



PRIMED

What I learned in eight weeks as roller derby fresh meat

By Sarah Lockwood / Photography by Kim Frost

When I found out that there was roller derby in Richmond, I thought it sounded like a fun thing to do, a cool way to spend a couple of nights a week after work. And, maybe, I hoped, a way to shed some of the weight I'd gained over the years — the freshman 15 that carried past my senior year and, sigh, into my first office job.

A chance to skate again! How great would that be? I used to be pretty damn good once upon a time, though that was blades, not skates, but still — I spent practically my entire childhood with skinned knees.

The more I thought about the possibility, the more interested I became, and soon I was spending part of my lunch hour every day watching videos of the women in their candy-colored satin jerseys and shorts, hurling themselves into one another and zooming around the rink. Eventually I was superimposing myself onto the rink with them, exulting in my roller derby alter ego: Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em Lockwood.

But you don't earn a derby name until you make the team.

Could I really do this?

Who was I kidding?

This back and forth went on for weeks, until my boyfriend, Andrew, said stop talking about it and just do it, you'll always regret it if you don't.

And that was how I arrived, anxious and excited, one night last August, at the Roller Dome in the East End, where Richmond's River City Rollergirls practice.

My goals were simple:

To learn how to circle a track on quad skates. To learn how not to fall, to learn how to stop. To learn how to weave through cones. To learn to give and receive whips.

And I did, I learned all of those things.

I learned other things, too. Things I never, ever thought I would learn from zipping around a track.

About myself, about being a woman, about what it means to live a life. >

Who was this woman who made me think that I could jump almost anything?

“WELCOME. I’m Sirius Block, and I’m the Fresh Meat coach here at River City Rollergirls.”

I stood, with my fellow newbies, in a line at the end of the rink in rental skates, kneepads, elbow pads, wrist guards, and helmet as Sirius — a woman with dyed, asymmetrically-cropped hair named Lindsay Wallbillich, though we were never, ever to call her that — prepared us for our first practice. More seasoned newbies, called Stale Meat, were in the front.

“Roller derby is chaos. You’re gonna fall. You gotta get over that. So first,” said Sirius, with a mischievous grin, “we’re gonna make peace with the floor.”

The Stale Meat-ers groaned, but Sirius flashed them her don’t-give-me-that-shit-eyes, and they skated forward and flung their bodies forward onto the wooden rink.

Now it was my turn. I took a deep breath, decided it was all or nothing, and, pushing off one foot, then the other, picked up speed and leapt.

The next thing I knew, there I was — splayed out on the ground.

“Did you *die*?” Sirius asked — the same question she asked everyone who’d wiped out.

I figured that I would have been in pain, or bruised or something. I figured that it would hurt to stand up. But no, I was fine. Actually, better than fine.

I had jumped.

I felt exhilarated.

After that, whenever Sirius said “jump,” I jumped without thinking. I had just met her and yet for some reason I trusted her.

Several weeks into my Fresh Meat cycle, I learned how to jump on wheels — a feat that had seemed nearly impossible to me when I started.

We’d been jumping over cones for two hours when, suddenly, Sirius lay down on the rink and told us to jump over her.

Like a trust fall, only this was a trust jump.

My thighs ached from jumping with the heavy skates on my feet, threatening to fail me at any moment. Yet something in Sirius’ confident command allowed me to leave the doubt behind. I mustered all of my power and jumped over her stomach.

Once again, Sirius said jump, and I jumped.

That night, she wrote on my Facebook wall, “Hey. You jumped over a human while on roller skates today ... and even tucked that landing like a pro. You’re a freaking badass.”

Me, a badass?

This was even more exhilarating than

my first jump.

Andrew had told me that I could be one all along. Now, maybe, I was starting to believe it.

WHO WAS this woman who made me think that I could jump almost anything?

It turned out, as I came to know her better over the coming weeks and months, that Sirius was the badass — an expert in the art of leaping, and not just when it came to the track.

She joined River City Rollergirls eight years ago, when, in one turbulent stretch, she quit her sorority at VCU and left school.

