

ROLLER DERBY NIGHT
THE ISLAND HIGH SCHOOL GYM
OCTOBER 23, 2005



THE VIOLENT SHALL BEAR IT AWAY

On the more intellectual side of things here on the Island, our Intrepid Island Investigator (Private Third I) at Island-Life managed to sneak into a den of iniquity here for a full report on a resurgence of what was once a grand Island tradition which dominated the entire Nation and characterized an entire period of American History. And which vanished entirely for nearly a half-century until recently. Furthermore, our embedded journalist managed to get inside gratis,

which is much appreciated on all sides, as the expense account for staff here is rather meager.

Hey, you see any ads in this space?

It was a mild night behind cloud wracked, melodramatic skies as we made our way stealthily through darkened backstreets to behind the gym for Island High on Encinal where all the lights were up and all the parking taken for blocks in all directions. Between the aisles of dark vehicles and shadowy forms we made our way to the side entrance where Guido, our Inside Man, greeted us with a stack of bright orange helmets, bidding us to take these and follow him down a long concrete corridor that felt as if it were miles underground until we came to a place of locked steel cabinets and tiles and dripping water in the distance. We felt as if we were deep inside Moria in the lockerroom of the Dwarves.

The air thrummed with chanting and the acidic smell of sweat and violent acts. A man was saying something over a high school PA system and of course, the words were unintelligible. Guido then says to us, "Hand those helmets to the guy who says, "oh there they are!" and you are in. After that, you are on your own in here, pal." And the little man disappeared like an elf somewhere in the shadows.

We made our way down a dark concrete corridor while a rhythmic pounding and the muffled sounds of chanting seeped through the dank walls.

We came to a set of swinging doors, which we pushed open with one foot and came into a blaze of light from bright overhead fluorescent tubes.

Somebody said, "Oh there they are," and we handed the helmet stack to an immense man weighing easily well over 300 pounds and wearing a bright orange jersey stamped with the legend "ICE BOX".

"I'm going over there," we said.

He was ignoring us already as he trundled across the floor of a well-buffed gymnasium to a group of people also wearing orange jerseys. "Ok, you go over there."

We walked around the edge of a raised oval track topped with padded rails, and ascended the stands through throngs of shouting, stamping people. We had arrived safely into the high school basketball gym which had been temporarily converted into a venue for that bloodthirsty atavistic icon of the vicious 1950's. Below, eight men skated on the race track.

It was Roller Derby night on the Island.

"Denby! Somebody said. "How did you get in here?"

There in the upper ranks of the stands were the majority of the House Social Club. Our entire building had taken a field trip to see the event.

Our quaint little Island and the rough sport of Roller Derby may seem like an odd mix, but this island was the primo mecca for decades. All the best players from around the country were trained here and a 200 meter indoor track existed on Central in a building devoted solely to the sport.

The original Roller Derby was created by Leo Seltzer back in the 1930s. Created after the country weathered through the worst of times the Roller Derby was a survival knee-jerk response to the great depression of 1929.

The first-ever Derby "game" was skated on Aug. 13, 1935 in the Chicago Coliseum, with over 20,000 people watching. At that time, rather than a competitive game, the Derby was an endurance race. Male/female teams would switch off skating a race of 57,000 laps, which amounted to 4,000 miles - roughly the distance across the United States.

A large map was displayed with markers showing where the teams would be if they were really skating across the country.

The skate marathon drew the most energetic and athletic youngsters who were just teenagers. The participants found their way to these roller races because they wanted to survive and would do most anything for food and a place to sleep.

The "modern" Roller Derby was born by accident only a few years later, as Seltzer was showing off his game to New York sportswriter Damon Runyan in Miami in 1938.

During a "speed jam" a few of the players tangled up and Runyan suggested to Seltzer that contact should be part of the game. The next night it was.

The event was immensely popular through the forties and fifties, with stadiums topping 100,000 people, but fell into a decline in the later part of the 50's era. Setzer's son took over as the sport migrated west. Our Bay Bombers with their orange jersey's were founded in 1954 and have remained Northern California's favorite team. Saturday Night pitted the Bombers against Chicago's Pioneers in an old rivalry meant to revive the game from its doldrums.

Two things conspired to terminate the game, which had its last "official" race in 1973. The Energy Crisis and Television.

Driving everywhere, Roller Derby soon succumbed to rising gas prices and transportation costs. Television had grabbed hold of the game and quickly turned it from a sport into a boffo absurd spectacle with all the moves and flamboyance -- and fakery -- of Pro Wrestling. The best skaters dropped the sport in disgust and fans also turned to more thoughtful entertainment. Like football.

Oh well. Ya gotta love America.

Saturday night was the latest in a revival that has been going on for couple of years here. As it stands today, the skaters are not nearly as physically fit as they once had to be, when female competitors could easily have competed in any body building pageant and the men were bulky blocks of solid muscle, but there still is a fair amount of conditioning required to skate for 90 minutes in five minute increments while throwing body blocks. Also, some of the flamboyance and sheer theater of the latter days was present as "Ice Box" mixed it up with opposing team members on the track, punches were thrown with wild telegraphing motion and at least one time the visiting coach brained somebody with a cafeteria chair.

Not to worry: with all the punches, armbars, thrown chairs and mayhem, not a spot of blood dotted the bright white track in the end. Quite unlike any Sunday spent over at Fairtex gym, where they keep a bucket and mop ready at all times to mop the canvas.

It was all good fun, if not the most intellectual, and a fine time was had by all.

Oh yeah, we won 62-61 in a heartbreaker down to the last seconds. Bay Bombers rule!

