

Dream Team

By Lisa Birch

‘Let’s go, Team Slow!’ I joked. The other girls gave me watery smiles. All through roller derby fresh meat (the name given to the rigorous skill based training needed before attempting to play competitively), the four of us had been the slowest and, some would say, most determined. We had failed the first round of tests, but a second was offered to us, which is why we were standing there as a team of wannabes. I hadn’t been practicing a whole lot since failing the first test, but skating is a little like learning to ride a bike: hard to forget in a hurry.

‘Alright, freshies, follow me!’ Anna Narky waved her arms in the air, guiding us to the relatively easy first station, set up in a small area on one of the multi-purpose courts. All we had to do was weave between cones which had been placed quite close together. We lined up, and then I noticed all of the assessors. It wasn’t just Anna watching us; she had a guy with a stop watch at one end, someone holding a whistle next to the first cone and another assessor hovering nearby with a clipboard. In fact, there were more assessors than skaters.

‘I feel sick,’ I muttered to no one in particular. It wasn’t just nerves; something wasn’t quite right. It didn’t matter, because all too soon I was skating between the cones, making perfect time.

‘Awesome work, babe!’ Cathy, one of my team mates from Team Slow, high-fived me as I rolled to a stop.

‘How’d you do?’ I asked her.

‘Alright, I think, but all these assessors are giving me the creeps. It’s not very chill, is it?’ We looked around at the other skaters, set up at two other stations. The assessors holding clipboards were clutching them to their chests, determined not to give anything away.

Anna gathered us around her. ‘It’s time for your endurance laps. Now, you know the minimum you need to pass your safe skater test is 27, but today, you only need to get 20 laps in five minutes.’ I glanced at Cathy – neither of us had been able to skate

more than 18 laps in five minutes. Maybe fresh meat testing day round two would be the day we cracked it.

Anna assigned us each an assessor who would count our laps, and we picked a spot on the track. I selected a red line, thinking it would be lucky, and waited for the whistle again. As soon as it blasted, I began to run on my skate stoppers and picked up speed, slowly lapping other members of Team Slow. But by time two minutes had elapsed, they were passing me. With only three minutes on the clock, and five laps in, I knew I probably wouldn't make 20, but I kept going. At the 30 second warning I sped up again, but when the final whistle blew, I'd only achieved 16 laps.

The afternoon dragged on. We were tested at standing on one leg, and then the other, for thirty seconds. Harder than it sounds on skates. We skated as a big pack of girls, dodging obstacles thrown on the track by the assessors. Finally, the moment I'd been dreading, the giant pool noodle was laid across the derby track.

'You must jump over the noodle with both feet in the air, and land with both feet at the same time,' Anna reminded us. In the line that curved around the apex of the track I saw other roller girl wannabes crossing their fingers. I said a quick prayer, thinking God might be more reliable than holding two fingers together. Like all prayers I'd offered up to God, I knew I could count on him for some kind of answer.

Soon enough there was just a wide open space between me and the pool noodle. I skated slowly and jumped, and then landed straight on my backside, a sure sign of not bending low enough to jump. On my second attempt, I heard my skates leave the ground at different times, and on landing, I did the same. And, after the failed third attempted, Anna skated up to me.

'I've seen enough. Come and have a chat.' Well, this can't be good.

I looked over my shoulder at Cathy who was peering at me from behind a taller girl. I shrugged at her and followed Anna, who sat down on one of the chairs that lined the court. 'I'm not skating very well today,' I said to her.

She shook her head. 'It wouldn't be fair to let you keep going. The thing is, we really like you, and you've given everything a go. Why don't you come back as NSO?'

I looked at her blankly. ‘A what?’

‘NSO. A non skating official. You can volunteer with us and still come to all our parties and things. Plus, they have a super cool uniform.’

I didn’t give two hoots about the uniform. I wanted to wear skates and speed around, hip checking people and getting in the way of the opposition. Volunteering sounded fun, but right now all I wanted to do was play on a team.

‘There’s always next year,’ she said kindly. I thanked her, and she went back to Team Slow, now down one member. I skated off the court as fast as I could and started peeling off my skates and knee socks in the foyer. What on earth was I thinking? I’m a quiet underachiever! Was I nuts to think about being a derby girl in the first place?

I stashed my skates in my bag, and walked out to my car. The roller girl decal I stuck on my back window seemed to be mocking me. I gave it a death stare, then climbed into my car and cried.

When I got home, I took to my bed like an overtired child who has been sent to their room without dinner. Except, this time, I had sent myself there. ‘There will be other chances,’ my husband said. ‘You could always volunteer with them.’

I shook my head. ‘I’ve never been on a team, except primary school netball, and then I had to play Wing Defence every single time.’ I looked over at my skate bag; it was already sending a wafty odour across the room. ‘This is the only thing I thought I could do, and now I can’t even do it.’ I even got kicked off Team Slow, for crying out loud!

God, I prayed, you have some funny ways of answering prayers.

‘I’m coming around to collect your tickets,’ said the gym instructor from the stage. The disco lights were on, and being a balmy January day, everyone was already hot and sweaty before the workout had started. ‘Please let me know if you are injured or pregnant.’ The instructor stood before me and I handed her my card. ‘I have a knee injury,’ I said, so she

went through some basic instructions of what not to do. But something else she'd said – 'or pregnant' – stuck in my mind.

Or pregnant...

Those two words began to annoy me all through the class. Could pregnancy throw your skating off balance? There had been six weeks between the fresh meat sessions ending, and that big test I had taken just yesterday. I tried not to think about it too much. The class flew by, and soon enough I was looking at the roller girl decal again. This time she looked friendly.

Cathy started fresh meat again without me, with a new league she had tracked down. 'You should come,' she said. 'Everyone there is really nice, it's super relaxed. Totally your scene.' This was the third time we had had this conversation, and I couldn't put it off telling her the truth any longer.

'I can't, I'm having a baby.' I said. My husband looked at me curiously, wondering who I was talking to, no doubt. It was too soon to tell people, but not soon enough to stop competitive skating.

'Oh. Well, next time freshies come up again, maybe?' Cathy sounded surprised, but still had derby on her mind.

'Sure.' I said, and meant it. There would be time for me to skate again, one day, but for now I just wanted to worry about my team of three.

Instead of washing out my stinky skate gear, I found myself washing new baby clothes. And instead of attending practices, I was attending pre-natal classes. It wasn't the team I imagined, but it was better than Team Slow. It was the team God had chosen for me. We were the Dream Team – no hip checks necessary.