

Fight Club

By day, the ladies of Scare Force One manage offices, direct fund drives and research neural functioning like typical Washingtonians. At night, they step into their alter egos and roll with the punches.

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ANGELA WALL IS SPRAWLED ON THE GRIMY GROUND LEVEL OF A PARKING GARAGE IN ROSSLYN. Along with the rest of her team, she is lacing up her skates and adjusting the Velcro straps of the various guards and pads and other equipment that mark the transition from regular life to roller derby. Wall, 33, captain of the DC Rollergirls team Scare Force One, is known to the league by her derby name, Condoleezza Slice. She finishes adjusting her gear and ties her long brown hair back under a bandanna printed with a pattern of little white skulls. Slice is broad-shouldered and solid, and the cumulative effect is menacing. She tugs on a pair of gloves, even though it is hot and muggy in the garage.

"Slice," someone asks, "did you hurt your hands?"

"No, I'm working tomorrow," says Slice. "And I just got my nails done."

Like Slice, who is a technician and manager at a cat hospital in Alexandria, the rest of Scare Force One's skaters lead double lives, created in part by the colorful alter egos that skaters give themselves upon joining the team: There is Harley Quinn (Rachele Huelsman), director of development for a nonprofit; Helena Handbag (Yvonne Dailey), a freelance graphic designer; Trampon (Jessica Schulze), a peroxide blonde who is an executive at a professional skin-care line; as well as Demabrat, Madeleine Allfight and Dame Nation. But daily life often bears little resemblance to derby life, a world where women in miniskirts and fishnet pantyhose regularly bruise each other, break bones and go home with the pattern of their fishnets imprinted in road rash on their flesh.

For Slice, the traits that have made her a good manager at the cat hospital -- patience, organization, time management -- are ones she has also found useful in the more mundane aspects of running a team. The Alexandria resident says she was "president of every club imaginable" in junior high and high school, but, until now, she had never been a "captain of adult women." As the DC Rollergirls league moves through its first season, the biggest challenge for her is one she has never faced: to take a group of strong-willed women who have made a living out of thinking for themselves and help them think like a pack.

In the garage, Slice and her team begin a version of the progressively exhausting "suicide" drill, in which they sprint to the far end on skates, throwing themselves, at intervals, onto the concrete and then doing sit-ups. The garage is a sandpapered expanse of gray studded with concrete pillars and splotches of motor oil, and it is unsparingly lit, like

the inside of a refrigerator, with fluor-escnt lights in wire cages. The team's shouts echo off the walls.

The league's four teams are basically building themselves from scratch. "Ninety-five percent of us haven't skated since middle school," says Slice. Practice is a mix of endurance drills and strategies and exercises for form, technique and "pack awareness," that elusive ability to move in a unified bunch, like a school of fish. During one drill, the skaters speed up until they are hurtling around the concrete pillars in an attenuated pack; at the far turn, they bunch up; there is a clashing of wheels, and one skater takes a header into the curb.

"Let's line back up!" calls Helena Handbag, when the pack stops to fuss over the woman who fell. "I hate wasting time," she says under her breath.

"So, does everyone agree with the strategy of taking the weakest people out first?" Slice asks near the end of practice, wiping her forehead. "The people that stand straight up -- we need to be hip-checking them. Pay attention to those girls you can knock down."

The air in the parking garage is thick and unmoving, and by 10 p.m., everyone is sweating; their shirts and shorts are patchy with oil and grime from the floor. "Time to stretch!" says Harley Quinn, 28, who lives in Arlington, and the women spit out their mouth guards and bend over their hamstrings.

"Oh, my God, I have B.O.," says Trampon, 25, of Springfield.

"You are so flexible!" Harley Quinn says to Slice, who is pretzeled in a crouch, her face a few inches from the concrete. "Weren't you a cheerleader?"

Slice blows a raspberry and shakes her head. "Yeah," she says. "But that was many moons ago."

