

Hurts so good: Bruises are a badge of honor for these locals on the roller derby track

By Patrick Hite

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HARRISONBURG — By day Lora Dattilio is a middle school English teacher. Caroline Cook designs costumes. Beth Van Pelt is a paralegal and Heather Cole is an author and archivist.

By night, however, they are badasses on roller skates, hip-checking and blocking and whipping their way around a roller rink. The women are part of the Rocktown Rollers, a Harrisonburg-based roller derby team.

The team practices at the Rockingham County Fairgrounds and holds home bouts — the name given to a game of roller derby — at Funkys Skate Center in Harrisonburg.

Van Pelt, who lives in Verona, joined the team in 2010, played four or five years before taking a break because of family obligations then rejoined the team around 2018. It was a Harrisonburg Fourth of July parade in which the team skated where Van Pelt first discovered the Rocktown Rollers. She had always enjoyed sports and, while she had some idea what roller derby was, she wanted to explore it more. She joined the team and immediately fell in love.

"It's a full-contact, kind of aggressive sport," she said. "You don't get that with women's sports a lot of time."

Explained in the most simplified terms, roller derby teams get points when their player known as a jammer laps a member of the opposing team. The other team's blockers try to stop the jammer with physical force. At the same time the blockers are trying to open up room for their jammer to skate through. Each team has four blockers and a jammer on the track at any one time. There are two 30-minute periods.

A good jammer tends to be quick on their feet, agile and strong. They also need to be attentive to what's going on around them.

Players can land in the penalty box if they elbow someone in the face or take someone out below the knees. So it's not a free-for-all, but it's also not necessarily for the faint of heart. Players wear helmets, mouth guards, and elbow and knee pads.

"Lots of bruises," Cook said. "We like to share them with each other. They're badges of honor. Sometimes a really good one, if you knew who did it, you might have them sign it. I've definitely had a few of those. Knock on wood, the worse injury I've sustained is a sprained ankle and I've been playing for nine years."

Immediately after saying that, both Cook and Van Pelt went to a wooden wall in the fairground's exhibition hall and knocked on it.

Van Pelt considers herself lucky that she's never had anything worse than a bruise. She's seen broken ankles, dislocated shoulders, broken collarbones and torn up knees. So injuries can happen. She said most hits are to the arms, upper legs and hips and chest.

"But it's not your WWF-style sport," Van Pelt said. "Now it's a legitimate ruled sport."

Instead of going by their given name on the track, players all have a derby name. Van Pelt said she's not even sure she knows all her teammates' real names. She goes by Bassett Case. As a former vet technician she still has a love for hound dogs.

As a costume designer and technician for the University of Virginia's department of drama, Cook is known as Pin Pushion. The Staunton woman said she also likes to sew as a hobby in addition to doing it at work, so the name fit.

Dattilio also incorporated the day job into her name, calling herself Independent Claws. She teaches eighth-grade English at Wilson Middle School. Dattilio said most of her students know she plays roller derby and the reactions range from "Oh, I can see that," to "No way."

Dattilio, who lives in Staunton, joined the team in May, finally getting the "gumption up" to try something she'd been considering for awhile. Newcomers, like Dattilio, are referred to as "fresh meat" in the roller derby world.

"I was really nervous," she said of that first day. "But the overall feeling is just so friendly and supportive and welcoming. It's been truly wonderful."

Cook said when her stepsisters heard she was on the team they couldn't believe it, saying she was too sweet and tiny. "And my stepfather said, 'Not on the track she's not,'" Cook said.

Cole actually went on a dare. A friend's husband saw a poster for the Rocktown Rollers and challenged a walking group Cole was part of to step it up. Cole, as did one other member of the group, took him up on challenge,

going to a fresh meat recruitment event in April 2022. She called it a total lark, but 10 months later she's still part of the team.

"Everyone on the team was so amazingly fun and interesting and supportive that I just kept going back," she said.

Her family thinks it's hilarious.

"I am not an athletic person by any stretch of the imagination, so they've gotten a kick out of the whole thing," Cole said. "My husband and teenage boys came out to my first game a few months ago and held a sign cheering me on and everything."

Van Pelt said the team is a non-profit that raises money for various organizations. While the group they are donating to this year isn't officially settled yet, Van Pelt said she thinks it might be Big Brothers Big Sisters.

In the past they've donated to Harrisonburg's Friendly City Safe Space, a community for LGBTQ+ people and aspiring allies; Cat's Cradle, an animal rescue in Harrisonburg; and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

The team, which is always looking for sponsors, has its first home bout Saturday, March 25.

