years is up for sale.

One morning last year, skaters were greeted with notices posted over all the building’s entrances that said the warehouse needed to be vacated because it was going to be demolished. Shortly thereafter they learned the property owner was trying to sell the place.

The uncertainty of the future of the league caused Villa to cancel any planned bouts and events. The league created a crowd funding campaign in the spring of 2014 to raise funds to move to a new location. They raised more than the \$100,000 that they asked for to get them into a new space. But the money was set aside for the move, not for operating out of the Doll Factory.

She said many of the skaters were going a bit stir crazy without boutting regularly.

“I LITERALLY BLEED FOR
THAT TRACK. BLOOD,
SWEAT AND TEARS.”
— CORAZON RIOS



“Skating derby is like a drug for these girls,” Villa said. “Without it they are fiending for the stuff.”

Besides not enough time on their skates, morale was low among many league members because of the uncertainty of their future.

Recently in March, a television show used the factory as a location for a shoot. They painted over the skull and crossbones that graced the front of the building, something the league first objected to. But they eventually acquiesced—almost as a final admission of the end of their days at the Doll Factory.

“The painting over the mural was a really big deal to a lot of people because it symbolized so much,” Rios said. “For a lot of us, this is all we know.”

Costello happens to be a professional architect and spent her lunch breaks over the past year looking at possible new homes for the league. Finding a place that could fit their track was a challenge.

“I would go look at buildings, come home, sketch them up on my computer and drop in our track to see if it would work or not,” Costello said.

They found a new location in El Sereno on Alhambra Avenue and moved into the new space at the beginning of April.

Besides transitioning to a new space, the Derby Dolls are also transitioning to new ownership. The team has been owned by one of the original skaters, Rebecca Ninburg, or “Demolicious,” since the very beginning in 2004. The Dolls are transitioning to a coop model in which the skaters own the league so each member has a voice and it isn’t going to be run as a for-profit business.

“No one person’s vote counts more than another’s,” Rios said. “We’re going to run this league as a cooperative.”

Now that they are in their new home, the Derby Dolls jumped right into competing in bouts. They held a soft opening on April 25 and already have a schedule drawing out until December. Overall, the league is looking forward to introducing the community to their new digs.

“This is an exciting new start,” said Rios. “There’s going to be feelings and there’s going to be other feelings. It’s going to happen when you get a hundred alpha females together.”



LEFT/ABOVE/BELOW: The Derby Dolls scrimmage at the former Doll Factory in Echo Park on March 12.