THE DC ROLLERGIRLS WERE FOUNDED IN 2006 by Ginger Park, Shannon Flowers and Katelyn Coram, three women who had each been looking for a way to bring roller derby to the District and who met each other through online message boards. The three posted ads on Craigslist and MySpace, put up fliers on local campuses and held their first recruiting party at the D.C. nightclub the Black Cat in January 2006.

The current grass-roots incarnation of roller derby has come a long way from its origins. The ancestor of today's game was created by businessman Leo Seltzer in 1935 as a variation on walkathons and dance marathons -- cheap, long-winded live events popular with small-town audiences. Seltzer, whose productions included ice-sitting contests and novelty weddings (like one in which the bride was dressed in cellophane), took his Transcontinental Roller Derby on a series of long events along Route 66. Men and women -- all wearing tight satin short-shorts and leggings -- alternated stints on a flat track, averaging 110 miles a day, seven days a week; the winner was the first couple to skate 57,000 laps.

Over time, what began as a novelty of endurance evolved into something more closely resembling a sport, as Seltzer adjusted his game to please his crowds. Skaters began lapping each other to score points; the cross-country format, in which teams essentially played one long game from coast to coast, was abandoned in favor of individual, stand-alone bouts. Seltzer implemented a banked track to increase skater speed (and on-track dramatics). According to Keith Coppage, author of *Roller Derby to RollerJam*, the modern game, with its formalized violence, was born during a bout in Miami in 1937, when the larger, slower skaters began throwing elbows and body-checking the smaller, more nimble skaters. With spectators in a frenzy, Seltzer called off the referees and let his skaters battle it out.

For the next 40 years, the popularity of the game ebbed and flowed, its fortunes determined in large part by its relationship to network television. After the game suffered a slump in the 1950s, Seltzer's son Jerry revived it with the Bay Bombers, a San Francisco-based team that led sold-out tours nationwide and sparked a craze that lasted until the franchise folded in 1973.

Though derby was coed from its earliest days, women were always the most popular skaters. Management played up audience favorites such as Josephine "Ma" Bogash, a diabetic in her mid-40s who took up the sport with her son in the 1930s, and later turned the sport's comelier stars, such as Joan Weston and the flashy Ann Calvello, into celebrities. On television, female skaters drew a loyal fan base of both sexes. "Yelling for her favorites," noted a team program from a 1950 bout, "gripped by the tension of a close game, the woman, whether housewife or working girl, forgets the numerous petty problems that bedevil her daily and vents her anger on one or more of the skaters."

After the Seltzers' business folded, there were a few attempts to capitalize on the game's entertainment value. There was a musical, "Roller Derby!" in 1985, the (partly scripted) TV series "RollerJam," from 1999 to 2001, and, most recently, "Rollergirls," a 2006 reality show. But for the most part, roller derby lay dormant. It never caught on as a neighborhood game. No one tried to clean it up for school leagues or intramural teams.

And then, in 2001, a man named Dan Policarpo appeared on the music scene in Austin and started distributing fliers around town, looking for roller skaters. "I was living in a car and going to work," he said in director Bob Ray's roller derby documentary "Hell on Wheels," "and at night I would hit the streets and start talking to people." In the film, which opened this year, Policarpo describes his vision for the league -- "a crazy circus with these clowns . . . stabbing each other, bears on fire on unicycles" -- and his plan for procuring skates in a scheme he calls "pretty illegal."

At Policarpo's first meeting, 50 women showed up, eager to skate. But the skaters' vision soon began to diverge from Policarpo's, and he didn't stick around long enough to see the enterprise to fruition. Still, part of his vision, at least, had taken hold.

"We didn't know the rules," says April Ritzenthaler, one of the founders of the Lonestar Rollergirls, a Texas league. "And no one had even seen a full game," but the women had four captains and a willing constituency, and they ended up running it themselves. "We just liked it because it was violent and fast," she says.

Austin's skaters held a bout at South by Southwest, a giant music festival, and were soon receiving national media attention. The sport's tough, sexy aesthetic and do-it-yourself attitude struck a chord among women in their 20s and 30s. (Although there are men's leagues, all-female teams have dominated the sport in this latest resurgence.) For a sport that is evolving and growing, the Internet is its natural home. In the last few years, leagues have sprung up around the country, a word-of-mouth revival assisted by a legion of MySpace and Facebook pages dedicated to the movement.

