New Books in Sports Interview with Michella Marino

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Hello colleagues,

I am writing to let you know about my latest New Books in Sports podcast with Dr. Michella Marino, the Deputy Director of the Indiana Historical Bureau, a division of the Indiana State Library, and the author of Roller Derby: The History of an American Sport (University of Texas Press, 2021). In our conversation, we discussed the origins of Roller Derby, its radically progressive politics in mid-century America, and its reinvention in the 21st century.

Please find the URL here: https://newbooksnetwork.com/roller-derby

In Roller Derby, Marino charts the rise, fall, and rise again of one of America’s most unique sports. It began as an endurance competition akin to pedestrianism and weeklong cycling races and in many ways it never left those beginnings. Roller Derby always mixed sport and spectacle, eventually becoming one of the most popular entertainments in the country. Unlike any other sports at the time, Roller Derby included men and women skaters on the same team and even in some circumstances on the track at the same time. Both men and women contributed equally to the score, but changes to the game in the 1930s that made physical contact, including fighting, more common produced unease among some spectators. Roller Derby’s mixed gender composition and its violence both helped ensure its popularity with male and female fans, but also raised significant challenges to mid-century norms.

To make the sport palatable to a more conservative middle America, Leo Seltzer, Roller Derby’s founder, promoted normative gender images of the skaters. Roller Derby crowned an annual king and a queen: a popularity contest that usually rewarded the most likable man and the most beautiful woman skater. Marino shows how these performative showcases both mollified critics of the game even as they limited the participation of some of the skaters – non-white and non-traditionally feminine skaters could not perform mid-century beauty in the same way. These contests also undermined the image of Roller Derby as a sport among many journalists who refused to cover it.

Even so, Marino shows that most fans could see the athleticism of the skaters on the track and Roller Derby quickly became popular among in-person fans from across
the social spectrum and later on television. Roller Derby was tough work. To keep his skaters happy, Seltzer instituted radically progressive policies, encouraging families to compete as families, equal pay for its skaters, maternity leave, and day care. When the league folded, it paid out the remaining skaters from a pension fund.

The final chapter details the rejuvenation of Roller Derby as an explicitly female-led and feminist sport that continues to face challenges around the sexualization of competitors, the integration of male competitors and spectators, and the challenges and opportunities provided by becoming an Olympic sport. Fun and full of life, Marino’s *Roller Derby* will appeal to scholars interested in American sport, gender, and spectacle, but also to the broad audience of skaters and sports fans.

Keith Rathbone is a Senior Lecturer at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. He researches twentieth-century French social and cultural history. His book, entitled *Sport and physical culture in Occupied France: Authoritarianism, agency, and everyday life*, (Manchester University Press, 2022) examines physical education and sports in order to better understand civic life under the dual authoritarian systems of the German Occupation and the Vichy Regime. If you have a title to suggest for this podcast, please contact him at keith.rathbone@mq.edu.au and follow him at @keithrathbone on twitter.