

For these Dolls, the accent's on tough

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Los Angeles Derby Dolls team the Junior Ri-Ette battle the Pennsylvania All Stars Roller Derby at the Doll Factory in Los Angeles, March 1, 2014. Bethany Mollenkof/Los Angeles Times/MCT

LOS ANGELES — Some girls play soccer or join the swim team. Ivy Wolk, though, chose the Los Angeles Derby Dolls.

“This is it, this is for me,” said the tiny 9-year-old the first time she saw the Derby Dolls skate. Roller derby is a rowdy contact sport played by two teams on roller skates. A player scores points by passing members of the opposing team. They try to block her and can even knock her out of the way.

It's not the safest sport in the world. But for the girls, bumps and bruises are signs of achievement. Their injuries mean the girls skated hard and tried their best.

“There have literally been days where I have been like, ‘I must be crazy.’ But she just picks herself up and gets back out there,” said Ivy's mother, Tracy Wolk. Still, Wolk made sure she told Ivy's doctor about her daughter's new sport.

Tough Names, Tough Practices

In the 11 years since the Derby Dolls got their start, they've become famous in LA. They teach girls 7 and older how to skate, and Derby Doll teams play against teams from across the country.

The Derby Dolls have had many homes. Now the league needs to move again. Their home base is in the "Doll Factory," a building in LA's Historic Filipinotown neighborhood, but the building may be knocked down.

Finding a new place is a challenge, said league co-founder Rebecca Ninburg. It has to be big and not too expensive. It also has to have a landlord willing to have a roller derby league in the building. Roller derby doesn't have the greatest reputation, but the Derby Dolls are not the violent and loud crowd some might think. To raise money for the move and the new space, the Dolls are trying to raise \$100,000 online by the end of the month. So far, they've raised more than \$79,000.

"I'm just gonna be so sad that we're gonna lose this place. It's my home, it's my home away from home," said Yesenia Hernandez, 15. She said roller derby gave her the confidence to stand up to bullies at her school. Hernandez has been knocked down during games, but her mom isn't worried. The girls take care of one another, said her mother, Julie Hernandez.

Practices are intense. Team members are known by their derby names. They can be funny or tough-sounding nicknames, like RegulateHer or Jackie Nimble. Yesenia's derby name is "Cherry Bomb."

On a recent day, young women skated around the track under a skate-shaped disco ball. They were pushing and yelling when one fell hard and slid into the center of the rink. She was in pain, but still smiling. A teammate skated to the first aid cart to grab supplies.

For The Love Of The Sport

At halftime of a recent game, fans strolled around the Doll House with food and drinks in their hands. They looked at souvenir stalls and stopped to listen to bands.

"It's not polished. It's not baseball, it's not the Lakers," said David Hale, referring to LA's basketball team. He's a fan who found the Derby Dolls online. "You can see it in their faces. They're not doing it for the money, they're doing it for the love."

Ivy is known here as Shematoma, after the scientific word for bruise. When she skates around the track, she is sure of herself. Her teammates, ages 7 to 17, wear skirts and patterned leggings. Some have shirts with their derby names printed on the back. They practice stopping and skate around cones set up on the rink. An upbeat soundtrack includes music from the Disney film "The Jungle Book."

Ivy gets quiet and a bit shy when asked, really, what it is about roller derby she loves so much. It makes her feel normal, her mother said. That's a big deal for a kid with a rare allergy that prevents her from eating 19 major foods. Ninburg, though, made sure there were frozen grapes, her favorite treat, at a recent team party. The grapes were a hit with the other girls also.

Last summer, Ivy took several weeks off to rest and undergo tests. She was nervous about coming back, but her coach greeted her with a shout and a big hug. Her friends acted as if nothing had changed.

She turned to her mom and said, "I'm home," Wolk remembered.

Quiz

- 1 The reader can infer from the text that the girls have all of the traits below EXCEPT:
- (A) They are loyal.
 - (B) They are tough.
 - (C) They are bullies.
 - (D) They are dedicated.
- 2 What seems to be the reason why it is very important to Ivy Wolk to feel normal?
- (A) She is shy.
 - (B) She is bullied.
 - (C) She bruises easily.
 - (D) She has many food allergies.
- 3 Select the paragraph in the section labeled, "For The Love Of The Sport" that best shows how dedicated the girls are to their sport.
- 4 All of the following show people must care about the Derby Dolls EXCEPT:
- (A) They're famous in LA.
 - (B) The players have humorous names.
 - (C) They've been able to raise \$79,000.
 - (D) Fans are interested in souvenirs at the games.