For all the game's unruliness, there are plenty of rules. The pack is made up of four skaters from each team, who skate counterclockwise around the track. The jammers, one from each team, start a few seconds later, and attempt to skate through the pack to score points. Skaters in the pack act as both offense and defense, blocking the opposing team's jammer and helping their own get through. Jammers score a point for each skater they pass after their initial pass through the pack. Each scoring session is called a jam; jams last two minutes, or until the jammer in the lead calls it off for tactical reasons. Teams skate as many jams as will fit into a 20- or 30-minute period. Bouts are usually three 20-minute periods or two 30-minute periods.

The rules of the game's governing body, the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, prohibit egregious contact. For those who cuss at each other or at the refs, who windmill their elbows, who intentionally trip other skaters, grab them or throttle them with their own helmet straps, there is an extensive system of penalties and a penalty box. (Some leagues use a child's wading pool. DC Rollergirls uses a dunce cap and a sign that says "Naughty".)

What are players allowed to do? They are allowed to hit each other, hard, shoulder to shoulder; they are allowed to whip each other around opposing players and stop so suddenly that the opponent wipes out; they are allowed to slam into each others' hips, thighs, upper arms and front torsos. WFTDA provides the guidelines, but the game is still evolving.

The DC Rollergirls' first year was mainly spent recruiting and holding all-league practices at area public spaces and rinks. In the fall of 2006, the league elected four captains, who drafted their teams. (During the season, skaters could become "free agents," and captains could negotiate with each other to procure them for their teams.) With no shortage of interested women, the Rollergirls capped their membership at 15 per team, started a waiting list and planned their first public bout for this past March. Since that season opener, the league has held two practices a week (teams can hold additional practices) and one bout a month. This season, still working out its system, the league has played a mix of singles and double-headers. The championship bout will be played October 20 at Dulles SportsPlex, based on the teams' regular-season records.

The league's elected board of seven skaters recently bought out the interest of the original owner, founder and skater Shannon Flowers, for \$2,000, and is applying for nonprofit status. This year, skaters pay the league \$35 to cover the costs of practice space. Other expenses, such as outfits and gear, are paid for by individual teams. Kali Schumitz, league secretary, says that the small profits from ticket sales and merchandise items like T-shirts go into the league.

Perhaps because the league is relatively new, it takes all comers, regardless of skill level. Still, to be considered for a space on a team, skaters must pass a basic skills test, including endurance, speed and the ability to take a hit. Each league player must pass the test a few times a season. Skaters who fail to pay their dues or to attend the minimum number of practices, or who exhibit "unsportsmanship-like behavior," may also be cut, says Schumitz.

It is too early in the life of the Washington league to characterize the type of woman who joins. The league includes elementary school teachers and mothers, scientists and artists. Older leagues have noticed that, more often than not, the women who join are those who never fit easily into more girly society, as April Ritzenthaler from the Austin league notes.

"Many are tomboys or tough girls or women who didn't have a lot of women friends," says Bob Ray, director of "Hell on Wheels." The teams become sororities of a kind. Scare Force One members skate together four or five times a week and socialize together in their free time.

Roller derby is also a cutthroat contact sport. Tempers run hot. The collisions are real and often ugly. Many team Web sites include "scrapebooks," photo galleries of splintered fibulas, pancake-size hematomas and vast tracts of oozing rink burn. But for many women, this is part of the attraction. Says Trampon: "I need to hit people. It makes me feel better. I guess that's why I chose derby."

TO CONDOLEEZZA SLICE, ROLLER DERBY WAS A NATURAL ACTIVITY for someone who spent a good part of her childhood on wheels. She grew up on 17 acres in Fredericksburg, Va., on what she calls a mini-farm. Her father, a motorcyclist, had her riding a three-wheeler by the time she was in middle school and a motorbike a couple of years later. She was also a baton twirler and a cheerleader, and she roller-skated at Skateland in Fredericksburg "until it stopped being cool." In high school, she played a sport in every season, and she dabbled in inner-tube water polo in college. After college, she played on a succession of work-league volleyball and softball teams, but for the most part, she says, these were not competitive enough for her.

