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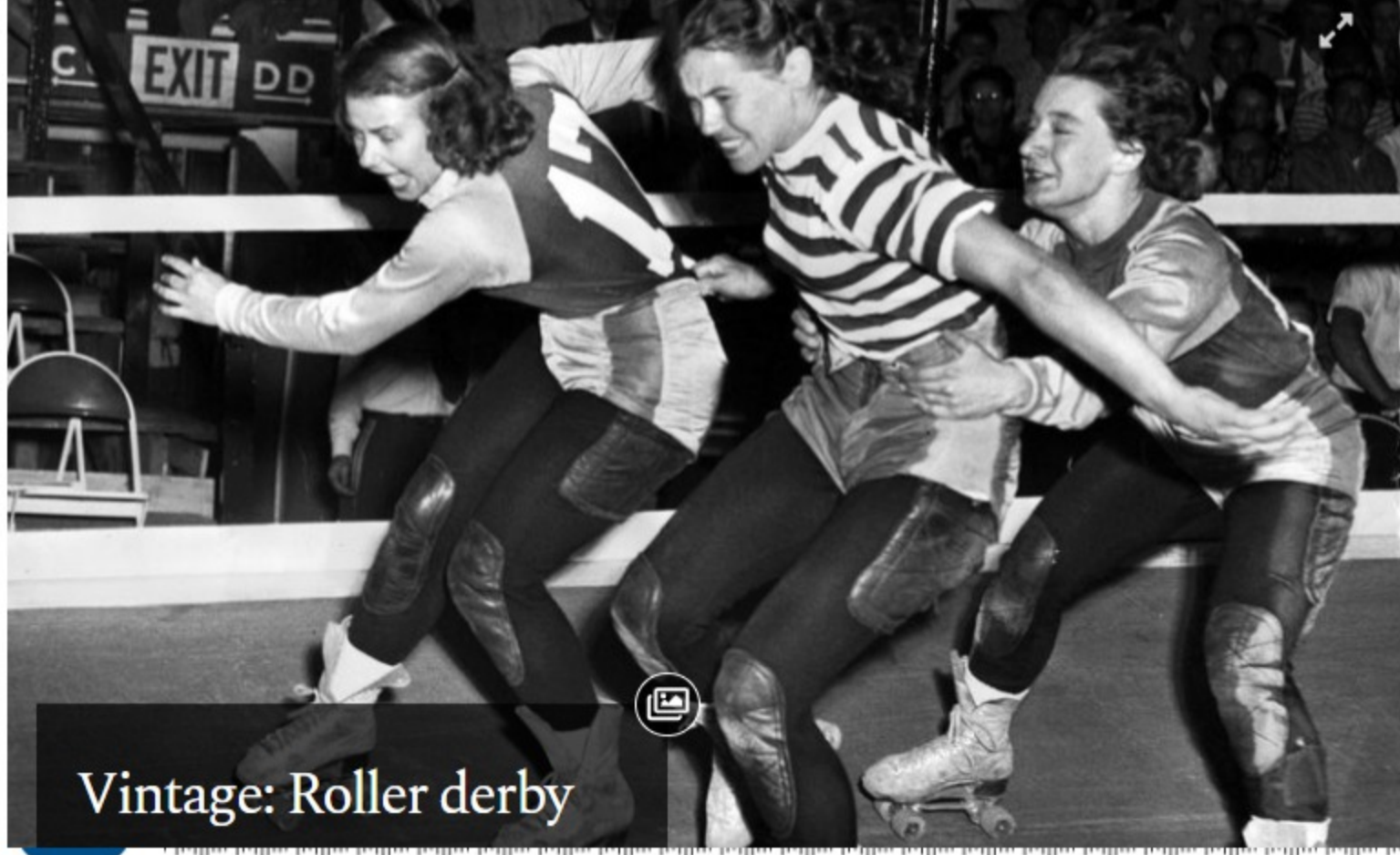


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CHICAGO HISTORY

# Flashback: A battle on skates: A look back in photos at roller derby and its Chicago Coliseum days

By COLLEEN KUJAWA CHICAGO TRIBUNE | MAR 26, 2021 AT 5:00 AM



Vintage: Roller derby

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"I love it. It's the most exciting thing a girl can do."

