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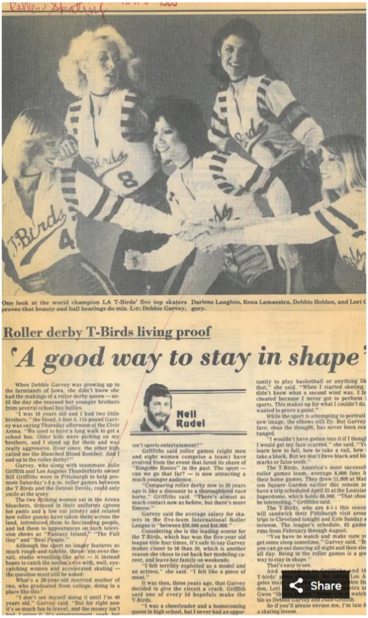
Flashback Friday: Roller skating

14 PHOTOS

12:16 p.m. EST Dec. 8, 2017



Roller Skating

One look at the world champion LA T-Birds' five top skaters proves that beauty and ball bearings do mix. L-r: Debbie Garvey, Darlene Langlois, Rena Lamaestra, Debbie Heldon, and Lori G gory.

Roller derby T-Birds living proof

'A good way to stay in shape'

Neil Rudel

When Debbie Garvey was growing up in the farmlands of Iowa, she didn't know she had the makings of a roller derby queen — until the day she rescued her younger brothers from several school bus bullies.

"I was 10 years old and I had two little brothers," the blond, 5-foot-3, 115-pound Garvey was saying Thursday afternoon at the Civic Arena. "We used to have a long walk to get a school bus. Older kids were picking on my brothers, and I stood up for them and was really aggressive. Ever since, the other kids called me the Bleached Blond Bomber. And I end up in the roller derby!"

Garvey, who along with teammate Julie Griffith and Los Angeles Thunderbirds owner Bill Griffiths were in Pittsburgh to help promote Saturday's 8 p.m. roller games between the T-Birds and the Detroit Devils, could only smile at the irony.

The two striking women sat in the Arena bleachers, dressed in their uniforms (green hot pants and a low cut jersey) and related how roller games have taken them across the land, introduced them to fascinating people, and led them to appearances on such television shows as "Fantasy Island," "The Fall Guy" and "Real People."

Although the sport no longer features as much rough-and-tumble, throw-'em-over-the-rail, studio wrestling-like acts — it instead hopes to catch the nation's eye with, well, eye-catching women and accelerated skating — the question must still be asked:

What's a 28-year-old married mother of two, who graduated from college, doing in a place like this?

"I don't see myself doing it until I'm 40 years old," Garvey said. "But for right now it's so much fun to travel, and the money isn't bad. I enjoy it. It's entertainment, yeah, but isn't sports entertainment?"

Griffiths said roller games (eight men and eight women comprise a team) have evolved from the event that lured its share of "Ringside Rosies" in the past. The sport — can we go that far? — is now attracting a much younger audience.

"Comparing roller derby now to 20 years ago is like a dinosaur to a thoroughbred race horse," Griffiths said. "There's almost as much contact now as before, but there's more finesse."

Garvey said the average salary for skaters in the five-team International Roller League is "between $20,000 and $50,000."

Considering she is the leading scorer for the T-Birds, which has won the five-year old league title four times, it's safe to say Garvey makes closer to 50 than 20, which is another reason she chose to cut back her modeling career, and leave her family on weekends.

"I felt terribly exploited as a model and an actress," she said. "I felt like a piece of meat."

It was then, three years ago, that Garvey decided to give the circuit a crack. Griffith said one of every 50 hopefuls make the T-Birds.

"I was a cheerleader and a homecoming queen in high school, but I never had an opportunity to play basketball or anything lik that," she said. "When I started skating, didn't know what a second wind was. I fe cheated because I never got to perform i sports. This makes up for what I couldn't do. wanted to prove a point."

While the sport is attempting to portrait new image, the elbows still fly. But Garvey face, shun the thought, has never been rea ranged.

"I wouldn't have gotten into it if I thoug I would get my face scarred," she said. "Y learn how to fall, how to take a rail, how take a block. But we don't have black and bl marks or false teeth."

The T-Birds, America's most successf roller games team, average 8,000 fans f their home games. They drew 11,000 at Mad son Square Garden earlier this season a have a trip scheduled April 22 at the Louisia Superdome, which holds 60,000. "That shou be interesting," Griffiths said.

