

Recruiting at the Roller Derby

By Suzanne La Follette

Standing at the side of the bank track, I watched as roller girls flew by with glitter, sweat and blood trailing them. I was trying to point out which roller girls I had met the week before. The thing was, I didn't recognize any of them. When I met them at a practice they were all wearing T-shirts, shorts and roller skates. Now there was a variety of fishnets, short skirts and makeup. Their names changed from Julie to Glitterotica, Miki to Varuca Assault. It was a transformation I somehow wasn't prepared for, not because this was my first roller derby bout but because this was the first time that I knew any of the roller girls. Our recruiting table was right behind the penalty wheel (the wheel they spin to determine the punishments for a roller derby penalty). The first was a Michael Jackson dance-off between opposing teams and ended with a dual knee slide. There were more than 1,000 fans and three Austin Fire Department (AFD) recruiters. We were ready for one of the best recruiting ventures for women this year.

Just like most large departments in the country, the Austin Fire Department's process is highly competitive. In our past few hiring initiatives we have had approximately 3,000 people apply for about 100 positions. Historically, candidates were ranked on their written exam and interview scores. As recruiters, we stop contact with our candidates after they take the written exam. So, our main focus is to get them to that test!

I learned that my job as a recruiter is to educate people about firefighting as a career because there are so many



misconceptions. The first time I spoke to a woman who had never considered firefighting I said, "You can do this. What's stopping you?" She replied, "You're an awfully inspiring person, you know that?" In a world of "no" I was telling her "yes!" That's when I realized what we are up against when it comes to recruiting female firefighters. It's not just the male firefighters or fear of the Candidate Physical Ability Test® (CPAT); it's our age-old social construction of women in the workplace. That's a hefty history to change. The male recruiter we had with us at the roller derby commented, "Who didn't have a red fire truck to play with as a kid?" My fellow recruiter, Kat Casey and I looked at each other. Neither of us did; we had dolls.

Our recruiting process kicked off and we began to hit every career fair that came our way. I was the only female recruiter and I was dismayed to find that the majority of women that would approach our table were just looking to hit on our male firefighters! Plus, location is everything; when you are wedged in between Tokyo Electron and Progressive Insurance, you don't stand much of a chance. Women at these white collar career fairs are mostly looking for jobs in human resources, payroll, or something comparable behind a desk; not the kind of women we are looking for in the fire service! We all know it takes a special woman to want to fight fire and there are plenty of us out there.

But where do we find them? Casey and I were searching for more appropriate events.

“I think we have been closed-minded in our approach to finding good female applicants,” said Casey. “This is still a non-traditional job for women, so we should look in places where we find women doing non-traditional things.”

Austin’s Lonestar Roller Derby (TXRD) was founded in 2001. According to their website, they have sparked a roller derby revival of the sport across the nation. The group of tough, no-nonsense, athletic women was exactly what drew me to roller derby but I had no idea how many similarities I would find between them and the fire department. I met with TXRD’s Sponsorship Manager, Fishnet Stalker and she took me to a roller derby practice in a large warehouse on the east side of Austin. It was September and there wasn’t a hint of air conditioning.

“It really is interestingly uncanny how similar we are in our heroic persona, how we become part of a family and a synergistic team,” Stalker aid. “Maybe one day, my daughter will be able to face a challenge and know that she can overcome it by having role models of strong women in her life.”

Before a bout, the girls put on their skates and costumes and become a different part of themselves. Maybe it’s a stronger, harder side of them. Maybe it’s tough, dirty and bloody. But whatever it is, it’s not who they are when they go to work as teachers and city park employees. Just as we dress in our turnouts or station uniform, we become a part of a team and a better part of ourselves. When we dress for work we become heroes, calm in a crisis but strong enough to tear apart a car.

The roller girls are an amazingly tight-knit family where everyone is a skater or has been one in the past. They run their own business and build their own track before every bout. There are coaches, team mothers, retired roller girl stars, and up-and-coming rookies but it doesn’t seem to matter whose team you skate for; they are one big family.

Stalker filled me in on their training; “Most of the tight bonds that are formed start with the training team you come in with. Those are the girls you learn to skate with, learn to fall with, and learn to hit with.”

Just like the fire academy there is a different relationship with those that you “came through” with. As a cadet you do everything with your team from studying and running towers to walking into the flashover chamber. Those firefighters become a part of your family for the rest of your career.

In the end, we attended three roller derby events: two bouts and one practice/league meeting. At the bouts we were able to speak with women in the audience, who were surprisingly tentative to speak to us. Casey and I approached many women that had walked right by our table thinking we were there for someone else, not for them. Many of those women are now gearing up to apply with AFD in December and take our test in January. I had the opportunity to speak to the roller girls at their league meeting and the word spread among them like a grease fire explosion. The 30 women that were there spread it to the rest of the league and there was a quite a buzz about becoming a firefighter.

We hope to continue our relationship with TXRD as they encourage female empowerment. We are now planning to attend bouts they have in other cities in

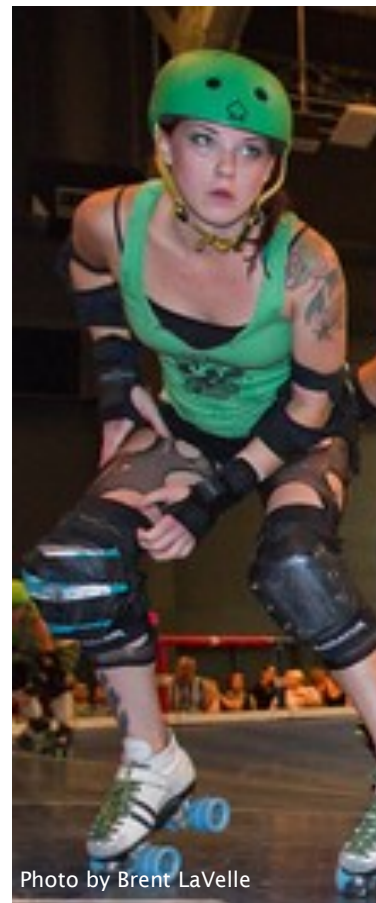


Photo by Brent LaVelle

Texas because we have been so successful here in Austin. As recruiters, we are now firmly rooted along the non-traditional path. The Austin Outlaws professional football team try-outs and the Valkyries women’s ruby team tournaments are on our calendar!

Suzanne La Follette is currently a firefighter with Austin (TX) Fire Department.