A few months after joining the DC Rollergirls, she attended her high school reunion in a green dress that she remembers for the way it showed off her biceps. Until then, she says, "I had always been athletic, but I had never felt strong."

Derby has proved to be an outlet for the frustrations of her job at the cat hospital, which she says can be "extremely stressful." Treating people's pets, she says, "is like treating their children." And, "a lot of people don't have pet insurance, so money is an issue, and I'm the person to talk to about money."

By the time elections were held for the league's four captains, Slice had emerged as a de facto leader among the skaters. "Slice was the one who, if she saw you doing something wrong -- no matter which team you were on -- she would come over and tell you, hey, if you do it this way . . ." says Scare Force One's second co-captain, Harley Quinn.

Slice says she chose her skaters for their ability to play more than one position, "to give a hit and take a hit." The team also ended up with many of the biggest women in the league, and it soon had a reputation for a bruising level of play. Slice says that when she notified two of her picks, the women expressed relief: Everyone they were scared of in the league was on Scare Force One.

NEAR THE END OF WINTER, THE WEATHER HAS FINALLY DRIVEN THE TEAM INDOORS from the parking garage. The first bout is a few weeks away, but persistent colds have plagued the team, whose work-hard, play-hard ethic tends to leave everyone chronically short on sleep. Energy is at an ebb. It is difficult to generate the hard-earned bonhomie of a good practice in a public skating rink, the cheapest option in inclement weather, but where the team is not allowed to scrimmage or run drills. Tonight, the skaters have joined open skate at D'Light Skate N Palace, a cavernous relic from skating's glory days in Temple Hills. For strength training, they do laps in a crouch around the broad wood-plank floor to thunderous R&B, dodging small children and couples with their hands in each others' back pockets.

Halfway through the evening, the skaters retire to the rink's party room, an unheated and dimly lit space with a couple of old Happy Birthday banners strung along one wall, where Slice convenes a meeting around a long table. Although the skaters contribute regularly to their online discussion group, there are always issues for a captain to discuss with her team in person. Tonight, there is the question of a mascot ("Does anyone have any preference about a mascot for our team? Because personally I couldn't give a [expletive] about a mascot"), what the team needs to focus on in practice ("endurance and strategy"), and attendance, a topic on which Slice is particularly inflexible. "We sucked in January," she says, "and we're not starting this month off any better."

Slice narrows her eyes and stares at her team. "Does anyone know how many weeks we have before our bout?" she asks. "Because this is crunch time, and it doesn't feel like crunch time. It feels like a slump." The team sits in silence for a moment, and then the discussion turns to the planning of an overnight party, a team bonding event. When the meeting draws to a close, Helena Handbag and Dame Nation pack up their gear and walk out to the nearly empty parking lot, which has begun to whiten under a light snow.

Nation, 22, has a black bob, an understated but precise manner and several piercings on her face. She is co-captain as well as the team's tactician, with a knack for information-

gathering and for teaching new strategies and techniques. Nation spends a lot of time on Internet chat groups of derby coaches, referees and statisticians, tracking and contributing to the evolution of the game. When she travels for work -- she's a research fellow in cognitive neuroscience at the National Institutes of Health -- she often stops by the local league, questions in hand.

Nation grew up playing sports but found that her options after she left college were unsatisfying. She says that the guys on her coed work softball team "would literally run into my zone and take a catch I'd called -- and they didn't seem to think there was anything wrong with this behavior." Her parents, who are art historians, once did what they could to discourage their daughter's athleticism, enforcing a "one sport at a time" rule. This did not dissuade Nation from playing basketball and softball, learning tae kwon do and small-boat sailing and "imitating the American Gladiators," the short-lived precursor to today's reality survival shows, in which regular people battled spandexed bodybuilders. Her parents have, however, been supportive about derby. "When I told them I joined up, they told me about my maiden aunts who watched banked track every Sunday night in the '70s," and whose interest in derby, she says, "was pretty alarming family gossip at the time."