Riverheads grad Brendan Hickman hikes Continental Divide Trail in record time

By Patrick Hite

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Eight pairs of shoes, six showers in 76 days, one bath in a laundromat bathroom sink, multiple blisters, one mountain lion, five states and 2,882.3 miles. Those are just some of the stats from Brendan Hickman's record breaking hike on the Continental Divide Trail.

Hickman, a 2000 Riverheads High School graduate who grew up in Augusta County and now lives in Oregon, left New Mexico June 14 and finished in Montana Aug. 29. The hike officially took 76 days, 10 hours and 52 minutes, the fastest known time for a self-supported hike along the Continental Divide Trail. That beat the previous record set in 2016 by a little over three days.

He had hoped to cover 40 miles per day, but Hickman fell just short of that personal goal, averaging 37.67 miles per day. That included one zero-mile day when he was not feeling well and one 56.7-mile day.

"It's really emotional, really kind of a confusing experience," Hickman said of his feelings when he finished. "The last day I did about 33 miles to get to the finish and it was lots of emotions running through me. I was getting like teary eyed even before I got to the end. I was struggling with tears when I got to the finish. It was an odd relief."

He was met at the finish by his girlfriend, his brother and sister-in-law and his nieces.

"There certainly is this relief of pressure," Hickman said. "But the accomplishment, it didn't feel real. A very surreal feeling."

New challenge

Hickman has hiked the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail. He wanted to try the challenge that the Continental Divide Trail provided, one that starts in the deserts of New Mexico, passes through snow-covered mountains in Colorado and covers some pretty remote and wild territory.

The trail was designated by Congress in 1978 and closely follows the United States Continental Divide, starting in New Mexico at the Mexican border and going through Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho before ending at the Canadian border in Montana.

Near the end of the hike, Hickman had to pass through Glacier National Park in Montana. A permit was required to hike the national park, and when Hickman reserved one he planned for an aggressive day. When he arrived he found out it would be an even more aggressive hike with part of the trail closed due to bear activity. The reroute added about three miles to the hike.

Those miles caused severe blisters — Hickman said they went past being blisters and were deep cuts in his foot — and he ended up limping 30 miles on his next-to-last day of hiking. Luckily he got to bed around 9 p.m. and slept until 4 a.m., his longest night of sleep on the trail, and felt much better the following day, his final one hiking on the trip.

His feet hurt more after this hike than any other, including the PCT or AT. The mileage and difficult terrain along the Continental Divide Trail contributed to the pain. On day one he did 48 miles and developed blisters that didn't heal for a month.

The isolation was more than he expected, hiking for days without seeing another person. In New Mexico for 20 days, he only saw three groups of hikers.

"This trail is tucked away into pretty wild mountains the entire time," he said.

Colorado was the most difficult part of the hike, with large amounts of snow and significant altitude ranging from 11,000 to 14,000 feet along the 700 miles in the state. He had prepared for much of the snow to be gone by July 1 according to what he had read, so he entered without an ice axe or any kind of traction for his shoes to maneuver the slippery terrain.

"The mountains are gorgeous but they are very tough to make distance on," Hickman said.

He certainly experienced a range of temperatures on his adventure. At nights in Colorado it got down to near freezing, but the days were not bad. Compare that to the first day he hiked in New Mexico when the temperature hit 105.

Wildlife

He had prepared for grizzly bears in Montana, but didn't see a single one. He only saw two bears on the entire hike and he doesn't believe either were grizzlies. Both were from a distance, one in New Mexico and one in Wyoming. Both ran as soon they sensed Hickman was coming.

He saw lots of elk and deer. He saw a few rattlesnakes, only one that refused to move off trail and forced Hickman to go around. He heard coyotes. Hickman had hoped to see both a mountain lion and a wolf. He didn't see a wolf, but he's pretty sure he saw a mountain line in southern Montana.

It was 10 p.m. and Hickman was wearing his headlamp. It was not uncommon to encounter eyes along the trail, most always belonging to deer or free-range cattle. On this particular night, he saw eyes about 100 feet away so he turned up his headlamp. He still couldn't see what was in front of him, but from the way the eyes were moving it reminded Hickman of a cat.

He pulled out his phone and turned on the video feature, zooming in to get a better view. That's when he saw the ears and body, realizing it was a mountain lion. He kept moving and the animal followed, getting closer from behind. It got within about 50 feet of Hickman, who pulled out his bear spray just in case. He yelled at the animal to move while he backed away. The cat didn't come any closer and eventually disappeared, but for the next hour he said his head was on a swivel. He finally got to a place where he was comfortable that the mountain lion was gone, so he camped.