The T-Birds, who are 8-1-1 this seaso will sandwich their Pittsburgh visit arou trips to Cleveland tonight and Erie Sunday a ternoon. The league's schedule, 65 game runs from February through August.

"You have to watch and make sure y get some sleep sometime," Garvey said. "B you can go out dancing all night and then sle all day. Being in the roller games is a go way to stay in shape."

That's easy to see.

And [illegible] and th T-birds' [illegible] Los A geles team [illegible] bie H don, Lori [illegible] stra a Gwen "Sk[illegible] watch ble as Debbie Garvey and Julie Griffith.

So if you'll please excuse me, I'm late f a skating lesson.

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Around-Town

World-champion skaters from the Los Angeles T-Birds roller derby team visited Pittsburgh in 1983 to play against the Detroit Devils. Pictured: Darlene Langlois, Rena Lamaestra, Debbie Heldon and Lori Gre. [Submitted]

On a slick plastic floor at Thrills on Wheels roller rink in Harmony Township, small people whizzed through the links of a human chain. In addition to Thrills, there were three other Beaver County roller rinks in 1978: Melody Lane Roller Rink in Hookstown, Homewood Roller Rink and Ellport Rink outside Ellwood City. [Tom Myers/BCT file]

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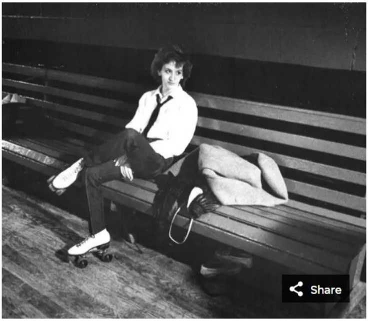
Kathy Marburger of Crafton, a Carlynton High School student, traded running shoes for roller skates at a running track in 1981. [Bill Gilmore/BCT file]



Debra Woodyard of East Liverpool, Ohio, recently celebrated her 21st birthday at Melody Lane Roller Rink in 1986. [Terry Clark/BCT file]

Melody Lane Roller Rink still drew a crowd in 1986. A fire destroyed the Hookstown rink in 1995. [Terry Clark/BCT file]

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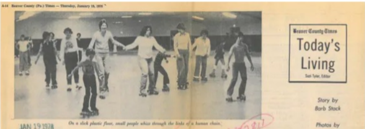
World-champion skaters from the Los Angeles T-Birds roller derby team visited Pittsburgh in 1983 to play against the Detroit Devils. Pictured: Darlene Langlois, Rena Lamaestra, Debbie Heldon and Lori Gre. [Submitted]

Sam Wood, a skating champion, spun records and taught skating classes at Thrills on Wheels roller rink in Harmony Township. He told The Times in 1978 that skating is for everybody. “You don’t need rubber knees," he said. Skaters are not born; they’re made.” [Tom Myers/BCT file]



A-14 Beaver County (Pa.) Times — Thursday, January 19, 1978

Beaver County Times

Today's Living

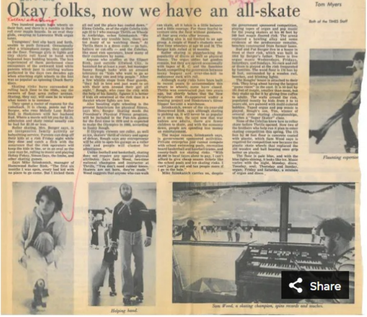
Sue Tyler, Editor

Story by
Barb Stack

Photos by

On a slick plastic floor, small people whiz through the links of a human chain.

JAN 19 1978



Okay folks, now we have an all-skate

Roller skating

Tom Myers

In 1978, local roller rink owners were priming for a comeback. Pat Berger, who owned Melody Lane Roller Rink with her husband, Bud, said it's a cheap activity. "Where a movie will hit you for $3.25, admission and skate rental usually can be had for $2.50 or less. Roller skating, Mrs. Berger says, is an inexpensive family activity or babysitting service," wrote Times reporter Barb Stack.