Nation's first name is Rebecca, but she asked that her full name be withheld from this article. "I'm trying to ensure that anyone Googling my real name only turns up professional stuff," she says. She hasn't told anyone in her office she skates derby, and when she skated into a wall and her face swelled up, she told her co-workers that she had been in a car accident. Plus, her boss, she says, "makes me take out my piercings when I come in, so I don't think she'd be really excited about derby." This fall, Nation has begun a doctorate in cognitive neuroscience at Duke University in Durham, N.C., and is transferring to the local league, the Carolina Rollergirls. "When I win the Nobel Prize," she says, "or get a teaching job with tenure, I'll come out of the derby closet."

IN THE MONTH BEFORE THE FIRST BOUT, Scare Force One is practicing four or five times a week, for two or three hours at a stretch. They work on their endurance and form, and they put together a blocking move, which they dub, with their typical bawdy humor, the Great Wall of 'Gina. They scrimmage hard against each other and beat the league's other teams in practices. And then they go to the East Coast Derby Extravaganza.

The ECDE, hosted by the Philadelphia Rollergirls, is a two-day, three-rink festival of roller derby, in which leagues from up and down the East Coast skate against each other as well as in mixed-league scrimmages with themes: brunettes versus blondes, tattoos versus no tattoos, tall versus short and "T versus A." The event falls on the weekend before the DC league's first public bout, which has deterred many of DC's skaters from attending, to avoid the risk of injury.

In typical DC league practices, skaters have tended to pull their punches, not wanting to hurt each other or themselves. Many of the skaters at the extravaganza are from older, more established leagues, and the seniority shows: Their packs are fast, and they hit hard.

Scare Force One, with nearly half of the team in attendance, gets pounded. On Saturday night, Helena Handbag (or Hellie, as she is known in the league), gets hit in the face and spends some time propped against the side of the rink looking stunned, one hand trembling in the air.

For Hellie, who has no background in skating or athletics, derby was less a sport than a life that she fell into. The 37-year-old from Northwest Washington is outgoing and brightly sarcastic, with a pixyish grin. A freelance graphic designer, she has a degree in graphic design and photography from the Corcoran College of Art and Design. Before joining the league, she had taken a job as a bouncer at the 9:30 club, which she sees now as part of a search for a particularly aggressive kind of physical activity, a search that eventually led to derby.

Shortly after Hellie began skating derby, her marriage ended. While this was, to a certain extent, timing -- "Clearly, I needed to get a divorce anyway," she says -- she credits derby with providing her the impetus and the nerve. "Derby does so much for so many people in different ways. For me, it was ending this horrible, horrible marriage that I had been miserable in." She began dating Nation, whom she met in the league. "The joke is that I skated without a helmet and turned gay," she says, "and now I skate with a helmet because I don't want to get hit again and go back to being straight."

In the summer of 2006, prompted by her new athleticism and to help pay for her divorce, she entered a Jell-O-wrestling contest at Asylum, the Adams Morgan nightclub that is one of the league's main sponsors, which carried a \$500 prize. Though she was aware that the event might be more show than sport, she dressed athletically, in layers of jog bras and tank tops that she tested by having people try to pull them off before the match. She won successive rounds handily, although, she says, the judges deducted points "because I was wearing pants. Everyone else was wearing lingerie." The easiest way to get points seemed to be to let one's top slip off. In one of the final rounds, she says, she wrestled her opponent over to the judges and pulled up the woman's top. Hellie won the contest.

Hellie is one of the team's strongest jammers. She also skates back blocker, a position that anchors the rear of the pack. "As a jammer, you know exactly what your job is. As a blocker, you have to think about what to do," she says. "I had a really hard time learning how to be part of the pack."

At ECDE, Hellie is scheduled to skate again shortly, though she still seems shaken from her collision. A few minutes before 9, Slice crouches down next to her.

"I can skate," Hellie says, preemptively.

"I know you can skate," Slice says comfortably. "The question is, should you skate?" She cocks her head and studies Hellie. "Is that too mommy of me?"

