

ROLLER DERBY DOLLS



TEACHERS' NOTES

You have to have motivation, you have to have determination, you have to have ovaries or at least be a woman, you have to be athletic, you have to take yourself seriously and you have to have self-respect.

— Texas Roller Derby Girl, Nadia Keen, AKA Smarty Pants

Synopsis

In the sprawling outer suburbs of Brisbane, a revolution is brewing. A sassy group of women from all walks of life has a dream: to resurrect the lost sport of full-contact roller derby in Australia.

Led by their president Evil Doll, and despite none having experience in business, the roller girls have set up a roller derby league, one of 220 now dotted around the globe.

Born in the United States in the 1920s, full-contact roller derby took off around the world before fading into obscurity in the 1980s. Thirty years later, it has sprung up again, driven by the passion of suburban women: nurses, artists, tattooists and driving instructors—wives and mothers by day, hell on wheels at night.

Many are heavily tattooed and pierced, living lifestyles out of step with mainstream society. They are rebels, misfits, rockabillys and punks. But on the rink they are a team, setting aside their daily lives, adopting derby names such as Doris Daynger and Nicky Knockout and wearing fishnet stockings, hotpants, striped socks, corsets and studded belts.

Roller Derby Dolls is a story of female empowerment, friendship and struggles—all on old-school roller skates.

Curriculum Links

Roller Derby Dolls could be used in the context of Cultural Studies, Women's Studies, Personal Development, Health, Physical Education, English and Media. This lively short film addresses important issues in a fun forum and would make an excellent adjunct to any study of gender roles, personal identities, and subcultures. It provides highly engaging and thought-provoking material for secondary students of all ages to grapple with.

The activities and discussion points in this guide are designed to extend literacy skills, while also drawing on art, communication and ICT domains. Teachers are advised to pick and choose activities that coincide with the personal and curriculum needs of their cohort, rather than to work through the guide sequentially. Some teachers might like to select some of the activities and present them as a matrix, with students required to complete say four out of 12 options. (This structure fosters personal responsibility for work and allows student choice, while targeting specific assessment areas.)

FILM AUSTRALIA

NB Teachers are to be advised that *Roller Derby Dolls* contains some coarse language. This program received a PG (Parental Guidance Recommended) classification for its broadcast.



Discussion Points & Activities

Roller Derby: 'Hell On Wheels!'

'It's about getting on skates and knocking the shit out of each other.'

— Evil Doll

'I used to play netball but I got chucked out because I was too violent.'

— Mad Hatter

- Who is the audience for roller derby?
- Is the audience for this film the same as the audience who attends roller derby events?
- 'Roller derby is more theatre than sport.' Discuss.
- 'Roller derby is only for rebels and misfits.' Discuss.
- What other sports or cultural events/spectacles share similar elements to roller derby?
- What reputation does the sport have?
- Do you have to be an exhibitionist to play roller derby?
- In what ways could it be said that roller derby promotes diversity and fosters self-expression?
- How many leagues currently operate in Australia? What do you think might make the Brisbane league featured in this film distinctive from the hundreds of other leagues operating around the world?
- Roller derby is a fast growing women's sport. Four years ago there were two leagues in America; now there are 220 in the world.
- What do you think accounts for its evident popularity?

- What are the rules of roller derby? Make an instruction booklet on how to play the game, popular strategies, objectives, set-up (two teams of five women, a pivot, three blockers and a jammer), etc. See the Australian Roller Derby website for a downloadable beginner's guide (See references).
- What are the most common injuries sustained in roller derby?
- Why do some people like to do things in which they may be hurt?
- After watching the film, does roller derby appeal to you, either as a sport you might consider participating in or as a spectacle you would be interested in attending? Why/why not?
- Design a marketing campaign to launch a new roller derby league. Consider which aspects of the sport you would promote; who you would pitch it to; possible sponsors you might approach; alternative promotional avenues; etc. Annotate your campaign outline, fully articulating the reasoning behind your choices and decisions. Include a poster for an upcoming event.
- Design a board game based on roller derby.
- Construct a diorama of a roller derby event.
- Devise your own roller derby league, with four teams. Give the teams and their members names, costumes, identities, attitudes, personal and professional backgrounds, etc.
- How has the sport changed since the 1960s/1970s?
- What are the key differences between men's and women's roller derby?
- In pairs, present an interview to the class, where one student is an American roller derby legend and the other is a TV journalist. What questions would you like answered?
- Write a commentary of a roller derby game. Consider tactics for making it exciting. What adjectives might you use? How might you heighten suspense? Perform this commentary to the class.
- Describe the 'do-it-yourself' ethic that characterises the organisation and administration of roller derby. Is this part of its charm?
- Devise a program for a weekend roller derby camp.
- What sorts of skills would the women practise at their training sessions?
- Where do you think Australian roller derby might be a decade from now? Do you think Evil Doll and the women featured in this film will still be skating? What other interests might they be pursuing?



Talkin' The Talk: Roller Derby Slang

Blockers: Each team has up to three blockers on the track. They make 'holes' in the pack for their jammer to get through and block the opposing team's jammer.

