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Wednesday, 26 October 2011

Roller Derby!

Words and photos by **Ctein**

This column will be filled with much name-dropping and external linking. There's a reason.

About two weeks before my just-completed trip to Minneapolis, DDB (a.k.a. David Dyer-Bennet) mentioned in an email, "I've got a crazy photo project coming up, but shortly after you've left I think: 22-Oct. Shooting the Fabulous Lorraine's roller derby team in a match. Should be fun...."

Well, Lorraine is indeed Fabulous, and a friend of mine, too, and I wasn't leaving until the 24th, so I asked DDB to ask her if I could join the fun. I kinda knew what the answer would be, but it's always polite to ask.

Our very own DDB (David Dyer-Bennet) at the ready, in the "suicide zone." Made with the Rokinon 85mm.

Mind you, I haven't done any sports photography for 40 years, and DDB's got even less experience than me, but that's never stopped either of us. He's good and he's a fast learner, and I figured I'd get my chops back pretty fast. Right on both counts.

So, last Saturday DDB, Lydy, and I drove out to Eau Claire for the match.

I haven't seen roller derby since it was on TV as a kid. I loved it. I didn't like watching any other sports, still don't. I think it was the combination of skill, chaos and mayhem combined with getting to see women actually *do* something real and physical. A novelty when I was young, but still a delight. And still too rare. This match, in fact, was a charity bout raising money for Girls on the Run.

PORTALS

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SEARCH

Google

WWW
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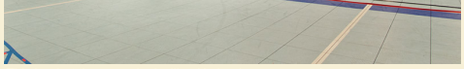
CATEGORIES

Around the Web (220)
Baker's Dozen (50)
Blog Notes (565)
Bon Mots (10)
Book of the Week (15)
Books (521)
Camera Reviews (138)
Cameras, new (779)
Cameras, old (255)
Carl Weese (23)
Collecting (53)
Computers (91)
Ctein (370)
Digital Techniques (72)
Eamon Hickey (2)
Editing and Portfolios (75)
Exhibits (84)
Film and Darkroom (127)
Followups (147)
From the Archives (38)
Geoff Wittig (2)
Gordon Lewis (15)
Interviews (7)
Jim Hughes (31)
John Camp (8)
John Kennerdell (17)
Ken Tanaka (11)
Kirk Tuck (8)
Legal and social issues (112)
Lenses (316)
Mini-Portfolios (5)
Morning Coffee (32)
Music Notes (106)
News and Occasions (475)
Obituaries (82)
Off-topic posts (490)
Open Mike (337)
Oren Grad (1)
Past Blasts (23)
Peter Turnley (66)
Photo equipment (344)
Photo industry (169)
Photo-tech (221)
Photographers, current (240)
Photographers, historical (164)
Photographic aesthetics (219)
Photography businesses (26)
Photojournalism (85)
Polls (16)
Print Offers (261)
Printers and Printing (169)
Quote o' the Day (95)
Random Excellence (246)
Random Snaps (123)



This is what the arena looks like. No banks, so no one is gonna go up and over the rail. The photographer in me says, "Dang." The blue tape marks the outer bounds of the skating zone. It's a permeable boundary. Note DDB, left of center, there. Made with the Olympus 12mm $f/2$ lens.

Turns out flat tracks are now the norm, not the banked ones of my youth. OK, so maybe not quite as much mayhem as I remember. We got ourselves situated in the suicide zone, which is the area just outside the blue zone the skaters are supposed to stay in. Note the phrase "supposed to"; that's why they call it the suicide zone. Hah, the closest any skater came to colliding with me, she was a good two feet away.

But first there was the pre-game entertainment and, to our delight and surprise it was Lojo! Formerly of Minneapolis, now living in Iowa with her partner Susan, I haven't see Lojo in some years. Multi/megatalented singer, guitarist and songwriter. When she'd sit in with The Flash Girls, the Fabulous Lorraine's old group, it was something incredible. As a solo act, she's still incredible. She can rock down a house all by herself without breaking a sweat. In an alternate reality, she's a major star, I'm sure. She performed pregame and during the intermission.