In a moment, it's decided: Hellie will wait until the following day to skate, in a bout against the Connecticut Rollergirls, another first-year league.

By the end of the weekend, the bouts have taken a toll. Everyone is bruised and weary. Slice has taken a block with her shoulder and can't lift her arm; Michele Pevahouse, 31, of Alexandria, whose derby name is Six5onSkates (so named for her height), has broken two ribs in a collision with a blocker on another team. In retrospect, Slice calls the weekend the team's eye-opener.

"That was our 'Holy [expletive], these girls are really, really going to hit us,'" she says.

DERBY HOLDS A PECULIAR POSITION IN THE PANTHEON OF WOMEN'S SPORTS. While it may not be the only rough, full-contact women's sport -- there are numerous women's professional football leagues, for example -- it has quickly become one of the most popular. "The idea that women are naturally less aggressive than men is bull [expletive]," says Alison Piepmeier, director of the women's and gender study program at the College of Charleston. Instead, she says, "women are trained to channel that aggression in certain ways," like sarcasm and cattiness, rather than physical dominance.

As young girls, "women are much more punished for aggressive behavior and made to feel like they've violated some kind of code," says Carole Oglesby, an applied sports psychology consultant.

For women, Oglesby says, sports can be a way to return to what she calls a "healthy self-advocacy," making good use of one's power. "I think there is a joy, a kind of pleasure, in making an all-out effort at something," she says, "not saying, I want to break a bone, but saying, I'm going for a goal, and, by God, I'm going to get it."

As Slice notes, the particular attraction of roller derby for her is not necessarily how physical it is but how mental it is: a rapid, endless series of opportunities to outwit, outmaneuver and generally thwart one's opponents. Of course, on some level, Slice says, it's all physical. "When you're blocking someone," she acknowledges, "you want to see them get a little air."

Whether derby girls are born or made, the game does seem to be played by women for whom, as for many men, physicality is a means of expression and a certain brash toughness has been the vernacular. "The biggest draw of derby for me," Nation says, "is the chance to be a part of a community of women who value athleticism, a community where I'm not only allowed but expected to be both female and physically competent."

At a team bonding event at a lake house over the summer, says Slice, some of the women ended up body-slamming each other off the dock into the water at 3 in the morning. And sometimes Six5 and Harley Quinn stand outside the nightclub Asylum at the end of an evening out and play a game in which Harley slaps passersby, either men or women, on the rear end. "At the last after-party," Harley wrote in an e-mail, "we had quite an audience . . . Some people walked by several times trying to get a smack." When people

complain or approach Harley for a fight, Six5 steps forward imposingly, which tends to settle the issue.

Piepmeyer says activities like these reflect a turning of the tables.

"It's common for women's bodily space to be invaded," she says, "so it's surprising to us to see women doing it. When men do it, it's just the way things are."

Roller derby is arguably the only women's sport that makes a point of its femininity. In the same way that the skaters' names are exaggeratedly tough and cartoony, their uniforms are almost caricatures of sexiness -- campy, theatrical get-ups that riff on traditional types, such as stewardess, schoolgirl, geisha girl. The result is a kind of repurposed burlesque, one that can threaten as well as invite. The effects of this combination vary. Slice's boyfriend, whom she met snowboarding, enjoys the company of the team and regularly attends the league's events, as do many boyfriends and husbands, though not all.

"These women are playing with patriarchal ideas of women's sexuality," says Piepmeyer. For these reasons, roller derby today is often associated with feminism's so-called third wave (the first wave was suffrage and the second, the bra-burners of the 1960s), a somewhat controversial designation that includes alt-rock and "riot grrrls," ushered in, in part, by rocker Courtney Love -- women who claim the right to be sexy and still be tough and feminist.

Whether this attitude sets the whole feminist movement back 100 years is the subject of bitter debate among academics and in the blogosphere. Female sexiness, some feminists argue, has always meant submissiveness, and tough, even aggressive women who also want to be sexy are borrowing trouble. The combination of sexiness and toughness can cause problems with men who misread or ignore the signals. In one scene in the documentary "Hell on Wheels," about the Austin roller derby league, a male spectator is ejected from a game for groping a skater. "We walk a fine line between sexy and slutty," the announcer says to the crowd. "And crotch-grabbing is slutty."

