

Rolling with MS



Sk8 the State for MS roller derby divas recount the miles and the smiles

by Matt Alderton

If your only memories of roller skating involve coasting carefree in rented skates around a roller rink, bathed in the rainbow glow of disco lights, you've obviously never participated in a roller derby match. Roller derby is a raucous mix of glitter and grit, a rite in which two teams of five engage in a tangled exchange of physical jabs and verbal barbs. Equal parts high-speed chase and hand-to-hand combat, it leaves participants not only with memories, but also bruises. Or, as players prefer to call them, badges.

In that way, it's a lot like multiple sclerosis, according to Amelia Saint, 33, a roller derby referee from Sioux City, Iowa, who uses the name "Skinner" during matches. "There are some similarities between the roller derby 'attitude' and the attitude of fighting against this disease," says Saint. "There is a certain ferocity and unwillingness to give up that is necessary in roller derby. MS is obviously a very different fight. But it is a fight, and that's something people in the sport can relate to."

In fact, they relate so well that three roller derby players from Saint's team, the Sioux City Roller Dames, have organized a special MS fundraiser every spring for the past five years. Called Sk8 the State for MS, the event takes Saint, plus the trio—who call themselves "Team IronFeet"—to a different state every year, where they glide through the entire state on old-school quad roller skates to raise money and awareness for MS.

"There are still people out there who say, 'What's MS?' Roller skating is a great way to bring

attention to [the movement] because so many people have great memories about roller skating. When people see us, it brings a twinkle to their eye, and that's really powerful," says Libby Claeys, one of the members of Team IronFeet, who uses the nickname "PBR" in roller derby.

Athletes to advocates

Team IronFeet member Melissa Dittberner—whose roller derby name is "Sum Mo Payne," or "Mo" for short—says the idea for Sk8 the State originated with her ex-boyfriend in 2010.

"I'm a massage therapist and when I was in massage school we did a lot of work with the National MS Society," Dittberner says. "My instructor's wife had MS, so it was fresh in my brain as a disease that wasn't getting enough attention. MS is something many people don't understand, and we agreed it could use some extra eyes, some extra funds and some extra awareness."

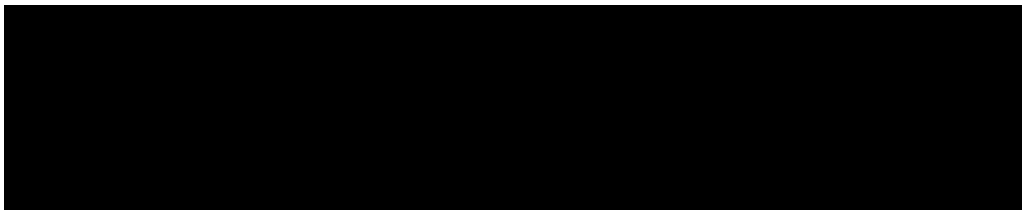
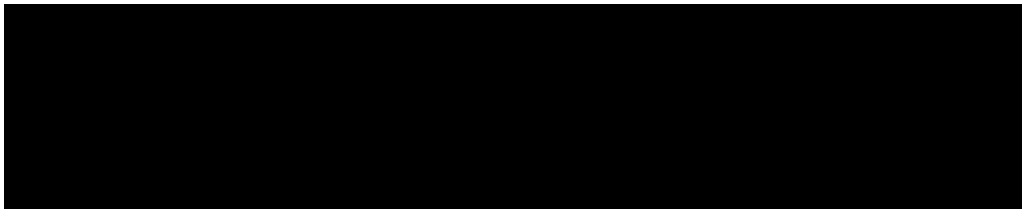
Dittberner was looking for a way to challenge herself and contribute to the movement. Her ex's idea—marathon skating—was a crazy proposition. And that, she says, made it perfect.

"In order to turn heads to raise awareness and really get people to listen to what you have to say, sometimes you have to do something that's never been done," Dittberner says. "I suppose that was the idea behind it. We wanted to do something that was as crazy as possible and see what we could get done."

Dittberner started Sk8 the State for MS with Claeys and a third roller derby teammate, Dani Bock. Saint later joined as the team's driver and support staff to support both the MS movement and her friends.

Claeys had her own connection to the disease: Her aunt has lived with MS for 40 years. "She has been like my second mom my whole life," Claeys says. "She has never judged me for an inch; she's always been supportive, and basically a big huge superhero to me. With this project, I wanted to be her superhero. ... If she could make such a positive impact on my life, this is the least I can do to show her my appreciation."

Sk8 the State for MS



To Texas, with love

Team IronFeet skated its first Sk8 the State for MS in 2010, when the women spent six days skating north to south through South Dakota. Since then, the derby divas have rolled through a different state every year, starting with their home states and adjacent states, then branching off to states where they know people who can provide support in the form of fundraising and lodging. Each time, they skate between 30 and 60 miles a day—typically between five and eight hours, depending on road and weather conditions—stopping periodically along the way to host events and attend fundraisers, most of which take place at roller derby matches, where local teams allow Team IronFeet to sell shirts and collect donations.

“We obviously have a roller derby connection, so we try to cash in on that as much as we can,” Saint says.

Going into this year’s event, Team IronFeet already had skated more than 1,000 miles and donated more than \$15,000 to the Society. Then in March, Team IronFeet skated 450 miles in Texas in just under two weeks. “We draw attention wherever we go because we’re on roller skates,” Bock says, “and you don’t see people on roller skates very often.”

Attitude and gratitude



Libby Claeys' passion for Sk8 the State for MS is evident on her leg, where she has tattoos displaying each state in which she has skated so far.

Photo courtesy of Libby Claeys.

Although it won't have a final tally for its 2014 fundraising until later this fall, Team IronFeet members feel they get as much from Sk8 the State as they give.

"The people we've met along the way have been life-changing," says Claeys, who gets a tattoo on her leg of each state when she finishes skating it. "Everybody thinks what we're doing is phenomenal, but in reality it's what they're doing—the people we've met who have MS, or have relatives with MS, or are caregivers for people who live with MS—that's phenomenal. Our pain—our wounds, our blisters—is temporary. The fact that they wake up every day with smiles on their faces, filled with an appreciation for life, that's our big inspiration."

The day MS is cured is the day the women will retire their wheels, says Claeys. In the meantime, they've got 45 more states to skate. "Our ultimate goal is to have MS eradicated," continues Claeys. "But until then, we're going to continue on."

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

Follow TeamIronFeet through North Dakota in 2015, and beyond, on its [Facebook page](#).