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Derby Life: A Crash Course In The Incredible Sport Of Roller Derby



Synopsis

Roller derby is an incredible, hard-hitting sport: a cultural phenomenon with a storied past dating back to 1935. Modern roller derby, restarted in Austin, Texas, in 2001, has been one of the fastest-growing sports of the 21st century. The modern punk-inspired DIY amateur athletic movement has spread to almost 2000 leagues all over the globe in less than fifteen years. This book can't teach you how to skate, but it will get you up to speed on everything else! With chapters on the history of roller derby, rules and strategy, exercise and nutrition, and the gear you'll need to play, *Derby Life* will teach you what you need to know to get rolling. Veteran skaters will appreciate chapters on building mental toughness, dealing with derby drama, and getting back in the game after an injury. *Derby Life* also includes advice from roller derby greats such as Bonnie Thunders, Scald Eagle, Swede Hurt, and others, and personal stories and beautiful photographs from derby people all over the world.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Gutpunch Press; 1 edition (July 18, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1943316007

ISBN-13: 978-1943316007

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.7 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #329,048 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in [Books > Sports & Outdoors > Individual Sports > Rollerskating & Rollerblading](#) #98 in [Books > Sports & Outdoors > Extreme Sports](#)

Customer Reviews

Margot Atwell has been playing roller derby since 2007 and skates under the name Em Dash for the world champion Gotham Girls Roller Derby league. She's the co-founder and editor-in-chief of [derbylife.com](#) and has written for publications such as *Derbylife*, *Derby News Network*, *Derby Central*, *fiveonfive* magazine, *Moviefone.com*, the *Huffington Post*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Publishing Perspectives*, and others. She is the co-author of *The Insider's Guide to Book Publishing Success* (Beaufort Books, 2013). She lives in Brooklyn with her tiny dog, Schlitz.

If you are interested in becoming a skater in the amazing sport of Roller Derby this is the best way to start. After reading this you will enter the sport with more knowledge and information than most of the skaters you admire had when starting out, including the author. This book covers every aspect of the sport starting with it's history from the invention of the roller skate, the beginnings and evolution of Roller Derby as an exhibition of endurance that it's creator Leo Seltzer turned into a sport that filled Madison Square Garden, through it's various incarnations through the sixties and seventies sustained by Leo's son Jerry right up to it's rebirth in Austin, Texas and it's becoming the fastest growing phenomenon in sports today. Here a skater will learn practical advice on conditioning, nutrition, the mental aspects of the game, and equipment, right on down to how leagues are structured and run. There are the personal stories written by skaters themselves on their journey's through and experiences in the culture of Roller Derby that explain why these women work so hard and sacrifice so much to play this sport they love. For the fan, learning more about what these athletes must do in order to play and what it takes to keep a league and the sport going, will only add to your appreciation and enjoyment of the sport. For anyone that has a loved one or friend that plays, this book will give you insight into why they have what many see as a crazy obsession when it comes to Roller Derby. Finally, if you are a sports fan who has grown sick of the money and corruption that seems to dominate every aspect of sports today, this book will open a window to a place where world class athletes truly play a sport for the love of the game. The author, Margot Atwell is someone who failed at her first try out, only to go on to become a skater on the legendary Gotham Girls All Stars. Margot writes from a unique perspective as a skater, a person involved in various aspects of running a league, a trainer and as a well known writer for Derby News Network, five on five magazine, Derby Central and as Co-founder and editor-in-chief of Derbylife.com an online resource for everything Derby. In the end this is a great story of women working together to build something that would empower themselves and other women, making it grow into an all inclusive community that all other sports could learn from.

I have a confession: I love roller derby, that incredible sport where women on skates speed counterclockwise around an oval track trying to score points. And I have been actively involved in a non-skating capacity for about six years. I was a fan as a kid, but roller derby has changed over those many years. While unique derby names are still around, the glamour costumes and glitz is being replaced by an emphasis on athleticism and skill. A flat track has replaced the banked track as the primary track style (though there are some banked track leagues) and safety is everyone's number one priority. No more sending the

opponent over the rail or stiff-arms. Roller derby is a fast growing sport, an international sport, with new leagues forming regularly. But many people still don't understand it or what it takes to participate. Help is here, and it's in the form of Margot Atwell's marvelous new book, *Derby Life: A Crash Course in the Incredible Sport of Roller Derby*. This derby introduction/manual/memoir is perfect for those who want to know about the sport, are thinking of participating, or are veteran skaters who want a handy, concise reminder of how to improve their skills. After a description of "What Is Roller Derby?" and a short history of derby, as it's often called, Em Dash explains who the participants are from skaters to volunteers and gives a short description of what role each person plays in the sport. Surprisingly, there can be almost as many "support people" involved in a bout (as the games are called) as there are skaters. That means that if you want to participate in derby but don't skate, there's a place for you. The chapter "How to Get Rolling" gives a comprehensive look at the equipment needed to skate. Skates and pads and helmets, oh, my! It almost sounds like one is gearing up for battle, but derby is a full contact sport, and, as I said, safety is the sport's number one concern. Injuries will and do occur, as they do in any sport, but the equipment puts the odds in safety's favor. Em dash includes some of the skills needed to play, and helpful information on where to find instructional videos by skating stars Sarah Hipel of the Texas Rollergirls, Kamikaze Kitten (retired from the London Rollergirls) and the San Diego Derby Dolls. A chapter on "Trying Out for a League" offers information on that process and is followed by a section called "Fresh Meat." Fresh Meat are a league's new skaters who are in training to learn the skills of the sport. Leagues may differ on how long a skater is "fresh meat." It may be until the skaters meet certain skill levels or have their first bout. Em Dash wisely avoids getting too specific about the rules because as she points out, as the sport evolves, the rules change. She does, however, talk about general rules, and lists several different organizations that have their own rulesets. She also talks about "derby culture" and says "Roller derby is an exceptionally open, welcoming, accepting community." Leagues are like families, and just like other families sometimes there are squabbles. Em Dash acknowledges this and offers ways to handle those moments. She also explains the role of a critical derby component the Afterparty. But there is more to derby than the skating and the Afterparty. A

