

Mad Skater Girls (September 2016)

STORY BY GRACE WEBB

It's a Thursday night at All Seasons Arena in Mankato, and about a dozen women do quick laps on roller skates around the rink. They range in age from early 20s to mid-40s, dressed in all manner of colorful sports gear. Written on their helmets and across their backs are nicknames such as "Brass Chuckles," "Puerto Wreckin'" and "Mean Latifah." The atmosphere is focused, with one member of the team shouting out different drills every few laps. Yet as the women skate by each other, they also crack jokes and share laughs.

They are the Mankato Area Derby Girls, and they're a force to be reckoned with.

The MAD Girls formed a team in 2012, starting with a group of women who simply wanted to skate together and have some fun. It has grown exponentially since then, with about 40 members on the Mankato team (though not all of them are participating skaters at meets). The season runs almost all year, with members taking a break for about a month in the fall, and there is usually one meet a month. Home games are played at the city's Civic Center, while away games range as far away as Iowa and North Dakota. In addition, some MAD Girls offer to be "fostered" to other teams that need a substitute player, traveling to different cities for a meet or two.

Holly Alhbrecht, known as "Brass Chuckles" on the rink, is one of the veteran skaters and is serving her second term as president of the league. She said she joined the team because she felt stagnant in life and was intrigued by a group of strong women who enjoyed such a physical sport.

"I had no skating experience," she admitted. "I started with a borrowed helmet, borrowed skates, borrowed pads—everything. I didn't think I'd actually stick with it."

But she did, juggling a day job as a marketing director, a home life with kids and twice-weekly practices for her new sport. She says she's not the only skater who has a busy life; many of the team members are wives and mothers with full-time careers and other community activities. Yet all of them make time for their team and their sport.

Emily Braaten is one of the newest members of the team. The third-year MSU student said she never really skated before joining the team but she enjoyed watching the Minnesota RollerGirls. When a MAD Girl invited her to try out last year, she decided to go for it. She participated in the 12-week "Fresh Meat" program, which offers training to new recruits and the chance to be on the team if they make it through. During that time, Braaten learned everything from the basics of skating on quad roller skates to how to safely knock into members of the opposing team. She made it through, earning a spot on the team and the right to pick a new nickname – "Derby Puckett".

"Now I love skating," Braaten said. "I wish I had done it forever. The team is so awesome and welcoming, and I feel sexy out there as I skate. It's a confidence boost."

When it comes to the actual skating, Alhbrecht said it isn't nearly as violent as people tend to envision. Far from the brutal free-for-alls that were more common in the 1970s and 1990s, there is actually a governing board that regulates meets and focuses on player safety: the Women's Flat Track Derby Association. Players aren't allowed to punch, kick or clothesline each other, and even foul language is discouraged. In addition, while skaters can hit speeds of 11-12 miles per hour, the plays are usually much slower and more focused on strategy.

Even so, Alhbrecht acknowledges that roller derby is a full-contact sport that can get pretty rough. MAD Girls have had their share of concussions and sprains, with at least one significant injury per season.

Melissa Walchuck (AKA "Puerto Wreckin'") has experienced this first-hand. After watching a bout in May of 2015, she decided to try out for the team, earning a place with the MAD Girls this January. She skated in one away bout but, four days before what would have been her first home meet, she fell during a routine practice session and broke her ankle.

"The team always stresses safety first, but as with any contact sport, injury can happen at any time," she said. "The wrong fall is all it takes. I wouldn't repeat the experience, but it was definitely worth it. If I had to tell the story of breaking something, I'd rather say I broke my ankle at roller derby than walking down the street."

Besides the monthly meets, MAD Girls also host fundraisers during the year to help with expenses such as renting their practice arena. They are also officially a non-profit organization and donate a portion of their profits from every meet to a charity voted on by the members. In addition, team members are required to accumulate a certain number of volunteer service hours each month before they're allowed to skate in meets.

Albrecht said the team is always looking for volunteers, even those with no skating experience. For more information about the team and its upcoming meets, visit its website, www.Mankatoareaderbygirls.com, or its Facebook page: Mankato Area Derby Girls.

- Grace Webb is a wandering reporter whose home base is Mankato.