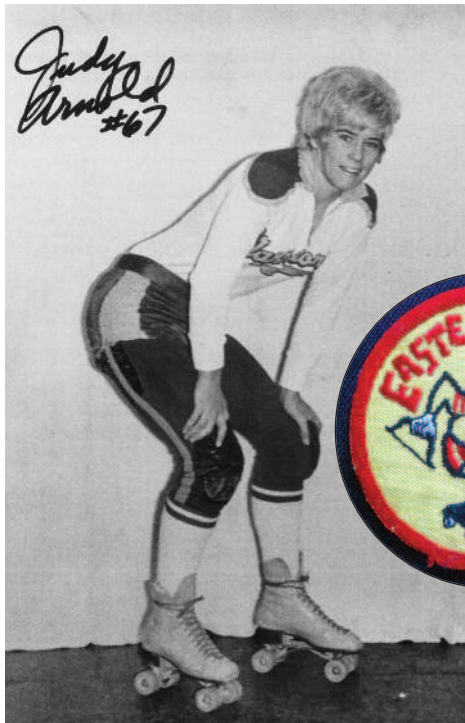


I may not know Karate, but I know crazy and I'm not afraid to use it.

Back In Time

By Will Valentino



An autographed Judy Arnold photo when she skated for the Warriors in the late 60s.

NOSTALGIA ON WHEELS

Those who may remember the “Eastern Warriors” may not know just how they happened to become Philadelphia’s Roller derby team. In 1967, The Warriors were a team on the move, relocating from the tropical paradise of Hawaii, far east to Philadelphia looking for new fans and a market share of the burgeoning popularity of roller derby. The sport had a stop and go success since the late 1940’s when the Philadelphia Panthers competed in national leagues. What began as a straight laced sport in Chicago in 1935 based on endurance, soon morphed into something completely different and far more entertaining. During the turbulent 1960’s, colorful personalities, theatrics, match games, grudge matches and flying fists brought the game into a whole new arena. In the Warriors case, the team captured the attention of many Philadelphians looking to cheer on a winning team. The 70s had been lean and mean with championships few and far between for most professional Philly sports teams. Something clicked with this team captained by a feisty blonde named Judy Arnold! Kids like to read comic books, but to some, these rag tag warriors on wheels had been superheroes in their own right. Fans began to frequent the games held at the Philadelphia Arena and later the Spectrum. Often the team would be featured on “The Roller Game of the Week” on WKBS TV Channel 48 and soon, watching those bright red, yellow and white uniforms sandwiched between mail order commercials for KTEL records and Ginsu knives became a weekend ritual for many. There was a visceral thrill watching the Warriors glide, roll and punch their way to victory over the likes of Judy Sowinski and the New York Bombers. Sowinski would eventually become a Warrior herself and a South Philly resident to boot! Elmer Anderson gave the play-by-play often interviewing team members only to start ducking punches as players tore at each other’s uniforms, throwing chairs and threatening match races with high stakes. The game had become a new age gladiatorial match on wheels and the Philadelphia fans ate it up! To understand the game, you must first understand how the game was played. The game was based on point scores and preventing the opposing team’s lead “jammer” from reaching the front of the pack. Imagine if you will, football, on wheels, on a banked, ever circling oval field where the lead “jammer” has to break through the opposing teams defenses to get to the front of the pack to score within a set time limit. Talk about a blast from the past, Mike Douglas, who once did a nationally syndicated talk show from Philadelphia called the sport a “cross between the circus, hockey and wrestling and he wasn’t that far from the truth. To give you an idea of how popular the sport had become, in 1972 Douglas had an open air roller rink built on Independence Mall outside the KYW studios at 5th and Market and featured Judy Arnold and members of the Eastern Warriors in a match game against Chess Champ Bobby Riggs! I found the whole segment on YouTube! In their heyday, 16,000 people would fill the Spectrum to watch the Warriors roll to victory, drawing more than the fledgling Flyers! Perhaps it was the Warriors who taught the soon to be renegade “Broad Street Bullies” how to throw a punch and draw a crowd! At the end of the day it was the pure entertainment value of the sport that kept people watching and attending the games.

A Warriors team patch purchased by the author at a game in the 1970s.

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In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, the roller derby was synonymous with everything hip, modern, and far out in popular culture. During this time, the sport reached its pinnacle of popularity after humble beginnings in the mid 1930’s. If you lived in the Delaware Valley during this time, the chances were good you had a few heroes on roller skates that became local legends and are fondly remembered today.

One of those heroes was Judy Arnold, a San Francisco native, who along with the likes of Jim “The King” Trotter, Ruberta Mitchell, Little Richard Brown and Buddy Atkinson Jr. became the heart and soul of the Philadelphia “Eastern Warriors.” Now I am sure there are a few *Back in Time* readers who remember the Roller Games, and if not, then get ready for a blast from the past!

Next Month in “Back In Time,” we will visit and catch up with Judy Arnold, the original “Blonde Bomber” in the flesh and remember those crazy days when the Spectrum was known as “Judy’s Place” and the roller games were the hottest sport in the City Of Brotherly Love!

MORE TO EXPLORE: For more memories: check out the Philadelphia Warriors Facebook page and JudyArnoldSkater.com. You can also check out YOUTUBE.com for plenty of video of roller games past!