She was 20, and enmeshed in more than just the usual sophomore melodrama.

She was in a physically abusive relationship with a man she says she had, despite herself, become dependent on.

Roller derby was her escape.

In 2012, her boyfriend, seeing that the rink had begun to consume her, asked her to choose: the roller derby or me.

Sirius mustered up the courage — and leapt.

Suddenly free of the relationship that had been imprisoning her, she celebrated her independence and bravery with her first tattoo.

“I was super in love with the sport, the way you get googly eyes over a new crush,” she tells me over coffee one day, revealing the five circles down her spine, representing five players in a jam. “I wanted that on my body so bad.”

The turmoil in her life didn’t end, however, with her escape.

First, her financial aid ran out. Then, her mother kicked her out of the house because of her tattoo.

She could have curled up into a ball for weeks. She could have cried and >

ROLLER DERBY BASICS

How’s it played? Two teams of five skate around a track in a series of short matchups, called **jams**. A jammer earns points by lapping the other team’s blockers. Blockers can help their jammer and obstruct the opposing jammer’s path with shoulder, hip and full-body contact.



The jammer is indicated by an starred elastic helmet cover, called a **panty**.

2006 WFTDA opened its doors to new members after the modern form of the sport got its start in Austin, Texas in the early 2000s.

There are **420** leagues in **WFTDA**, the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association.

WFTDA leagues in Virginia:



A typical roller derby starter kit, including skates, pads, helmet and mouthguard runs about **\$250**.

Lindsay Wallbillich, a.k.a.
SIRIUS BLOCK





Nat Gower-Kinney, a.k.a.
**NATASHA
RUNOFF**

 **JAMMING:** River City Roller Derby practices twice a week. *Get an inside look at the action at richmondmag.com/derby.*

moaned for months. But she had been through the worst already; what was worse than the fear and pain of being in a relationship with someone who might strike you at any moment? Her tormentor had toughened her. She was stronger than she thought.

And so she leapt.

She got into a car with her best friend and moved to Boulder, Colorado.

Later that year, when she went back home for Christmas in Virginia, she saw a friend who was back from deployment in Japan. The two fell in love and, within a year, moved to California and married.

Stability did not ensue.

In fact, Sirius told me, she has moved 17 times in 10 years.

In every city she landed in, Sirius found a roller derby team. She conquered altitude sickness skating in a freezing warehouse with Boulder, tried a bank track team in San Diego, and trained in the heavy Florida heat and humidity.

"When you pick up your entire life and move it," she says, "it's nice to have something that's constant."

She returned to River City Rollergirls in 2015, excited to coach Fresh Meat.

Today, she works front-of-the-house at a country club in Williamsburg. On the side, she's learning to code JavaScript, and taking Russian. Once her husband finishes his degree in electrical engineering, she tells me she wants to go back to school for criminology and become a police officer, or a cosmetologist who works in funeral homes.

Partly, this is her restless nature; she can never sit still.

But partly, of course, it's the nature of life itself.

I think back to my first practice, and Sirius's words to us: *Roller derby is chaos. You're gonna fall. You gotta get over that.*

I know now that she wasn't just talking about the track.

Rachel Crank, a.k.a.

AMERICAN GOTHIC



PHOTOGRAPH BY [REDACTED]

SIRIUS didn't just help us to toughen our bodies and learn moves. She coached us mentally, too.

She spoke repeatedly about the importance of setting goals. At the end of every practice, we filled out "goal cards" for the week, month, year. Periodically, she would pull these out and go over them with us, asking if, say, we'd improved our T-stop.

I dutifully filled out these goal cards, but the one I didn't share was the most important one: To become as strong as Sirius.

PHOTOGRAPH BY [REDACTED]

I FIRST met Natasha Runuoff because she was getting rid of a pair of size 9

skates. I just so happened to be in the market for the very thing.

It had been a hard week, my fifth in the program. It was hard to get out of bed every morning. It hurt walking down stairs. My back throbbed whenever I moved. Every night from the rink I couldn't wait to collapse into bed.