"It was probably the scariest animal moment I've ever had in the wild," Hickman said.

Hickman hasn't planned his next adventure. It might be a non-hiking experience, like bicycling across the United States or paddling the Columbia or the Mississippi rivers from start to finish.

"It's hard to say," he said. "There are so many adventures out there. There will certainly be something to come, it's just hard to say when it will be."

'It's gnarly, man': Waynesboro woman takes the gloves off for bareknuckle boxing debut

By Patrick Hite

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WAYNESBORO — Sydney Smith was disappointed about her debut in bareknuckle boxing. Not about the outcome, though. That she was happy with, beating the No. 2 contender by decision.

She only had a few bruises after the fight. Her eyes were slightly black. Her knuckles had mostly healed less than a week after the fight in South Carolina May 12. That was the part she was unhappy about.

"I was prepared to come out of there with my teeth knocked out and like, you know, just stitches and my eyes swelled shut," Smith said. "You know what I mean? Like that's what I was prepared for. I was prepared for war."

The stats showed her opponent landed 28 punches to Smith's head, so at least there was that. Maybe next time she can loose a tooth or two. And have an eye that's swollen shut for a few days. One can dream.

There will be a next time, though, because Smith is working toward what she hopes is a title shot in BKFC, the largest bareknuckle boxing promotion company in the world. When it began in 2018 it was the first organization allowed to hold a sanctioned, bareknuckle event in the United States since 1889. Bareknuckle fighting was a popular sport in the 18th and 19th centuries before making a return in the last five years.

Smith began with dreams of being an MMA (mixed martial arts) champion. She had several amateur fights, including making a trip for an event in

Montana in 2021, before making her pro debut in June, 2022. Medical issues kept her on the sideline a lot during that time, limiting her number of fights.

Then BKFC added a strawweight division for the lightest fighters, those at 115 pounds or less. Smith had been interested in bareknuckle fighting for awhile but couldn't fight until that division was added. She just wasn't big enough for heavier divisions.

She started feeling healthier this year, saying her fight in South Carolina was the first time she's fought at 100%. It showed in the results, handing Andy Nguyen her first BKFC loss. The fight was five two-minute rounds.

"It's gnarly, man," Smith said. "It's the ultimate test of combat. You have to have grit to fight bare knuckle and I've got a lot of that."

The fight itself went fine, but things didn't go as smoothly leading up to the match. Both her cornermen backed out just days before the fight, leaving her searching for help while in South Carolina. Luckily a friend from Virginia Beach agreed to make the seven-hour trip to Greenville to be in her corner. Smith said she was more annoyed than angry that people backed out on her.

The outcome of the fight was an upset to everyone but Smith, who was confident in her abilities. As she was leaving the arena after the fight another boxer told her she'd just made a lot of people rich. She looked at him and said, "If they bet on me." The next morning at breakfast another fighter told her he'd made \$675 from betting on her.

"I don't really pay attention to it, honestly," Smith said. "My whole life has just been nothing but an underdog story."

In her 31 years, Smith has faced a lot of challenges, detailed in a News Leader story published in June, 2021. She's been hospitalized for mental health struggles, survived an attempt to take her own life, had plans for another suicide attempt but didn't carry it out, survived a head-on crash in which she faced felony hit-and-run charges, has graduated from drug court for alcohol abuse, had a dysfunctional relationship with her dad who died while she was in drug court, dealt with multiple health issues and suffered three miscarriages.

Now, though, with her health problems hopefully behind her and raising a healthy 2-year-old son, Smith really believes her life has turned a corner for the better.

And she loves BKFC, saying the organization ran a flawless fight and everyone she met was so nice. Although her contract prevents her from saying how much money she won, Smith said she was "paid well" for her win.

Smith has also become very active in her church in recent years as she's battled to overcome her challenges. She thinks God helped put her in the position where she is now.

"He's looking for people to speak up for him in these days," she said. "And I feel like that's what I was born for. And all the hell I've been through in my life has prepared me for this moment."

Smith isn't sure when her next fight will be. There's a rumored card for Roanoke in September. She's love to be on that card if it happens. Maybe there will be an opportunity before then.

"I don't really know and I don't really care who's next," Smith said. "I'll fight them all if I have to before you give me a shot at the title. I don't expect a title shot right now. But after the next one or two, I feel like I will prove myself and prove that I deserve it. And then I'm coming to take it. 100%."