

Disco is her middle name

UCH Surgery Tech Is a Roller Derby Star

By Todd Neff

A world champion walks among us at University of Colorado Hospital.

It's not hyperbole. It's Tracy Disco Akers.

Akers, 30, is a surgical technician in the Day Surgery unit on the third floor of the Anschutz Outpatient Pavilion. She specializes in orthopedic cases.



*Tracy Disco Akers (right) in roller-derby action
(Photo courtesy Salvador Photography.)*

Outside of the hospital, she's something else, literally and figuratively.

Akers in December captained the U.S. national team in the [2014 Blood & Thunder Roller Derby World Cup](#) in Dallas. The home team won it all, thrashing their opponents to the tune of 637-3 (Puerto Rico), 569-14 (Argentina), and 505-15 (the Netherlands). In the final, Akers and company beat England 219-105. It was a tight game by historical standards: In the 2011 Roller Derby World Cup, Akers and her U.S. teammates crushed Canada 336-33.

Sitting across from Akers in a walk-in closet of a Day Surgery shared office, it's hard to fathom that this person in scrubs, earrings plastered to her earlobes with skin-colored tape, is also the captain

of a world-champion national team. She is, after all, the equivalent of a [Kyrie Irving](#) or a [Philipp Lahm](#) or a [Sidney Crosby](#), world-class stars in basketball, soccer and hockey, respectively.

The big difference is that these men are highly paid professionals. Roller derby remains strictly amateur, although the sport's stars do land endorsements and other perks. Akers, for example, is now wrapping up a three-week tour of Australia with sponsor Bont, which makes the quad skates used in roller derby.

She was, as of mid-January, depicted in action on the [Bont homepage](#). ESPN [profiled](#) Akers in advance of the world cup; and the *Dallas Morning News* did a [video story](#) during the tournament (Akers appears at just before the one-minute mark).

Serious sport. For those who associate roller derby with 1950s-era pro wrestling, it's time to fix a serious misconception. Roller derby was long-listed by the International Olympic Committee for the 2020 games, falling from contention only in May 2014 along with karate, sport climbing, wakeboarding, and the Chinese martial art of wushu. Once you're familiar with [the basics](#) of the sport, courtesy of the [Women's Flat Track Derby Association](#) (well worth your two minutes and fifteen seconds – try learning cricket in 2:15), do a search on “women's flat track roller derby” on YouTube and pick a game. Watch for a few minutes. What comes across is a strategic, fast, and rough sport, something akin to rugby on wheels.

The sport is growing fast. As of early January, Roller Derby Worldwide [counted](#) 1,307 amateur women's flat track (WFT) roller derby leagues in 41 countries worldwide, about 800 of which are in the United States. Colorado has 22 WFT leagues, from [Denver Roller Derby](#) (Akers's club) to the Durango Roller Girls, the

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Grand Valley Vixens, the Mesa Underground Derby Dames, the Slaughterhouse Derby Girls (Greeley), the Pikes Peak Derby Dames, and the Ark Valley High Rollers in Salida. There are also men's flat track, juniors, recreational, banked-track, and other sorts of leagues, but WFT predominates.



Tracy Disco Akers in Clark Kent mode in the halls of UCH Day Surgery.

Wheel-less beginnings. Akers is as unlikely a roller derby star as she is a surgical tech. Born in California and raised in Indian Hills in Jefferson County, her youth-sports experience was limited to recreational basketball when she was in elementary school. Art was her passion, and she ended up parlaying it into a career as a body artist.

In 2005, a friend who skated brought her along to a roller derby practice, and Akers turned out to be a natural. While small in stature – she's 5'3" – she quickly muscled up to a solid 140 pounds, and she had uncanny track sense and freakish natural skating skills. While she is capable of hitting hard, her strength was and is blocking opposing players using superior positioning.

She became a local standout, first with the Rocky Mountain Roller Girls, then with the Denver Roller Dolls, which she co-founded. That club's name recently changed to Denver Roller Derby; she skates with the club's top-tier team, [Mile High Club](#). For simplicity's sake, she legally changed her middle name to "Disco," her Roller Derby name until 2009, when she and teammates started going by their family names.

Into health care. A teammate who was a medical sales rep suggested Akers look into a career in health care. After more than a decade doing tattoos, she enrolled in the two-year surgical technician program at Everest College-Thornton, earning her associate degree in 2011. She landed the job at UCH in mid-2013.

"I hit the lottery," she said.

The job and the sport coexist surprisingly well. Day surgery, in contrast to many other types of surgery, is scheduled in advance. Akers works four ten-hour shifts, from 6:45 a.m. to 5:15 p.m., typically preparing for and assisting three to five surgeries in the outpatient operating room (OR). That leaves her time to practice and train in the evenings several times a week. It also leaves her weekends free for Roller Derby games, which happen on Saturday nights during the March-November season.

"Normally I'd be taking call and be doing normal OR hours, in my case as the new person working nights," Akers said.

Christine Woodman, BSN, MSA, nurse manager for Day Surgery and Pre-Procedure Services, said "Disco," as she's known to friends and colleagues, turned into a lottery pick for the unit, too.



A sponsorship deal with skate maker Bont landed Akers custom boots.

"We've been very impressed with her," Woodman said. "She's exceeded what we've expected of her and she's actually become a service specialist, which not many of the surgical techs attain. She's gained that very quickly, and she has the confidence and delivers the quality of care that people look for."

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Parallels. While there's decisively less body checking in day surgery, there are plenty of parallels to roller derby, Akers said.

"For an OR to run smoothly and for patient safety, you have to function really well as a team. You have to be able to problem solve, show leadership skills, and take on projects. I learned all of those skills from roller derby," Akers said.

Keeping one's cool under pressure also applies, she said. Plus, she added, "If you deal with a bunch of women in close proximity in a team sport, you can definitely deal with the OR."

She's looking forward to the upcoming roller derby season, she said, and if she can stay healthy and on top of her game, she hopes to compete with team USA in the 2017 World Cup. Back in the little day surgery office, the young woman in green scrubs reminisced about the team's recent victory in Dallas.

"Accomplishing something like that, not just for myself but for the country, there's not even words to describe it," she said. "It's a whole different level of accomplishment and pride."