The indescribably wonderful Lojo Russo. Good teeth, too. Made with the Rokinon 85mm.

Finally we got to the match; it was the Chippawa Valley Roller Girls ("our" team, in black) vs. the Harbor City Roller Dames (in white). I'll spare you the suspense—our team got trounced. CVRG was good, but HCRD was a lot better. Such is life.

For me and DDB, though, it was about making photos. DDB went the auto route, hoping and trusting that his Nikon kit's fast and predictive autofocus was up to the task (it was). He jammed away at ISO 3200 with a relatively slow $f/2.8$ telephoto, and it worked fine. He got lots of good photos. For a first-timer, he got hella-lots of good photos.

Looser's sometimes better than tight, when there's a nice group interaction. Made with the Olympus 45mm $f/1.8$, my favorite lens.

I went in a different direction. I held my Olympus Pen down to ISO 800, where the image quality is damn good. Armed with a quartet of $f/2$ and faster primes I didn't feel a lot of need for higher ISO. I worked a bit with the 45mm $f/1.8$ and the autofocus worked better than I expected, but mostly I went with the Rokinon 85mm $f/1.4$ lens I reviewed here a couple of weeks back, used wide open. That got me the same 1/400th–1/500th of a second as DDB. But not predictive autofocus, pure manual.

That Rokinon 85mm can also get me some nice groupings.

Well, I grew up with manual-focus sports photography. With practice, you can get really good at follow-focusing, especially when the motion is kind of predictable, as it is in a roller derby course. I'm way out of practice, so I fell back on a much safer technique. You pick your spot. Then you pick a spot on the field (track in this case) and prefocus there. Fix that point in your mind. Ignore what's happening everywhere else.

Reader Prints (7)
Recommended Cameras (14)
Reflections (198)
Reruns (24)
Roger Overall (2)
Sarge (1)
Satire Alert! (25)
Shooting Skills and Camera Handling (6)
Shooting techniques (157)
Software (75)
Sunday Support Group (73)
TOP contests (6)
TOP's Own Books (10)
Visual Culture (270)
Websites and links (141)
Weekend Exercises (5)
Workshops (19)
Your Turn (9)

ARCHIVES

January 2024
December 2023
November 2023
October 2023
September 2023
August 2023
July 2023
June 2023
May 2023
April 2023

More...

As a photographically-promising player approaches that mark, keep the shutter half pressed to minimize lag. Just before they hit the mark, hit the shutter. Pretty quickly you'll internalize the lag time of your camera and be able to nail it almost every time. Didn't take me even a half dozen photos before I'd got that down. Instant feedback is a big help, and chimping is my bosom buddy. Despite the razor-thin focus zone of the 85mm at *ƒ*/1.4, I was good most frames.

Tight is good, too. Made with the Rokinon.

(I'm starting to really, really like this lens, bunches.)

Of course, you miss a lot of the action that way. Furthermore, only a small percentage of those frames will actually have good action. You can't predict that, and you're still composing on the fly. A high success rate simply will not happen. But you get to put all the technical stuff out of your head and you will get enough good action photos to make you (and the team) happy.

Well I did, anyway. DDB got a lot more than me, because he wasn't locked down the same way (and because he is damn good). But I got enough.

Then came the after-game photos.

Did I mention that the Fabulous Lorraine is also assistant to Neil Gaiman? Now I have. In fact, Neil flew in our mutual friend Kyle Cassidy, whose work has been featured on TOP previously to photograph the CVRG's first match. So, Neil was at the game, too, and we finally got properly introduced instead of just circling each other at parties as we have for years (we have approximately 2,000 very close friends in common). There was a certain amount of after-game excitement when people discovered they had a modest celebrity in their midst, resulting in some of my favorite photos from the whole session. The Fabulous Lorraine loves this one, I love this one, and Neil loves this one. Gotta call it a win, I suppose.