As we sat in the laminated plastic diner-style seats in the RollerDome cafe, Nat Gower-Kinney helped me install a set of soft wheels onto the trucks of the skates. "You'll want to get a new toe stop and laces," she advised. "Toss the insoles too and buy a pair of Dr. Scholl's or something so you can form them to your feet."

Game Day Nat cuts a figure of almost superhero determination — lime green hot pants and dark lipstick. Her secret weapon is her devastating hip check. It

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could knock you on your ass.

But off the track? With her dirty-blond shoulder-length hair and black oval-rimmed glasses, she could fit right into an office. She confesses to being a “homebody.”

Like nearly all the women of roller derby, she is also as kind as she is fierce — not just unfailingly generous with her time, but also eager to share her knowledge and insight and time.

When I complained one day about my back pain, Nat told me that when she first attempted to pass roller derby’s national endurance test — 27 laps in five minutes — she wiped out three times, made it only to 16, and had an asthma attack.

She worked with her doctor to find a better asthma medication, practiced her footwork, and celebrated half-lap improvements here and there until she made a team in Virginia Beach.

That night I met Nat’s family at the rink, and began to understand more about this determined woman.

Roller derby is much more than a fun

side light for her and her wife. It is at the center of their social world.

Known to the team as Buckeye Barnes, Nat’s wife joined the league as a non-skating coach in 2017.

Nat — a registered nurse — has been interleague coordinator for two years and, since January, the team’s vice president, too.

Though technically speaking she is a stay-at-home mom, practically speaking she is almost never not doing some work related to roller derby.

At least twice a week, the couple makes the hour-long drive from Williamsburg to Richmond for practice, often with toddler Kilby, and his Pack’n’Play, in tow. Kilby watches cartoons as the older kids play in the snack bar and his moms practice.

Nat tells me she worries whether she’s being fair to Kilby, who often struggles to wake up the next day after a derby nights. Is he getting all he needs from her?

She says she hopes to hire a babysitter for some nights of this season — the key word being “some.” I can tell how, even

though she struggles with it, it is important for her to have her whole family here.

Thankfully, she says, there are a number of other parents on the team. “Even if they don’t bring their kids to practice ... they understand what you’re going through, understand why you have to do this.”

Why do you have to do this? I ask her one day.

She thinks for a moment. “It’s giving me a purpose,” she says.

She thinks again. “It’s not that home life isn’t fulfilling,” she says, sounding politic, “but it’s nice to have something else.”

She doesn’t connect all the dots, but it’s not hard to understand that she means: It’s nice to not have motherhood define her entirely. To not have being a woman define her entirely.

At a quarterly meeting last year, she advocated for a league name change — and won. River City Rollergirls is now River City Roller Derby.

“We’re not ‘girls,’” Nat says ▶



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disdainfully, noting that it's not all that different from being called "sweetie" or "honey" in the workplace. In pushing for the change of language, she says, she was also determined to send a welcoming signal to those who are transgender or gender nonbinary.

I felt such a surge of pride, of sisterly admiration, as I listened to her.

The next night I watched Nat performing jumping jacks on skates — yes, on skates — and couldn't stop grinning.



AFTER nearly two months, the original group of 40 newbies had been whittled to 14. My aim, now, was to make it all the way to "assessments," a national, standardized final exam to see who is fit to join the league.

To do that, I would have to ace, among other things, the 27 laps in 5 minutes that make up the dreaded endurance test.

This required mastery of "crossovers," in which you move forward by crossing one skate over the other, minimizing wasted motion and maximizing momentum. It was a new skill to learn, and it was exhausting.

One of the standouts among the crop of newbies, a woman named Rachel Crank, timed me, cheering and reminding me to get low and keep crossing. "You got this Sarah! Keep breathing!"

I made it to 16 laps. Weeks later, I tried again, and this time made it to 21, before falling to my knees, gasping for breath. My legs were burning. I felt embarrassed. Suddenly, I was on my high school track after being one of the last ones in my class to finish the mile. There were hot tears in my eyes. *Don't, I told myself. Not now.*

Hang in there, Andrew said.

