

Roller derby invades Mac Court on Friday

By JIM HUNTER
Of the Emerald

While you're inside McArthur Court watching this Friday's roller derby game don't laugh. The encounter between the San Francisco Bay Bombers and the Midwest Pioneers is sport, not entertainment.

And if you don't agree you're in the majority because, more than likely, the only ones that believe roller derby is sport are the International Roller Derby League empresarios. And it's dubious if they really believe it themselves.

But regardless of what it's called it's prosperous and the roller derby elite are smart enough not to tamper with a good thing.

Since its inception in 1935, roller derby has always been considered on the same plane with wrestling. The ring sport was once a respectable athletic event but television overexposure in the late 1940's and early 1950's reduced it to merely a display of showmanship.

Television also killed roller derby during the same period. It was stagnant until 1956 when Jerry Seltzer bought the rights to the sport for \$500. Under the name International Roller Derby, Seltzer has developed it into a business whose worth is estimated between \$5 million to \$10 million. Last year roller derby grossed \$6 million alone from attendance plus an undisclosed, but considerable, sum from television.

Public relations representative Gene Moyers feels the reason roller derby is so popular is not because it is a show but because of "the contact, action and speed."

He admitted there is a "certain amount of showmanship involved, but it's just like any other sport. Joe Namath wears white shoes doesn't he. Why single out roller derby?"

According to Moyers, the audience the event appeals to is the blue collar worker. "I'd say our hard core support comes from blue collars. We're especially big in the industrial cities of the east like Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Cincinnati. We're also strong in the Carolinas."

In 1970, roller derby drew 2,061,000 and is hoping for about 2,500,000 this year. The San Francisco Bay Bombers outdrew

all other Bay Area teams last year, attracting 793,000, including 28,814 at one game.

The six roller derby teams—the northwest Cardinals, representing the Seattle-Tacoma-Portland area; the Midwest Pioneers, representing Chicago; the Southern Mustangs, representing Dallas-Fort Worth; the New York Chiefs; the Northwest Braves, representing the Boston-Providence-Worcester area and the San Francisco Bay Bombers—play a 120 game championship season lasting from the first of May through September. The majority of these games are played in the Bay Area because "this area is a proven draw."

The top four teams then meet in a playoff to determine the champion. The Bombers have won the championship six of the last eight years, including 1970.

The rest of the year the six teams play "exhibition, tour games" in cities throughout the United States and Canada. This Friday's game is the final exhibition contest before the regular season begins on April 25.

The game in Eugene features Charlie O'Connell, five time Most Valuable Player, six time Roller Derby King and Hall of Fame member. Leading the girls contingency will be Margie Laszlo, two time MVP and Roller Derby Queen. The current girls MVP, Joan Weston, will not be appearing in Eugene as she is touring with the Oakland Bay Bombers.

The average age of a roller derby performer is 22 although some veterans, like Ken Monte, skate until they are in their forties. Most skater's put in five or six years in the league with travel or marriage the main reasons for retiring.

To replace retirees a roller derby training school has been set up in Alameda, Calif. to teach prospective skaters the trade. The center in Alameda has an enrollment of 500 to 600 out of which only four or five will make it to the professional ranks. Training usually lasts eight weeks.

Referees, who many claim are on the track just to lend the event an aura of respectability and do little in the way of spotting infractions and stopping fights, are recruited from fans, officials in other sports and former skaters.

Despite the time consuming

fight, roller derby is an offense oriented game with 48-43 a typical score. A point is scored when a jammer, wearing a stripped helmet, or a pivot man, wearing a solid black helmet, laps a member of the opposing team. It's the job of the blocker, wearing a solid white helmet, to prevent the jammer from passing them in the allotted one minute jam.

There are two jammers, two blockers and a pivot man on the track for each team except when a player is out because of drawing a penalty.

A quirk of the game is that the Bombers, usually trailing after 95 minutes of play, have an inexplicable knack of scoring the winning point or two on the final jam of the eighth and final period.

So after the Bombers pull out Friday's game on this last jam for the umpteenth time and you wonder how the brains behind roller derby could seriously consider this athletic travesty a sport, don't. No matter what they actually believe it is, they're laughing all the way to the bank.

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