Neil aloft. This might just be the happiest photo I've ever made. Made with the Olympus 45mm *ƒ*/1.8.

We hung around for the after-game party a bit, to get time to chat with Lojo and Lorraine (who wasn't skating this time, sad to say, but being very busy with organizing and managing stuff). Plus I had a big hug to deliver to her. Y'see, about a week before I left I was having diner with a very close friend, Marilyn Krieger. Marilyn's a world-expert cat behaviorist and trainer. I don't mean exotic entertainment and stunt cats; we're talking housecats?

You don't think your housecat can be trained to do just about anything you'd like (or broken of just about any bad habit)? Buy Marilyn's book and learn how.

I mentioned in passing the upcoming roller derby business and, whaddaya know, she and Lorraine are really good friends, too. Because, along with everything else, The Fabulous Lorraine does Bengal Cat rescue. And, I think maybe there's some connection between Marilyn and Neil, maybe, maybe. Don't ask me how cat behavior and Neil come together, but anything's possible, as Neil's interests are almost as far-flung and wide-ranging as the Fabulous Lorraine's connections.

This column isn't really primarily about photography. It's about these song lyrics from thirty years ago:

> *Most of us don't believe in what we cannot see,*
> *but there's more to living than photography.*
> *All the threads that link us eternally,*
> *think of electricity.*

Ctein

Ctein's regular weekly column on TOP appears on Wednesdays, if it doesn't get bumped outside the blue line.

Featured Comment by **Chris Norris:** "I shot roller derby for a few years and recently sludged through my thousands of photographs to put together something I'm proud of. It's a bit more art than sports photography, but it represents a lot of sweat and work."

Featured Comment by **Robert Roaldi:** "I think lots of guys secretly like tough women but won't admit it. This column was from way out in left field, I smiled all the way through. Merci beaucoup."

Posted on Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 01:06 PM in Ctein, Shooting techniques | Permalink

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Comments

I was lucky enough to move to Austin just when the roller derby revival ignited. Many games and photos later, I've got friends involved in the two (one banked-track and one flat-track) leagues here. It's an amazing community and the ferocious fun the women have out there is genuine.

Posted by: Charles Hueter | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 02:01 PM

Good column!

I love that top shot. She looks like a woman who likes to hit.
You didn't say which Nikon DDB is shooting. It looks too small to be a D3...any idea what it was? He looks more natural in that photo vest than just about anyone I've ever seen.

By the way, anybody who doesn't follow that link out to DDB's page is missing something...

Also, Chris Noris' comment, he says he "sludged through my thousands of photographs..." What a great word: sludged. A combination of trudged, and slugged (maybe) with an underlying sludge, though I wouldn't think he'd refer to his photos are sludge...In any case, it's a word I plan to steal.

JC

Posted by: John Camp | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 02:24 PM

Dear Chris,

Oh that's nice. And Photo 14 is friggin' wonderful!

Hey, is there some rule that the refs have to be men? (They all were in my game, and it looks like they all are on your site.) Or is it just that any woman who can skate and knows the game is out there playing?

And, yeah, I will be photographing more of the games when there's one while I'm in the Minnesota area. Lorraine said there's one match a month, roughly, so odds are good I'll hit one game a year.

pax / Ctein

Posted by: ctein | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 02:32 PM

Great on so many levels: action, expressions, portraiture, and my favorite; subcultures!... They have the Boston Derby Dames up here and they have spawned a mini-photo movement. See their website... photos, individual portraits, posters... - I have to recommend a book too - "Five Strides on the Banked Track: The Life and Times of the Roller Derby" by none other than a young, new-journalism embracing, gonzo-precursing Frank DeFord. The old Derby up to 1970....

Posted by: Chris Y. | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 02:34 PM

Come to Madison some time and you'll see 10-20 times that audience at every bout. Good times.