That night, in the shower, I let hot water massage my aching body. I ran my hands down my quads, around my knees and back up my hamstrings, feeling solid, alien muscle.

Roller derby was painful, and I wasn't even hitting anything yet. As sore as my legs were, my back was killing me, too. ("Oh, the back pain never really goes away," one of the coaches warned me. "You just get used to it.")

I turned to the side in my narrow shower, slowly lowering my body into derby stance. For a moment I imagined that I was Rachel Crank, zipping around the track, making it look easy.



WATCHING Rachel skate the 27-and-five was inspirational. She was clearly the fastest of all of us.

But I came to learn that that speed wasn't innate. Rachel had turned herself into a skater — methodically, and at great personal sacrifice.

During her first 27-and-five, when she joined Fresh Meat last January, Rachel had managed only 13 laps. One night in September, eight months later, I watched her storm out of the rink in frustration, pulling off her skates and heading for the parking lot.

There were many nights like that, she told me. "I would sometimes call my husband, after practice, crying, like, 'I don't know why I care about this so much.'"

Why do you care so much? I asked her one day after practice.

She told me.

She told me about the physical pain she'd put her body through. The aching back. The bruises and welts.

She had played sports growing up, but

she had done it simply to be skinny — to maintain her figure.

"I hated my body," she said.

She told me about turning her body into an instrument.

She told me about growing up going to church, and the relief she felt when she realized that tough derby women wouldn't mock her because she sings in her church choir.

She told me about becoming an evangelist on behalf of derby.

Of the 40 women who attended my Fresh Meat orientation, six were Rachel-recruits — women who had seen the excitement and new-found confidence in her eyes as she proselytized for the sport.

What they were responding to, she said, was a woman who was, finally, comfortable with herself.

"This is the first time," she said, "that I've felt confident in my own skin."

I was stunned by her characterization of a soft, scared Rachel. I only knew a determined woman who didn't care about what anyone else thought. One practice, she had showed up with her shoulder-length hair cropped short, which sparked a conversation about gender in her elementary art classroom. She glowed with confidence as she twirled for everyone.

Roller derby had more than changed her, she said. "This has become," she said, "my life."

I DIDN'T make it to assessments, but Rachel did.

Only the 27-and-five stood between her and a spot on the team.

By all accounts, it was a remarkable blur of a performance. When the final whistle blew, she collapsed onto the rink and sobbed.

And then, later, those tears turned to tears of joy when she learned she'd made the team.

"The biggest moment of my life," said the newly christened American Gothic.

It was not my moment, but in a way, I felt as though I shared in it. In watching Rachel and getting to know her, I

developed a newfound understanding of strength. Strength isn't about being able to skate circles around everyone else, literally or figuratively. It's not completing an endurance test, but rather returning to attempt it again and again.

I never did become "Rock 'em Sock 'em Lockwood."

But not for lack of trying.

I was seven weeks into the Fresh Meat program when Andrew fell off a motorized skateboard, sustaining a traumatic brain injury.

He is recovering, thank God.

But it has not been easy, nor quick.

Suddenly, I was no longer just his girlfriend. For the next two months I became — I had to become — his caretaker, his advocate, his cheerleader, his coach.

I had a full-time job, too.

I collapsed onto my pillow every night. Seeing him in pain made every day feel like two days.

But one night, at my most afraid, a thought entered my mind: I had learned to leap, hadn't I?

Sirius had shown me the way.

And I knew what courage looked like, too, because Nat had shown me.

And what determination looked like, because Rachel had shown me.

I was strong; Derby had made me strong. The women of derby — my coaches, my teachers, my heroes — had shown me that nobody is born strong. You had to become strong.

To overcome — this is what made a person strong.

Will I ever return to fresh meat and get my chance at assessments?

Maybe. Maybe this year, maybe in 20.

I might never make the team, but the team has, in so many ways, made me. ■

River City Roller Derby plays Charlotte Roller Derby on March 17 at 7 p.m. at Shooters Indoor Sportsplex in Midlothian. For more information, search River City Roller Derby on Facebook or go to rivercityrollerderby.com.



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