

Mayhem vs. Sideshow: 'Saturday Night's All Right' for Derby

By William Meiners
Herald Staff Writer

On an otherwise quiet night in Ithaca, a community within a community gathers for some mayhem in a room behind the bowling alley. To the amusement of many, the Central Michigan Mayhem took on the Quad County Sideshow in a roller derby match that may have lived up to the hype.

With hardly a parking spot to be found on the north end of Pins, most of the crowd is in place before the 7 p.m. "first whistle." After a recording of the "Star-Spangled Banner" is played, the fans, presumably a mixture of family, friends, and admirers, settles in for the rolling, fast-paced action of two, 30-minute halves.

For the uninitiated, a quick explainer is helpful. That refresher is especially key for any child of the 1970s who might remember roller derby and its ramped tracks as something akin to professional wrestling with clotheslines and elbow pile drivers. There might have also been a couple of scenes from "Charlie's Angels" and "Happy Days" with Farrah Fawcett-Majors and Pinky Tuscadero donning the skates and helmets.

Fortunately, Gina in a Throttle, the volunteer ticket-taker at the door, is a wealth of roller derby knowledge. She foretells the action that promises jammers, wearing stars on their helmets, who will maneuver past, and then lap, blockers from the other team, scoring points with each opponent they pass. "So both teams are playing offense and defense at once," said Gina, who retired after playing the "super awesome" sport for three years in another state, where among other things, she gathered bruises like French Impressionist tattoos and "learned to skate backwards."

Though the game whizzes on at its own rapid pace, it doesn't seem as ruthlessly violent as the 1970s montage that's best left behind in one's aging mind. Gina said up to seven referees, all with keen eyes on one aspect of the skating, help maintain some sense of civility. The program also spells out the signals the zebras use for calling penalties.

Everyone — from Ms. Throttle and the other volunteers to all skaters on both teams to every referee — goes by some sort of alias. Maybe they are alter egos. Juicy Gogo (likely not his real name) drove in from Grand Rapids to provide announcer duties.

"It's just a cool sport," said Gogo, sporting a pinkish blazer to match the home colors of the Mayhem. "Roller derby is a big community. Most of the women

are working professionals, lots of healthcare workers."

Perhaps roller skating with a chance of violence is a stress reliever. Though one might think healthcare workers might be more protective of their own bodies. "You might not get seriously hurt, but odds are you will get hurt," Gina said.

Near the end of the first half De Railya, who played for 10 years before breaking her ankle, joins Gogo in the catbird seat of the announcer's booth. "After the injury, I thought maybe there were other things I can do for my community," she said.

De Railya, who drove down from Interlochen for the evening, seems more like a color commentator than Gogo. "I just yell," he said. "Some announcers are really technical. I like to make it fun and fast."

Soon after, when Quad City reaches the 100-point mark early in the second half, Gogo barks into the microphone, "Everybody's got to get a drink when we hit the century mark!"

Even with the longnecks being served, the joint is surprisingly family friendly. Kids scatter about in their own play or collect loose pages and use colored markers to fill in the images of their favorite Mayhem skaters — Slamwise Gamgee in her shaded visor, Sly Vixen with her big eyes and long locks.

As the game progresses, both teams made runs to take short leads. Gamgee, number 25, seemingly puts in miles of work as a jammer, rolling through traffic on a flattened track. Gogo said a tie at the end of regulation is something of an anomaly. But sure enough, the two squads are locked at 198 as the official hour (minus play stoppage, timeouts, and injuries) winds down to zero. "I'm sure the referees are super excited for an overtime," De Railya said wryly.

In a short overtime period, the jammer for the Sideshow helps Quad County grab an early lead. The Mayhem fight and scratch back but are ultimately on the short end of the 214 to 221 final score.

Even amidst the rough-and-tumble play, the combatants are respectful, sometimes downright cordial, locking arms and sharing smiles. Throughout a couple more serious injuries, the skaters take a knee and hope for the best.

There's an afterparty forthcoming. "When you see the pizza coming out, that's for the volunteers and the skaters," Gogo tells the crowd. "I'm just supposed to announce that. And the pizza here is frickin' amazing. It's like wow."



The Central Michigan Mayhem took on the Quad County Sideshow in a roller derby match last Saturday in Ithaca.



Gogo Juicy (foreground) and De Railya, a 10-year roller derby player turned announcer, deliver live play-by-play to the crowd.

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