

# Rolling Down Memory Lane

By Amanda Staller Dec. 9, 2015

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Beloved roller derby superstar of the Philadelphia Warriors visits fans at local event.



Judy Arnold signed autographs for fans and reminisced about her career at a meet and greet in Port Richmond. AMANDA STALLER / STAR PHOTO



A young fan is speechless after meeting Arnold. AMANDA STALLER / STAR PHOTO

Memories swept through Ontario Street Comics, 2235 E. Ontario St., in Port Richmond at the Saturday, Dec. 5, meet-and-greet event where roller derby superstar Judy Arnold, 71, reminisced about her days on the track and met first hand those she impacted the most.

"I never knew that I was affecting so many people's lives," said Arnold, beloved standout skater of the Philadelphia Warriors in the 1960s and 1970s.

But she did.

Her impact was apparent as the faces of fans lit up at the sight of Arnold.

One of those fans was Ben Merritt, who came from Turnersville, New Jersey to meet the woman he had watched fly around the banked track, throwing a hip-check or two along the way.

Merritt, 52, felt the memories of his childhood creep back in as he saw Arnold and heard her infectious laugh.

"It always made my mom happy," Merritt said. "She knew where I was: in front of the TV, not out getting in trouble."

Arnold's roller derby journey started much before fans started cheering for her on the screen.

At 12, Arnold got her first taste of derby by watching matches on TV. Living just four blocks from where the San Francisco Bay Bombers practiced in California, Arnold's interest in the sport was peaked.

"The first time I went to the banked track, I was so small that I could walk under the curves," Arnold said.

Hearing the roar of the skates above her head only intensified her interest.

While out with her friends one day, Arnold saw the door to the track was left open. Timidly, she entered the building and for the first time, and on her wooden street skates, she made her way onto a derby track.

At that point, the derby bug officially bit the soon-to-be superstar.

By 13, Arnold had enrolled in a training school and was well on her way to a professional derby career.

"She was a natural," said Arnold "Skip" Schoen, 72, who skated with Arnold during his time with the co-ed Philadelphia Warriors team. "In my opinion, she was one of the best skaters during our time."

At 16, the team that inspired her to try her hand at derby, the San Francisco Bay Bombers, recruited her to join their team.

"That was a dream come true," said Arnold, currently a California resident.

The transition from the training school to a professional team was not without its bumps.

"I was scared to death," Arnold said. "When you're with the professionals, it's a whole different ballgame."

But Arnold soared.

In her first season, she was named Rookie of the Year. At 16, Arnold was already making a splash in the world of roller derby. However, the young superstar was not old enough to travel with the team. As the team traveled, Arnold stayed home and finished her high school education.

Once Arnold turned 18, she was free to travel with the Bombers. She skated all over the country and spent some time living in New York.

During her time with the Bombers, Arnold hit a crossroad that made her rethink her career in derby.

"There came a time when I thought I didn't want to do it," Arnold said. "I went from one team to another trying to find my place."

After taking a few months away from the world of derby, a glimmer of light appeared as Arnold received a call from the Hawaii Warriors in 1967 to join the team and become captain. Arnold accepted the position and headed down to Hawaii to continue her monumental career in derby.

"The rest is really history," Arnold said.

From there, the Hawaii Warriors were so successful that the league moved the team to Philadelphia where they experienced sold out crowds for over six years.

"She was the best female skater I had ever seen in roller derby," said Jeff Hart, 61, another of Arnold's fellow skaters. "She was strong and was able to move on the track in a way that other females had never been able to do."

For those who came out last Saturday to meet Arnold, popularly proclaimed as one of the best female skaters who ever graced the banked oval, it was a very exciting day.

“We don’t play by the rules. We really try to make things interesting here,” said William Fink, owner of Ontario Street Comics and derby fan.

Once Fink heard Arnold would be in the area speaking at local churches as part of the ministry work she’s currently involved in, he decided to invite her to his shop.

Aside from Arnold, Fink also invited members of the Penn Jersey Roller Derby to come out and celebrate Arnold’s career and the longevity of derby.

“We have old school roller derby in our blood,” said Gwen Toffling, better known as “Sister Serenity” to her derby family. “Our league was founded by older skaters.”

The roots and community-driven spirit of derby were felt at the event.

“We’re just here to spread the word that roller derby is alive and well,” said Ryan Borton, simply known as “Bread” on the track, of Penn Jersey Roller Derby.

For Arnold, even though she hung up her skates in 1975 to pursue a life in ministry services, the community values and inspiration that can be achieved through roller derby still ring true.

“It makes me happy that I was able to be a role model and touch so many lives,” Arnold said. “If each one of us just works to inspire one person, that could change the world.”

*To learn more about Judy Arnold, visit [judyarnoldskater.com](http://judyarnoldskater.com). For updates about events at Ontario Street Comics, visit Ontario St. Comics on Facebook.*