



# LEAGUES OF THEIR OWN





GREG DOHLER



**These Baltimore women prove  
you don't need balls to play ball.**

BY HANNAH MONICKEN AND KAY WICKER





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## WOMAN-TO-WOMAN (LACROSSE)

This past May, Baltimore sports fans gained another reason to rep the purple jersey: The United Women's Lacrosse League (UWLX), a four-team semipro circuit headquartered in Boston, kicked off its inaugural season, with the Baltimore Ride representing Charm City.

"People have been talking about establishing a professional or semi-professional league for women's lacrosse players since I graduated college back in 2001," says Jennifer Adams, the Ride's coach.

A player since she was 8, Adams was recruited as a freshman by the University of Maryland from her native Brighton, Australia. She has successfully coached teams at the University of Denver, her alma mater in College Park and is the current head coach for the Loyola Greyhounds.

"As a coach, I'm excited to bring together a lot of like-minded athletes who are at the top of their game, to give them a chance to play at a high level and to consider themselves professionals," Adams says. "They

work so hard at what they do and, up until this point, they haven't had a platform or a stage to showcase that."

Men have had the National Lacrosse League since 1986 and the Major League Lacrosse since 2001.

The Boston Storm, Long Island Sound and Philadelphia Force round out the UWLX's four starting teams. The Baltimore Ride is the only team in the league with a lacrosse-related name: To ride, as Adams explains, "means to re-defend, to attempt to get the ball back from the other team."

"Lacrosse in this city is such a big deal," says Dana Dobbie, one of Baltimore Ride's attacks. "People talk about Baltimore being the biggest lacrosse city in the entire world. You drive around Baltimore and you see lacrosse goals in people's backyards. That's not something you see in many cities."

Lacrosse was designated as Maryland's official state *team* sport in 2004, not to be confused with our state's *official* sport—believe it or not, jousting has held that honor since 1962. With the Maryland lacrosse culture so widespread and close-knit, it's hard to find someone who is not

connected to the sport in some way.

"I was at Whole Foods and a mom came up to me and said, 'Congratulations! We're so excited about the league. My daughter attends Roland Park and is so excited to get out and watch you play,'" says Dobbie, who is originally from Ontario, Canada.

### 4 KEY WAYS WOMEN'S LACROSSE DIFFERS FROM MEN'S

**UNFUSSY** Men wear full padding while women don't even don helmets.

**END OF THE STICK** Men's sticks have a pocket for carrying the ball while sticks for women are designed with a shallower pocket in order to pass the ball.

**MORE IS MORE** NCAA women play with 12 compared to the 10 in a men's game.

**GO TO JAIL** Body-checking is illegal for women.



The formation of the league has also received support from men's lacrosse—which, in terms of its rules and ways of play, can be very different than women's lacrosse. (See sidebar.) “The biggest thing I’ve heard from [men] that play the sport is just, ‘Finally, this is happening,’” says Dobbie.

You’ll recognize the Ride on the field by their distinctive uniform colors of black, gray and purple. The inaugural season is underway and culminates with a championship weekend on July 30. —K.W.

## MOTHER RUCKER (RUGBY)

Take the high-speed, pad-free play of soccer, combine with the full contact and ball-handling of American football and top off with a hefty dose of passion and a penchant for dirty drinking songs—that’s rugby.

Rugby is a brutal-looking sport from the outside. The players don’t wear pads (except mouthguards and, in some cases, a head-guard), and when we say the sport is full contact, we mean launch-yourself-at-another-player contact. Its players always bear, proudly, their “battle scars” after each game—usually, an impressive array of bruises, scratches and turf burn. Contrary to popular belief, however, rugby is a pretty safe sport, especially with proper technique and training. (Full disclosure: This writer played rugby for four years in college. My worst injury was a sprained knee, compared to a broken collarbone running high school track.)

The Chesapeake Women’s Rugby team in Baltimore is the oldest continuously running women’s rugby club in the country. They play in Division II of the Mid-Atlantic Conference and have three seasons—spring, summer and fall. Many on the team had never played rugby before joining up, as is the case with Lauren Harris, the current club president, who joined in the fall of 2014 and never looked back.