Booty block: The art of using your derrière to block the jammer.

Bout: A roller derby game.

Can opener: A lethal block.

Cutting the track: Crossing the inside track boundary to rejoin the pack after a fall.

Fishnet burn: A stippled effect that comes from falling while wearing fishnet stockings.

Fresh meat: The affectionate term for new recruits who will eventually need to pass a skills test before being placed on a team.

Jam: A two-minute scoring session.

Jammer: Sprint skater (marked by a star on her helmet) who breaks through the pack and scores points by lapping opposing team members.

Lead jammer: The first jammer to break through the pack calls an end to the jam by putting her hands on her hips.

Pivot: Blocker (marked with a striped helmet) who sets the pace of the pack by skating in front. Pivot's also play offence and defence with the jammers.

Rail hugger: A skater who won't let go of the sides of the track.

Wall: Several blockers skating together in a line across the track to block the jammer.

Whip: A move a blocker uses to 'sling-shot' a jammer through the pack.

- Invent some of your own terms of derby slang.
- Why is it offensive for a man to call a woman a 'bitch', while it is almost a term of endearment with these women? If time permits, teachers could introduce Lenny Bruce into this discussion; his work turns on the very nature of obscenity.



- Define the roller derby subculture.
- Do you belong to any subcultures? (Consider sporting associations, surfing, musical tastes, fashion sense, etc.)
- Choose one woman featured in this film and analyse her personal style, accounting for influences and the aesthetics of how she presents herself to the world. Compare and contrast your sense of personal style with this character's.
- Miriam is a married, working mother of two.' Consider this plain statement and the stereotypes it evokes. How does Miriam challenge the limitations of that definition/role?

The Dolls: Questions of Style and Identity

Name	AKA (derby name)	Occupation
Anita Knight	Evil Doll	driving instructor
Miriam Gleeson	Mimsy Mayhem	tattooist
Vicki Lind	Doris Daynger	factory manager
Carla Baxter	Dead Meat	artist
Nicole Ennever	Nicky Knockout	dental nurse
Nadia Keen	Smarty Pants	Texas roller derby girl

'You've got to be the one to say, "Hey, I am the greatest, I am good, just look at me", that's what you've got to keep doing.'

– Rita Mackiewicz, roller derby fore-sister from the 1970s

- What can you find out about the Sun State Roller Girls? Consider their common goals: 'to have fun, to push their physical limits, and to challenge the way people view women'.
 - Compile a list of adjectives to describe the women we meet in this film.
 - In what ways are these women 'dolls'?
 - What *physical/sporting* abilities are required to succeed in roller derby?
 - What *personal* qualities are required to succeed in roller derby?
 - How do the Brisbane women who feature in this film differ from the Melbourne league? Consider Mimsy Mayhem's statement, 'It feels like being the bad girls of Australian roller derby is the right thing for us Brisbane girls'.
 - What is 'psychobilly' style?
 - What are some of the reasons people get tattoos? Conduct a poll to see how many students would consider tattoos and their reasons for and against. Should teenagers be allowed to get tattoos? Why/why not? Draw a design for a tattoo that would have some personal meaning for you.
- Discuss the following quote from Miriam:

It's kind of like I feel like I can be myself finally and this is an environment where the style that I like is not only accepted, it's kind of the norm. . . The big difference between Miriam Gleeson and Mimsy Mayhem is that Mimsy Mayhem doesn't have a husband or two kids or a job. She just skates around the rink and has fun.
 - Draw up two columns. In one, make a list of attributes conventionally regarded as feminine. In the second column, list all the ways the roller derby women flaunt and subvert these stereotypes.
 - Why do you think aggression is typically positioned in opposition to femininity?
 - In what ways could roller derby be said to empower these women? Why does Nicole Ennever, the nurse, feel she needs roller derby? Consider her statement:

It doesn't matter if they [my friends] get hurt, and I don't have to run to anyone's rescue. . . that's part of being a roller derby girl—just knocking the crap out of the people you love the most.
 - Do you have anything in your life that operates, in a similar way to roller derby does for these women, as a source of exhilaration and liberation?
 - How important is the fantasy aspect of roller derby for the girls, as an escape from the mundane, everyday pressures of life?
 - Evil Doll says, 'There's a saying that "roller derby saved my life". I think that it's done that for so many women. It's been a beautiful experience.' Expand on her comment here.
 - Invent your own roller derby persona. Draw and label your self-portrait as a roller derby star.
 - 'The roller derby rink is a privileged space for enacting empowering and challenging visions of the female self.' Discuss.
 - Discuss the following voice-over statement: 'In the new derby, style matters as much as skating'.

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- Evil Doll says:

I'm forty this year. I've been told several times that I should grow up and mature. Why? Because society says I have to? I mean, look at me—like I could care less.

- What do you think a forty-year-old woman should be like? Why do you think this? Where do your ideas come from? Should Evil Doll 'grow up'? What might this mean? Has anyone told you to grow up? What aspects of Evil Doll's character, look, or lifestyle might be considered 'immature'?
- Mimsy Mayhem: 'There were stars in our eyes the minute we stepped onto that rink [for the first time]. What is meant by the expression 'stars in our eyes'?