These effusive words came from a 22-year-old woman who took a blow to her abdomen one day in 1951 in Chicago doing what she adored: roller derby. A Tribune reporter learned just how deeply Virginia Rushing's commitment to the sport went. By 1951, the Oklahoman revealed, she had suffered a broken pelvis and ankle — but she was blissfully where she wanted to be.

Roller derby as we know it got its seminal start in 1935 thanks to Leo Seltzer. He didn't invent the roller skating contest. But the sports promoter took it to the next level and set it on a course to evolve into a rollicking competition complete with collisions and falls.

Chicago gets to proudly claim the title of birthplace. It was here, at our Coliseum, that teams made up of one man and one woman assembled on a track and put their physical endurance to the test in the first Trans-Continental Roller Derby.

The event officially rolled into existence on Aug. 13, 1935, and the turnout in Chicago arguably contributed to Seltzer's aims of building the Coliseum's reputation as a major sports and events venue: Estimates put attendance at 20,000 people.

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"Ya dumb jerks!" Chicago's Mary Lou Palermo, center, yells to the Jersey Jolters who caused a three-way spill at the roller derby at the Chicago Coliseum on Feb. 14, 1951. The Jolters beat the Chicago Westerners 22-21, but it took four overtime periods in front of 2,703 fans to score that victory. Palermo was a beloved Chicago regular at the derby who was known for signature pigtails with bows. She was inducted into the National Roller Derby Hall of Fame and the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame. (Chicago Tribune historical photo)



Chicago Westerners skaters Ann Pernice, 19, and Eleanor Weber, 24, watch from the penalty box at a roller derby competition at the Chicago Coliseum in 1950. (Chicago Tribune historical photo)

Including women in the derby added to its appeal for spectators, but it also carried potential liability. Women's involvement didn't lend status and legitimacy to the burgeoning sport; attitudes toward female competitors at the time were what they were.

But it was hard to argue with the draw of the derby, as the competition toured big cities like Kansas City and New York after Chicago and pulled in crowds averaging 10,000 people. The sport got play on TV. And the Tribune caught on.

A 1951 feature story in the Tribune focused on a few of the die-hard women of roller derby, including Rushing of Oklahoma and Midge "Toughie" Brasuhn.

The account of Toughie's ruggedness sounds like the stuff of legends: "Who besides Toughie raises a triumphant finger in the air as she skates happily away from a prostrate foe? ... Or suddenly swoops down from the masonite track, grabs Betty Boyd of the (Chicago) Westerners by her Titian hair, throws her off the bench to the floor, and begins drumming a song of revenge with her fists?"

First Down, Thousands to Go

FANS GO WILD AT OPENING OF ROLLER DERBY

It's Enough to Drive One Cra-a-a-zy

BY CHARLES BARTLETT "There, there, boy, take it easy. Everything's going to be just fine and dandy. Just you relax."



Don't let that innocent expression Midge (Tuffy) Brauhm of Brooklyn (left) is wearing fool you for an instant. She has just given Julie Patrick of Chicago the hip and result is one of first tumbles in roller derby, which opened last night in Coliseum.

The Chicago Tribune reported on Nov. 13, 1953, that fans went wild on opening night of the roller derby in Chicago. (Chicago Tribune)

Roller derby brought thrills, spills and chills to audiences. And dramatic highs and lows also pepper its history. The ripple effects of a deadly crash of a bus transporting skaters through southern Illinois in March 1937 nearly put an end to the sport.



**Vintage Chicago Tribune Newsletter**  
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The Vintage Tribune newsletter is a deep dive into the Chicago Tribune's archives featuring photos and stories about the people, places and events that shape the city's past, present and future.

Crowds in subsequent decades kept coming to competitions, but by the mid-1970s, roller derby was hurting from diminishing interest. Attempted revivals in the '80s and '90s that cranked up the theatrics didn't catch on.

But a more feminist take on the sport early this century helped give rise to a renaissance, and today, [hometown teams](#) like the Windy City Rollers and the Chicago Outfit let skaters skate, compete and be blissfully free to be who they are.

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