“The stars aligned and I started playing the sport I wish I had been playing since I was a kid,” she says. It wasn’t just the sport she loved—although, as a forward (generally, the more contact-heavy positions), she relishes a good tackle—but the sense of community and family that came with it.

The club’s new coach, Gerard “Rusty”



## THE LANGUAGE OF RUGBY

**RUCK:** Attempting to plow through other players to the ball **MAUL:** A (mostly) controlled fight for the ball **SCRUM:** Melee for the ball to restart the game **RUGGER:** Nickname for a rugby player **HOOKE:** Wins the ball in a scrum (and not for money) **TRY:** Rugby score **ZULU:** Rugger’s (usually naked) first score celebration **SIN BIN:** The penalty box

Cross, is a rugby lifer—and something of a crusader. An Irish native, he’s one of 12 children (eight sisters and three brothers). Cross’ father was a rugby coach well into his 70s, ensuring the whole family developed a taste for the sport, as well as Europe’s other favorite pastime, soccer (aka “football”). Cross has more than one sibling who went on to play for Ireland’s national rugby and soccer teams.

Cross is determined to do his part to help rugby really take off stateside. He’s coached all over Baltimore and emphasizes the fun of the game and the importance of safety. This year was a rebuilding one for Chesapeake, which lost nearly half of the team to retirement or relocation. Now, however, their roster sits comfortably at 34, and they consistently get close to 30 players each game (you need 15).

“It’s not about winning,” Cross says. “It’s about improving every game. Then, as you improve, you start winning.”

With rugby, the women’s version of the sport is exactly the same as the men’s—an aspect that appeals to many like Heather Rodgers, a Chesapeake player since 2010 and rugby player since college. “I was always so offended being told what I could or couldn’t do because of my gender,” she says.

Rugby allows women the chance to prove they can tackle with the best of them—but also provides a welcoming environment where no one has to be afraid to be themselves. That, according to Harris, Cross and Rodgers, is the real beauty of rugby.

“Whatever your size is, whatever your strengths are, there’s a position exactly for that,” Rodgers says. —H.M.





JUSTIN TSUCALAS

## ROLLER GRRRLS (ROLLER DERBY)

One of the most unusual aspects of roller derby—which, if you know anything about the eccentric nature of the sport, is saying a lot—is that the sport is dominated by, and best known for, its women’s teams.

Nearly every major city (and many not-so-major ones) has a roller derby league, and Baltimore is no exception. The Charm City Roller Girls are members of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association and have three home teams—Charm Red, Charm Black and Charm Yellow—that play each other in round robin-style tournaments. When traveling to play other league teams, they separate into three traveling teams: the Charm City All-Stars (the A team, naturally), Female Trouble (B team), and the Trouble Makers (C team).

Roller derby is played in roller skates on a flat-track rink, the kind you probably skated—and landed on—at birthday parties as a kid. Each team has five skaters with two (one from each team) as the designated “jammers” who then score by passing

opposition players, who are rarely delicate in their opposition.

Newcomers to the derby team may be taken aback by their over-the-top “uniforms”—many skaters rock a punk aesthetic, complete with fishnets, multi-colored knee socks and bright shorts or tights. Derby names are a kick, too—each skater has an alter-ego. (*See sidebar.*)

“I’ve been with Charm City for two years. Before that, I don’t think I’d been on skates for years,” says Wendy McDermott, 38, aka Slampagne Supernova, a captain of the C team and player on the B team, who joined because of a “before-40” bucket list. Now, it’s a family affair, with her husband learning to ref and her son (known among her teammates as “Son of Slam”) an experienced spectator.