The tough-sexy combination also adds a wrinkle to the dynamic of standard male-female interactions. "I won't ever back down because it shows weakness," wrote Six5 in an e-mail. "Once you show weakness, you invite more aggression towards yourself." Last December, she says, she was in a bar with some of her teammates when a group of drunk guys came over. "They were trying to holler at us, and we weren't having it," she says. The guys persisted, calling the women derogatory names, says Six5. The situation "escalated," and it ended when she punched one guy in the face several times and had to be pulled off by the bouncer.

But it is this combination, Piepmeyer says, that is "part of what I think is really feminist about roller derby. These women are saying, I'm claiming ownership of this body, and I'm willing to fight you for it."

AT THE ALL-LEAGUE PRACTICE THE WEEK AFTER ECDE, many of Scare Force One's skaters are under the weather, in addition to nursing the battle scars from their weekend, which they are keeping to themselves. "Some people aren't telling anyone because they don't want to expose our weaknesses," says Slice, who has a chest cold and a tubercular hack. "But I say, let a bitch try to hit me in my left shoulder, and I'll expose somebody's weakness." Someone asks Six5, watching from the sidelines in her street clothes, why she isn't skating.

"I'm on my period," she says frostily, though she is really nursing her broken ribs.

By Scare Force One's team practice at Dulles SportsPlex on Friday night, the debut bout has sold out, which has unnerved everyone. "I wanted to vomit all day," says Katelyn Coram, 24, (Slambam Thankyouma'am). Although it is the night before the bout, Scare Force One seems eager to channel its apprehension into a productive practice, and the women end up spending a couple of hours working on plays to break up walls. When practice is over, they linger on the floor.

"The next time you come in here, there's going to be 800 people looking at you," says Hellie, and everyone groans.

By the next day, game day, the weather has turned gray and damp. Hellie and Nation are on the road to Dulles SportsPlex, where they have been playing this season, by midday. "For the first time in my life, I'm early, out of fear," Hellie says. The two look a little bleary. They both have head colds and were up until 3 that morning, working on the team's uniforms. They stop to pick up Harley at her apartment. Harley has her blond hair up in pigtails and curled into ringlets, and a slash of black eyeliner on her eyelids, like Brigitte Bardot. "Who's nervous?" she says, bouncing in her seat.

At the SportsPlex, the canvas walls that divide the space into individual rinks have been drawn up, and the vast indoor plain of the arena stretches the length of the building. The floor is empty except for the referees, including one who calls herself DayGlo Divine, whose helmet has a black Mohawk that mimics her own fluorescent pink one. Slice's brother Doug has taken on the job of team manager for the bout, and he studies a clipboard with the team's lineups.

By 3:45 p.m., the line to get in has looped around the lobby and is out the door. Many skaters' parents have come, as well as boyfriends, husbands and kids. Nation, who has put silver spikes in her face piercings for the bout, finds her parents, a tall, patrician couple who have come down from southern Pennsylvania, and seats them in the reserved section, where they peruse the program. Most of the rest of the section is taken up by Slice's family. The group is 20 altogether, including her father's motorcycle buddies and Slice's grandmother, who has driven up from North Carolina. Hellie's parents are sitting in seats marked "Reserved for Mr. and Mrs. Handbag, Sr." Hellie, wearing her Jell-O-wrestling championship belt, which is as big as a dinner plate, has slipped her skates on over her bare feet and is skating over the taped lines of the track to see how they feel.

Slice takes a lap. Her eyes are bright. "I'm so [expletive] scared," she says. "Is my lipstick smeared?"

The first bout, between the Cherry Blossom Bombshells and the DC DemonCats, is packed. By the time of the second bout, between Scare Force One and the Secretaries of Hate (or the Haters, as Scare Force One calls them), the crowd is exchanging chants. The Haters are revving up the audience, making laps with a big banner that says "HATE" in silver letters, along with a couple of small children wearing T-shirts that say "Hater Tot." Scare Force One is bunched at the edge of the track awaiting introductions.