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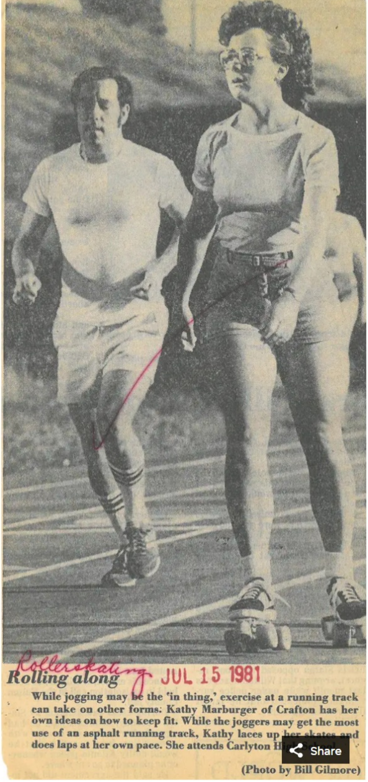
Teens enjoyed couple skating at Melody Lane Roller Rink in this 1986 photo. [Terry Clark/BCT file]



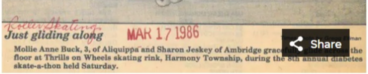
Rollerskating JUL 15 1981

Rolling along

While jogging may be the 'in thing,' exercise at a running track can take on other forms. Kathy Marburger of Crafton has her own ideas on how to keep fit. While the joggers may get the most use of an asphalt running track, Kathy laces up her skates and does laps at her own pace. She attends Carlyton High School.

(Photo by Bill Gilmore)

Kathy Marburger of Crafton, a Carlynton High School student, traded running shoes for roller skates at a running track in 1981. [Bill Gilmore/BCT file]



Roller Skating

Just gliding along MAR 17 1986

Mollie Anne Buck, 3, of Aliquippa and Sharon Jeskey of Ambridge gracefully glide across the floor at Thrills on Wheels skating rink, Harmony Township, during the 8th annual diabetes skate-a-thon held Saturday.

Mollie Anne Buck, 3, of Aliquippa and Sharon Jeskey of Ambridge gracefully glided across the floor at Thrills on Wheels skating rink in Harmony Township during the eighth annual diabetes skate-a-thon in March 1986.

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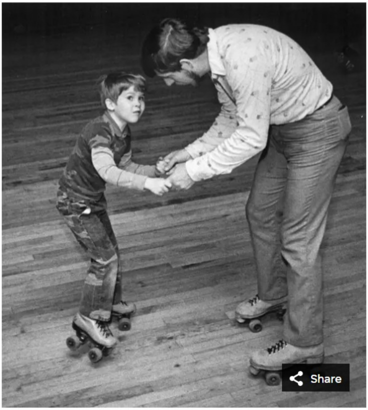
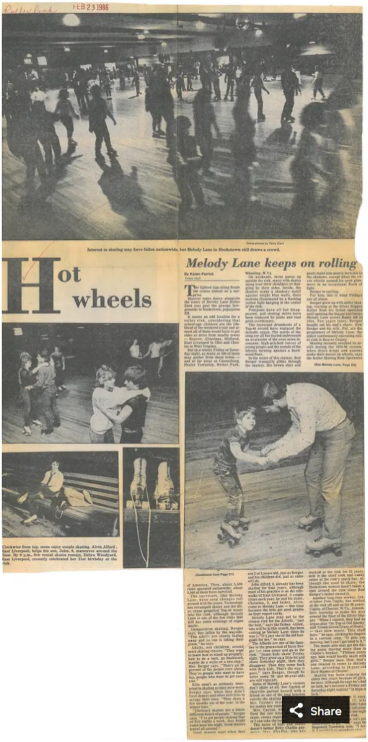


Alvin Alford of East Liverpool, Ohio, helped his son, John, 6, maneuver around the floor at Melody Lane Roller Rink in 1986. [Terry Clark/BCT file]

Mollie Anne Buck, 3, of Aliquippa and Sharon Jeskey of Ambridge gracefully glided across the floor at Thrills on Wheels skating rink in Harmony Township during the eighth annual diabetes skate-a-thon in March 1986.



Roller Rink FEB 23 1986

Times photos by Terry Clark

Interest in skating may have fallen nationwide, but Melody Lane in Hookstown still draws a crowd.

Hot wheels

Melody Lane keeps on rolling

By Karen Ferrick
Times Staff

(See Melody Lane, Page D4)

Clockwise from top, teens enjoy couple skating. Alvin Alford, East Liverpool, helps his son, John, 4, maneuver around the floor. By 9 p.m., few rental skates remain. Debra Woodyard, East Liverpool, recently celebrated her 21st birthday at the rink.

In 1978, Melody Lane Roller Rink was the the only rink among the four open in Beaver County at that time to still play organ music exclusively, as had been the tradition at older rinks. However, by 1986, things had changed. “The incessant drumbeats of a Top-40 record have replaced the melodic organ. The words of the song are all but buried underneath an avalanche of even more incessant, high-pitched voices of young people and the sounds of the wheels turning against a hardwood floor," wrote Times reporter Karen Ferrick in 1986.

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