Kacey Huntington Cappallo, 34, is an exception to the general rule that most derby members aren’t trained, practicing skaters—she was a serious speed skater before joining up with roller derby. After being recruited while attending grad school in Virginia at, of all places, a karaoke bar, she’s now in her seventh season with Charm

### BEST OF THE DERBY ALTER-EGOS

- Hittsburgh
- Allie B. Back  
(bonus jersey number: T2)
- LeBrawn Maimes
- Freckles Fatale
- Scarin’ Blockovich
- Traitor Jo
- Surly Manson
- Billie the Skid
- Federal Kill
- Leslie Nope
- Beta Blockher
- Ella Fitz-Peril

City, a captain of the All-Stars and skater with Team Maryland—the top skaters in the state. Her derby name is I.M. Pain. (A play on the architect I.M. Pei—she designs buildings by day.)

“I think the first time I got hit, I was like, ‘No. No, I don’t think I’m going to do this. I think I’ll just go back to speed skating,’” she says. “Then I figured out, if



you outmaneuver the person, then they don't hit you."

As derby becomes more popular, the skaters also hope it gets taken more seriously as a sport—many of these women are incredible athletes and derby is more than just a fun show (although it is fun as hell). In the end, all the skaters say, derby is a family.

"No matter where you go, there's a derby girl," says Jackie Gilbert (aka Jackie Treehorn, a nod to her second-favorite film, "The Big Lebowski"), a player on the All-Stars, as well as a Team Maryland co-captain. "I feel like it's this secret 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' golden ticket." —H.M.

## HOMETOWN BALLERS (FOOTBALL)

Even though Tanya Bryan has always been active in sports—she's played rugby, run track and field and got into soccer post-college—she wasn't aware women's tackle football existed before forming the Baltimore Nighthawks in 2007. "The first women's tackle football game I ever saw was our home opener," says Bryan.

Turns out, a lot of people still raise eyebrows at the thought. "The first thing people ask is, 'So you play lingerie football?'" says Shay Fitzgerald, a running back for the Nighthawks, referencing the Legends Football League, which has its players running, kicking and tackling in lingerie and (some) padding. Until recently, the league had a team in Baltimore. "A lot of [men] say once they come to the game and see, they wouldn't expect us to be women."

At first glance, the Nighthawks—thundering up and down the field in full pads under purple and black uniforms—could be mistaken for Ravens players. The Baltimore Nighthawks, one of 26 active teams in the professional Independent Women's Football League, are an eclectic group of women from diverse backgrounds, ranging in age from 20 to 43. And most are total football rookies. While some girls might play in adolescence through pee-wee leagues, football phases out for them by high school.

Women's lack of inclusion in the sport is evident in the lack of qualified female coaches. Four out of five Nighthawks



AMBER SMITH

### THE NIGHTHAWKS POPPIN' PUMP-UP PLAYLIST

**#36** Shay Fitzgerald rocks out with "Bodies" by Drowning Pool.

**#67** Suzanna Laudenschlager gets inspired by "Hakuna Matata" from "The Lion King."

**#32** Sherrie Thomas jams to "Panda" by Designer

**#66** Sandi James meditates on "Flawless" by Beyoncé.

**#50** Jaleesa Lantern grooves to "Get Up, Stand Up" by Bob Marley.

coaches are men. "It's very normal for men to be the coaches. There just aren't opportunities for [women]," says Bryan.

The league, divided into four conferences, includes teams all over the country and one in Montreal. The season begins in April and runs through June, with two postseason games in July. The team begins working in January with extensive class-

room and on-field training, making the Nighthawks a six- to seven-month annual commitment. Each year, team officials expect to lose about 25 percent of their roster. "Some have families and children to take care of," Fitzgerald says. "One player is about to go to med school."

The team, which often attracts military women, features a handful of active and retired members of the armed forces. "Our saddest moment was when we lost a player in Afghanistan," Bryan says of Hilda Clayton, a player who died in 2013 at the age of 22 during a training exercise while deployed.

Players say they are drawn to this sport because of the empowerment that comes with it. "I saw my own physical strength—I was able to knock people over," Fitzgerald says, and she fell in love. The team also provides a sisterhood. "We realize we need to stick together," she says.

Unlike the NFL, players and owners aren't quitting their day jobs for the league just yet. Bryan, though, hopes that this option could become reality.

"It's America's sport. I know some people think it's baseball," Bryan says. "But it's really football." —K.W. □