Posted by: Evan | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 02:39 PM

Chris Norris -- cool, thanks for posting the link to your collection. I'm pleased to see a couple of the ideas on my list to try in the future have worked for you; that's encouraging (I suppose I should have experimented a bit more on my first run, but I had a tech problem with my battery pack at the start that caused me to become a bit conservative; and I liked what I was getting).

Interesting to see differences in lighting (not just brightness and color balance) in the arenas. The Eau Claire indoor sports center is lit with what look like batches of fluorescent tubes up way high, so the light is less directional than what you have; easier, but less interesting.

I expect I'll be back a time or two at least; it was fun, the players seem to appreciate the photos, and I need to get out there at least a couple of times to do some photos of Lorraine's Bengals (both the CVRG home arena and Lorraine are vaguely 90 minutes from where I live; since it's largely the *same* 90 minutes, combining things makes sense).

This was definitely a case where the tech came through for me (despite the battery pack glitch; that cost me a couple of frames per second, which I didn't really need, and made verticals less convenient, which is a pity; next time!). I shot on continuous AF, hand-held, with VR, almost entirely (for the bout itself) with the 70-200/2.8 VRI, on my D700. I used mostly ISO 3200, but it ranged up into the non-certified pseudo-ISOs in some experiments.

I wasn't happy with some trials with a 1.4x TC; I need to examine the tries as a group and decide what was "really" wrong (I played with shutter speeds and ISO and things trying to get it right, but was never satisfied at the chimping level). I'd like to have 300mm or even 400 available (the 400 I've got is f/5.6, though). And I don't need shots of "the important play" for the newspaper; I need really good action shots, and if I only get one or two per game that's fine. I may need to not depend on AF, and trigger on position instead (pre-focused), with the longer lenses.

Of course, renting a 400/2.8 is not beyond the realm of consideration. Oops! Maybe I'm wrong about that; the 400/2.8 rents for $430 for 7 days from lensrentals.com for example (plus shipping).

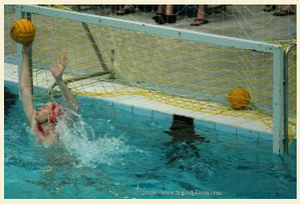
Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 03:04 PM

Your trick with prefocusing on an area of action doesn't only apply to manual focus lenses, it can be very useful even with full-automatic autofocus wonders.

I've used it in the past to get action shots with sports where the location of the action is very unpredictable and can move around quickly, like ball sports. If you always follow the ball, it's hard to get the players at their most interesting, but if you follow a player, it's hard to keep track of where the ball is.

When I shot waterpolo occasionally, I'd sometimes setup my camera on a tripod, frame and focus on one of the goals (usually of the team that was defending the most), prefocus, and set the aperture to a value that gave me the right DOF to get the goal in focus. Then I just held a wired remote in my hand and followed the game.

Got me some great action shots of the goalies and close attackers.



I've always wanted to try this trick with two people: One holding the camera and following a player, the other following the game and triggering the camera when that player receives the ball (or does something else interesting).

Posted by: Bernard Scharp | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 03:49 PM

No, Ctein, no. Don't you know that action can be shot only with uber-fast autofocus?

BTW, are you certain you don't remember the tracks from this film? :)

Posted by: erlik | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 03:50 PM

The Minneapolis science fiction/writing/folkie/whatever scene is the most insanely interconnected social nexus I have ever seen. It's pretty wonderful.

Posted by: Andrew Molitor | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 03:52 PM

Hi Ctein,

Hope you are well. Regarding DDB, well at least I know. Lunch for both of you is on me next time. Or breakfast.

Cheers,

Chris

Posted by: Christopher Lane | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 05:01 PM

When my daughter became fascinated by roller derby, I took my camera to a few matches — what a humbling photographic experience. Really crappy, dim lighting, bad angles all over, fast fast action. Ouch. At least I didn't get slammed by flying jammer.

By the way, what do you wanna bet New York City's Queens of Pain would whip your Chippawa Valley Roller Girls ass?