lot more. In chapter 9, *Making Your League Run*, Em Dash talks about the “business end of derby” of the committees and boards and stuff necessary to make it all work. I liked this chapter because a lot of people who want to be derby skaters aren’t aware that there is a commitment beyond practice and bouting. Someone has to get the sponsors, someone has to set up the venue, someone has to handle the merch and those someones are usually the League members. The commitment to derby involves more than just skating. A brief chapter on *Levels of Competition* is followed by a key chapter, *How to Improve*. Here Em Dash turns to many of her colleagues from the sport’s top leagues to have them offer their viewpoints. This is one of the strong points of this book: not only do we get advice and tips from Em Dash herself, but also we learn from other all-star skaters. This is a fantastic chapter, and if you highlighted the important stuff, you’d have to highlight every word. The next chapter, *The Mental Game*, augments the previous chapter and the two together are a dynamic training guide that a skater at any level can use and should refer to again and again. No one wants to see a skater injured. Yet injuries happen, as they do in any sport. In chapter 13, *Injuries*, Em Dash brings in Chicago’s Windy City Rollers physician Papa Doc to talk about this from a medical perspective. Then Em Dash offers suggestions on how to handle being a sidelined skater. This is a very helpful chapter for two reasons. First, there is a natural tendency for an injured skater to want to return to the track quickly, not always wanting to wait until she has fully recovered. And second, Em Dash offers suggestion for the sidelined skater to still be involved and how she can best re-enter the track. The chapter on *Diet and Exercise* offers a lot of information on, well, diet and exercise. As a confirmed couch potato, I skimmed it but it looked like good advice and if you’re gonna skate, you should read it and heed it. That stuff’s important. Really. If you don’t take care of your body, you won’t last long as a skater. Derby skaters are athletes, and train as athletes, and being fit goes a long way in preventing injuries. Chapter 15, *Keep It Rolling*, talks about things not often talked about: the changes that occur over time, such as a skater’s mental edge, burnout, and stress. Em Dash looks at each of these and a few other situations and offers practical methods for dealing with them. And once again she seeks other perspectives and turns to her colleagues and asks them how to rekindle passion for derby. And finally, she faces what might be

inevitable: it's time to retire. But, she assures us, there is life after retirement, and in the following chapter Em Dash gives several practical suggestions on how to handle that. The next part of the book is called "Derby Stories" and sixteen skaters recount how derby impacted their lives. There are stories of recovery and redemption, of accepting oneself, of mutual support, of being short, of hitting the track in your 40s, of using skating to deal with cancer, with loss. All are candid, and sometimes brutally frank. There is a piece about going to practice that is written with such rhythmic repetition that it is reminiscent of the sound of the pack's wheels as they whirl around the track. Another piece explains why there is crying in derby and another offers bite-size bits of sage advice distilled from years of experience. There is humor and pathos in these stories, honesty and humanity and humility and vulnerability and pride and all the things that make us human. The author recounts her own story of how she tried out for the legendary Gotham Girls, made the first cut, but not the second. Later, encouraged by another Gotham skater, she tried again and made the League. And it is her wonderful, prophetic final line in her story that sums it up for not only herself, but also for everyone who has ever joined the derby family in any role: "I couldn't imagine how much my life was about to change." In short, "Derby Life: A Crash Course in the Incredible Sport of Roller Derby" is an excellent book, a well-written, perfectly balanced derby introduction/manual, and is of value to a wide range of people -- from those who want to know about the sport, to fresh meat, to veterans who need a refresher and a reminder now and then. If you're involved with derby, you'll want to go back to it again and again. I was particularly impressed not only with the wealth of information presented, but also with the informal, casual style of the writing, with just the right amount of humor. Reading it was like talking with a friend. While Em Dash wrote the book, she was generous in giving her colleagues a voice, and it was nice to hear those voices. Their comments throughout the book reinforced and gave credence to what the author wrote. The book has numerous citations and additional resources for those who want more information. There is a listing of selected skate shops in the United States and elsewhere and contributor biographies. And, of course, there are pictures. If you want to know about roller derby or are a part of the derby family, you need this book.

You don't even have to play derby to find this book enjoyable. I'm still new to my team and the sport and I found this book very helpful. Not only does it give you the history of derby (which gave me great pride in being a part of it), it has also helped me with my mental game as I learn to better my

skating abilities. I think anyone remotely interested in this wonderful sport should read it.

Em Dash (aka Margot Atwell) knows the scene and tells about it with ease, affection, and authority. She has done a mountain of research, including many interviews so that we actually get a real picture of what Roller Derby is like and what it means to those who play it and those who watch it. It, with tap dancing, is a purely American invention and deserves wider attention and support. I personally like everything about it including the Derby names which include such as Agent Orange, Jeckle and Heidi, Bonnie Thunders, Scald Eagle, and our own Houston Psych Ward Sirens. And many thanks Em for explaining what scissoring is and how it is done. Without you I would have never known.

As a gift - considering roller derby as a hobby.

My daughter liked it.

Great condition!

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