Slice stands in the middle of her team. She has the same impassive expression as she does in practice, but her jaw is tight. She believes her skaters are ready. Still, everyone is on edge.

"This is just another Thursday night practice," she tells her team, above the din. "We're going to go out and whip some bitches' asses. Look at each other," she says. "And don't let them through. If I see you not looking, I'm going to take you out and put someone else in." The Haters are taking their introductory laps to an earsplitting reception from the crowd. Scare Force One's skaters nod briefly, their eyes on the track.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen, clear the runways. We're about to be invaded by Scare Force One," thunders the announcer, whose voice is promptly swallowed by a wall of noise. Harley, in a pair of black aviator glasses, does a behind-the-leg hold around the top of the track. Slice swoops through her lap, bent low into the crowd with her arms held out like wings. Trampon has "HI MOM" spelled out in tape on her helmet.

The match is a blur of skates and helmets, its shifting tensions broken by the dull thuds of colliding skaters. Early in the first period, a skater on the Haters throws a shoulder at Hellie as Hellie tries to pass, catching her on the hip and knocking her out of the pack. On the next lap, the same skater lunges at Hellie again. At top speed, Hellie shifts her weight almost imperceptibly, and the other skater misses her completely, spilling onto the track. In subsequent laps, the women who take aim at Hellie get addled upon contact and fall over in a tangle of skates or swirl away in a tailspin. Nation, unflappable, anchors the middle of the pack. Skating jammer, Harley sails weightlessly through the scrum; in the second jam, she darts through a brief window on the inside of the pack and throws her arms up triumphantly. Scare Force One has a strong lead.

But the Haters have some heavy hitters, including their captain, Mother Clucker, a quick bruiser of a skater with a bone-rattling block, and their jammers, Whiskey Tango and Lois Slain, are pugnacious. The crowd, true to roller derby tradition, seems more interested in a battle than a blowout, and at one point, when the Haters' jammer makes it through the pack first during one jam, the screams are deafening. "I thought I told you no points!" Slice yells at her team. "Why do they have two?"

In the second half, the crackling energy has leveled into a fast, tight spar. The Haters make up some of the difference in the scores. As the half progresses, Scare Force One's

pack begins to cohere, the skaters slipping up and back in the pack like pistons in a machine. In the reserved section, Slice's contingent is on its feet. Her father has ahold of the back of the chair in front of him and is rattling it. When Slice's opposing jammer wipes out, her father and his friends hoot and yell. In the back, Slice's grandmother has rolled up her program and is clutching it to her chest.

When the last whistle blows, the crowd is on its feet. The final score is 78 to 31, Scare Force One. The team takes a victory lap, and then one of her teammates tackles Hellie, who is the team's high-scoring jammer, and she disappears under a pile of skaters.

After the bout, in the locker room, the team strips off its equipment, adrift in a sea of duffel bags and helmets. Hellie appears in the doorway. "Team Awesome," she calls, and the locker room vibrates with cheers.

"Let me bask in the awesomeness," says Slice.

The arena takes a while to empty. In little knots around the track, skaters reunite with their families. Slice's father, waving his arms, rehashes some moment with Slice at the far end of the track. Hellie's mother, a demure woman who spent the entire bout sitting in her seat looking vexed, is swinging her hip at Hellie in a passable imitation of a hip-check. Little girls cluster around the skaters for their autographs. A group of military vets, who came to the bout for their "family day," get their picture taken with some of the team, including Trampon, who flexes her biceps, Mr. Universe-style, for the camera.

At the after-party, at Asylum, the bar is packed with well-wishers, including skaters from other leagues. Some skaters have gone to dinner with their parents, but gradually Scare Force One trickles in: Harley, Slice and her brother Doug, Hellie and Nation. They look exhausted but serene, like climbers at a summit. Midway through the evening, the team clusters around one end of the bar, hugging and hollering, and condenses into a single jubilant mob. On Monday, the women will go back to their regular lives, back to their jobs in the real world, where their primary responsibility is for themselves. Here, tonight, they are part of the pack.