Posted by: Joe | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 06:35 PM

Derby seems to be taking off well in the UK too - saw and shot my first bout this month and it's a most excellent experience, so much fun watching everyone, players & fans alike, get really stuck in!: https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150410426251972.411004.508076971&type=1&l=bfea533

Posted by: Rich Spencer | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 06:43 PM

I've seen female refs on rosters (I believe; names are not definitive) and a couple in photos, so they're only a small minority, not absent completely. I suspect Ctein is right that the real issue is that people who care enough to be refs and are female mostly end up playing, right now. As this generation ages out, probably a number will move on to being refs at that point.

Andrew Molitor, yes, yes it is :-). There's a strong software element, too, of course (that's where we overlapped, and I suspect where you know a bunch of the other SF people from). Fandom started as a social nexus from day 1 (when Hugo Gernsback published addresses with letters in *Amazing Stories*, and the fans started writing to each other directly).

John Camp, you probably saw in my previous message (looks like our previous messages were in the mod queue together), but it's a D700. Making the low-light not a problem, but I'd really like my 1.5x back.

Rich Spencer, looks like you had fun! There are some very nice shots there.

Joe, not betting on sports, especially this one. And CVRG lost this bout against Duluth already. But it was a good contest.

Posted by: David Dyer-Bennet | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 08:23 PM

Thanks David, it was brilliant (even though my friends' team lost)! I'm very much looking forward to the next home bout mid-November!

Posted by: Rich Spencer | Wednesday, 26 October 2011 at 11:15 PM

Roller derby can be hard to capture: high speed, the lighting in the arenas is dim, and often different types of lights are used together. It's great fun though. Here's a dSLR time lapse I worked on of Cleveland's Burning River Roller Girls to give you a compressed time view of the sport:

http://vimeo.com/4248744

Posted by: Andrew | Thursday, 27 October 2011 at 10:22 AM

Ctein - The refs tend to be men, but there are some women. Photo 12 shows one in the foreground (although in a place like Roller Derby, fishnets don't necessarily mean the wearer is a woman) and one falling out of the left part of the frame. I've also seen women that stopped competing due to injuries don the striped jersey.

David - The lighting differences were... substantial. The skating rink these were shot at (they play at a much larger, more uniformly lit arena now) had fluorescent lights, tungsten house lights, and sometimes colored lights. Since I shot over such a long period of time I did a lot of experimentation. On camera flash, remote flashes on stands, umbrellas... really just all over the place. I have a lot of shots that show some of the more interesting effects I got doing that, but they didn't thematically fit in with the series on strange.rs.

I don't think I ever shot with anything tighter than a 55mm on a crop body. At first, it was because I needed my faster lenses, but I eventually kept with it because of stylistic considerations. My shots looked different than most derby photography, which looked more like sports photography than what I was doing. Tightly cropped action shots just didn't appeal to me and there were already tons of derby photographers out there doing that better than I could.

Posted by: Chris Norris | Thursday, 27 October 2011 at 10:38 AM

Some of the crowd must have been thinking... Since when did ZZ Top take photographs?

Posted by: sean | Thursday, 27 October 2011 at 11:32 AM

I think that you'll find that photographers who regularly shoot roller derby have found it to be a complete addiction that most can't break free from. I, myself, got addicted in early 2006 and have blown through near half a million photos of it since.

Posted by: Jules | Thursday, 27 October 2011 at 03:36 PM

Chris, I have to say your gallery was excellent work and I felt compelled to share it myself, hopefully my Derby friends will spot it too!

Posted by: Rich Spencer | Thursday, 27 October 2011 at 06:03 PM

That last picture, the girl with the blue hair, she is kinda cute ;)

And yes, my first time trying to get pictures at a derby while keeping one eye on my active young daughter was definitely an experience - bad lighting, not a good angle to be had, fast action, terrible backgrounds. Yikes!

Those pics are good Ctein.

Posted by: Karl | Friday, 28 October 2011 at 10:47 AM

The comments to this entry are closed.