

{ROLLER DERBY}

LEAH PALESTRANT

By Heather Henderson | Staff Writer

It's easy to tell when a person is truly passionate about something. You can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voice when they talk about it. Talk to Leah Palestrant about roller derby, or any of her other pursuits for that matter, and you will see what I mean. Leah (pronounced like a certain princess from a galaxy far, far away) is a part of the Jacksonville RollerGirls, our local professional women's roller derby league, and she is unequivocally in love with her chosen sport.

If you've never seen roller derby in person, it is

surprisingly intense and ridiculously fun to watch. It's a whirlwind of a sport, like a rolling mosh pit to the soundtrack of screeching wheels and the clattering of knee pads against the wood floor of the rink.

Out there on her skates, Palestrant is Princess Plesh, a badass skating machine who plays the position of Jammer on the River City Rat Pack. Her job is to push through the maelstrom and score points by completing a lap around the track while her teammates defend her against the opposing team.



Everyone is essentially playing offense and defense at the same time. Roller derby is a lot of elbows and a lot of pushing and falling and getting back up, and them pushing some more. Princess Pleah tears across the floor like she's on fire, plowing through the crowd with a look of absolute determination, ready to crush anyone in her path.

At the team's practice sessions, there is a mix of light-hearted trash talk and sincere compliments flying around. Everyone is remarkably encouraging and positive even while they appear to be trying to kill each other. That's one of the things Leah loves about the sport. It's a truly friendly and supportive environment. She uses the term "support system" several times to describe her team, and you can tell by the way they interact that they all genuinely enjoy each other's company and want their fellow skaters to succeed.

Outside of the rink, Leah's determination doesn't falter, though her demeanor is much less terrifying than that of her skating alter ego. She is a textbook extrovert and it's obvious that she gets immense pleasure from the controlled chaos that she surrounds herself with. She is a leader both on and off her skates, and has a busy life filled with other hobbies, plus a demanding, yet rewarding, career. For her, it's all about scheduling and planning out her days to make everything fit, even if it means late nights at the rink followed by early mornings at work. She has a lot going on, but wouldn't dream of giving up any of her activities.

Roller derby has been a godsend for her. She believes she was drawn to the sport for a reason, after seeing it on TV and thinking "I wonder if I'd be good at that." Two and-a-half years later, she's now

a dominant force in the derby world. You get that sense that she's the type of person who doesn't just dabble in things, but rather dives all the way in, fully committed and endlessly driven not just to do it, but to do it very well. Derby quickly became more than just a hobby, but an emotional outlet and a source of self-confidence.

She confesses that, like most women, she has dealt with body image issues. A lifelong athlete in more traditional sports like basketball and volleyball, she was never comfortable with society's idea of what a female athlete's body should look like. Roller derby may very well be the most inclusive and body-positive sport there is. The ladies you see competing in derby represent all shapes and sizes, every one of them equally athletic and able to kick your butt. This inclusivity and diversity is important to Leah, and she's passionate about spreading the message, particularly to young girls who need to hear it the most. Her big hope for this sport is that it catches on with younger girls and allows them to grow up with the kind of support and positive body image that it has given her.

After studying Zoology at Ohio State, Leah's desire to make a difference in the world brought her into the education field. She moved to Jacksonville from Ohio in 2010, for a teaching job through AmeriCorps. She is now the learning and development director for the nonprofit organization City Year, where she trains volunteer teachers to work with students at low-performing schools in town. The program provides educational, social and emotional support to struggling students. It's a lot of work that carries an emotional toll, but she loves what she does. It's all part of her mission to, "repair the world," as she puts it.

When not skating or working, she dedicates the rest of her time to volunteering and community outreach. Wildlife conservation is one of her passions and she uses her background in biology to help rescue injured and endangered sea creatures. She is also heavily involved with her Temple and serves on the board of its young professionals group. It's a lot to juggle and she rarely has any downtime to herself, but she thrives on being busy and being around people. She is ultimately driven by a desire to help other people and do good, and her own relaxation seems to be the last thing on her mind.

As of now, roller derby is still on the fringes of the sports world and hardly draws the attention or money it deserves. The fanbase is loyal but small, and the athletes must make financial sacrifices in order to keep playing. Leah is hopeful that someday the sport she's so passionate about will gain the same mainstream respect and popularity as some men's sports, although there is a long way to go. Princess Pleah happens to be exactly the right person to blaze that trail. She knows how to take a hit, and she won't stop until she's finished fighting.

Photo: Chris Bishop