- Mimsy Mayhem says that working in a bank 'or something like that' 'would never have been an option for me'. Is she perpetuating another stereotype about people who work jobs like that? Is there any reason why you couldn't work in a bank and play roller derby and have tattoos?
- What does Dead Meat mean about the 'ugly duckling scenario'?
- Imagine one of the roller derby women attending a high school formal. Write a diary account of her experience.
- Doris Daynger says, 'My opinion of Anita is that she can motivate anyone to do anything.' Why is Anita such a natural and inspiring leader? Do you know anyone like that in your life?
- How would you describe Anita's managerial/HR skills? Consider statements such as:
If you know a girl whinging about me or getting narky with me, send them to her because I swear to God I'll smash someone's face in. Nobody gets personal with me.
- In the over-heated world of roller derby, friendships are put to the test. What happens to Evil Doll and Doris Daynger? Write a story about or an account of a problem that arose for you in one of your important friendships and how you dealt with it.

- Anita says, 'I generally don't get along with women.' Is there a contradiction here?
- Why does Anita (Evil Doll) want 'to inspire every woman in Australia to get on roller skates and give this sport a go'?

Skating onto the Screen: Looking at the Film

- Describe the message or theme of this film in one sentence.
- Design and annotate a poster to promote this film. Consider the style of the film's opening title sequence as well as elements such as tattoos and fashions.
- Compile a list of possible alternative titles for the film.
- Write a 100-word review to be published in a television guide.
- *Roller Derby Dolls* was produced under the banner of Film Australia's National Interest Program. In what ways do you consider this film to be in the national interest?
- Consider some of the possible logistical problems in shooting the 'fantasy bout' between the Black Heart Belles and the Soda-Pop Slammers.
- Filmmaker Phoebe Hart says, 'It's my hope that the audience will fall in love with the girls, their world at the skate rink and their passion, roller derby'. To what extent do you think the film succeeds in this ambition?
- Who would you recommend this film to?
- Choose one of the film production roles listed in the credits at the end of this guide and outline what their responsibilities would be on a film such as this.

References & Further Resources

Books

- DM Bordner, *Roller Babes: The Story of the Roller Derby Queen*, iUniverse, Inc, 2006
- John Cohen (ed), *The Essential Lenny Bruce*, Macmillan, London, 1973
- Keith Coppage, *Roller Derby to Rollerjam: The Authorized Story of an Unauthorized Sport*, Squarebooks, Santa Rosa, California, 1999
- Shauna Cross, *Derby Girl*, Henry Holt and Co, NY, 2007
- Frank Deford, *Five Strides on the Banked Track: The Life and Times of the Roller Derby*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1971
- Jim Fitzpatrick, *Roller Derby Classics... And More!*, foreword by Ann Calvella, Trafford Publishing, New York, 2005
- Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, New York, 2004

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Anita Harris (ed), *Next Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, Routledge, New York, NY, 2008

Melissa Joulwan, *Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track*, Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 2007

Catherine Mabe, *Roller Derby: the Greatest Sport on Wheels from the Great Depression to the All-Female Revival*, Speck Press, Denver, 2006

Websites

Australian Roller Derby
<http://rollerderbyaustralia.org.au/>

Australian Sports Commission/Australian Institute of Sport
www.ausport.gov.au

The Evolution of Women in Sport
www.femail.com.au/womeninsport.htm

Sport and Recreation Victoria – Active Communities – Active Women & Girls
www.sport.vic.gov.au

Womens Flat Track Derby Association
<http://wftda.com>

Womensport & Recreation NSW
www.womensportnsw.com.au

Articles

John Bailey, 'It's a bruising sport, but every day is derby day for the rink and file girls', *The Age*, 20 May 2007, www.theage.com.au/news/national/bumpandgrind/2007/05/19/1179497342353.html

Andrea Burns, 'Cruising For A Bruisin': Roller Derby is Back', *Herald Sun*, 24 February 2008, www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,23263530-5012948,00.html

Vanessa Croll, 'America's Roller Derby Craze Comes To Brisbane', *Courier Mail*, 6 May 2008, www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,23739,23648469-23272,00.html

Emma Vuletic, 'Roller Derby Revival', 17 March 2008, <http://travellaustralia.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=392968>

Roller Derby Blogs & Periodicals

Derby News Network (US) – a roller derby news blog with multiple regular contributors, www.derbynewsnetwork.com

Rollergirl Q/A – a Q&A blog for roller derby players, www.roxyrockett.com



ROLLER DERBY DOLLS

A Film Australia National Interest Program in association with Freshwater Productions and the Pacific Film and Television Commission. Produced in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Director **Phoebe Hart**

Writers **Phoebe Hart, Erin McBean**

Producer **Vickie Gest**

Executive Producer for Film Australia **Mark Hamlyn**

Executive Producer for Freshwater Productions **Trish Lake**

Duration **26 minutes**

Year of Production **2008**

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All photographs by Jimmy Malecki © NFSA

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