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by Eric Hansen

OUT OF BOUNDS

Revenge of the Nerds

Paris is romantic, cultured, and sophisticated—and teeming with rollerblading fanatics? An investigation into France's most mysterious obsession.

AT FIVE P.M. ON A THURSDAY, the banks of the Seine are bustling. Tourists carrying drippy ice-cream cones parade past the antique booksellers, couples from the Sorbonne lounge between the willow trees, and in the wall-mounted trash cans, mixed in among the sandwich bags and half-eaten macarons, are the first of the season's champagne bottles. It's springtime in Paris.

The fashion is clearly changing, too. At the Pont des Arts, an iron bridge near the Louvre, I stumble upon a photo shoot overseen by a white-haired man in a high white collar and fingerless gloves. It's clothing designer Karl Lagerfeld. He takes one sip from a goblet of red wine and has his assistant throw the rest in the river. Out with last month's scarves and the color violet; in with hot pants!

I climb the stairs to the 17th-century Hotel des Invalides, and there I find them: a handful of *les rollers*, the rollerbladers, weaving around little pink cones. They look just like they might have a decade ago, but with less neon.

They swoop and twirl and glide across the glassy-smooth square. A shirtless guy in his mid-twenties, flabby belly jiggling, weaves through the cones on toes and heels, his arms waving like those of a competitor in rhythmic gymnastics. He accidentally knocks over a couple of cones—*blonk, blonk*—but continues his balletic performance unperturbed, dancing for no one but himself. The winged horses and trumpeting angels of the Pont



What is irrefutable is that Parisians are not ashamed to skate in public.

Alexandra III stare off in the other direction.

I sit down on the esplanade's carved stone bench and ask myself the question I will ask over and over during the next four days: *Rollerblading?*

A 60-year-old skater with yellowing eyes, wearing the full complement of pads, introduces himself as Marc Delalain. A former oil-futures trader, he started skating roughly a year ago. He practices here several hours a day and just recently took up the slalom. He says that because trinket sellers have displaced skaters from the gentle slopes of the Trocadéro, near the Eiffel Tower, this is now the best place for slalom.

"Slalom is not so easy," he opines, "but with the *roller* we join another world for the body. Walking, legs are in front; with the *roller*, legs cross."

His Franglish hangs in the air for all to ponder. When I hint that rollerblading just ain't so cool in America, he looks injured, and I immediately feel bad.

"What do you like about it?" I ask.

"With two feet on the floor, in shoes, you are a lonesome cowboy," he explains. "But with the *roller*, you are not like that man. Young, old—in *roller*, we are all the same tribe."

WERE THE SAME TRIBE, I want to correct. Last year, only 3 percent of Americans rollerbladed even once, roughly the same number as those who swatted a badminton birdie, and if a man wasn't training for hockey season, he was more likely to cop to singing along at a Coldplay concert than meeting up with buddies and going 'blading.

But it's worth remembering how popular the sport once was. In 1996, it was one of the fastest-growing pastimes in U.S. history, and soon bike lanes on both coasts were being repainted with boot symbols. Pro skaters like Eddy Matzger were making six-figure salaries while pulling off feats such as 'blading the rocky slopes of Kilimanjaro. Bottles of chocolicious Yoo-hoo showed a rollerblader sliding a rail about a foot off the ground. Six Flags theme parks featured rollerblading stunt shows, while movies like *Prayer of the Rollerboys*, starring a bandanna'd heartthrob named Corey Haim, depicted the 21st century as a battle between good versus evil—on wheels. Rollerblading was the spandex-clad future!

Then it wasn't. In the late nineties, about the time the last Aerobie snagged in the branches of a tree, seemingly everyone

donated their skates to Goodwill. In 2004, the 13-year-old International Inline Skating Association disbanded, handing over administration of its Web site to a general-interest travel-tour operator in Montana.

Why the precipitous decline? The reasons are many. A lack of smooth surfaces to skate on. The blistering fit of early rollerblades. Hills, potholes, speed bumps, and what could be called "the stopping problem."

But, most important, it just fell out of fashion, says Doug Urquhart, creator of the 2007 rollerblading documentary *Barely Dead*. While Urquhart is quick to point out that he rollerblades daily with his dogs and that a tiny cadre of radical skaters have solidified into an edgy subculture, he thinks the main appeal of recreational rollerblading was its novelty—hey, we can skate outside the roller rink!—and after a while that simply wore off. "When rollerblading first came out," he remembers, a twinge of nostalgia in his voice, "no one knew it wasn't cool."

So what happened in Paris? There, in arguably the world's most trend-conscious city, it not only survived but thrived, attracting more participants per capita than anywhere else in Europe or the States.

Never mind the rainy winters and the cobblestone streets, the walls of bumbling pedestrians and the drivers drifting across lanes: Paris now hosts so many styles of rollerblading in so many locations that it will take me two days just to sample them. What is it about rollerblading that so appeals to the Parisian soul? Or did they just not get the memo? With all this in mind, I cinch my rental skates and begin my investigation at the birthplace of the scene: Le Friday Night Fever.

LE FRIDAY NIGHT FEVER is an organized skating tour, or *randonnée*. *Randonnées* wind through the city almost daily—from the Rando de la Lune, which takes place under full moons, to the *randonnée* that goes to various sites important in the life of Edith Piaf. But Le FNF was the original.

It was created in 1993 by now 38-year-old engineer Boris Belohlavek, originally from Poland, and his 36-year-old friend Tanao Terra, a naturalized Madagascan. Le FNF begins outside the wide glass-and-steel entrance to the Gare Montparnasse train station at 10 P.M. every Friday, year-round, unless there's a downpour. The routes change weekly but are usually 18 miles, with police and dozens of organizers in yellow

jerseys stopping cars to let an average of 8,000 skaters enjoy a nearly uninterrupted three-hour tour.

People had told me it was an "aggressive" skate, but I didn't really take them seriously. This is rollerblading; a patch of gravel stops anyone.

Looking around at the 3,000 folks at the start, I'm not worried. They're 20 to 40 or so, slender as any Europeans, most wearing typical fitness clothes. Pushing up all four lanes of Boulevard Saint-Germain, the crowd stretches out in a leisurely marathon-like start, but after Boulevard Henri IV and the sight of Notre Dame, the City of Lights becomes a fever dream, and our rolling tour of the northeast *arrondissements* turns into a melee.

Three hip-hoppers in baggy gray sweats swarm around me in a disorienting typhoon. A train of guys in race position, one in a white, skintight uni-suit, cut through the crowd with arms swinging like machetes. The pace settles in at about 13 miles per hour, shoulder to shoulder.

Then the tour turns into a melee. Three hip-hoppers swarm around me in a disorienting typhoon. A train of guys, one in a white, skintight uni-suit, rollerblade past me with arms swinging like machetes.

I'm a decent skater, once even skated regularly, but no matter how hard I push I end up sucked to the back of the pack... where there's no sag wagon, only the first-aid vans that form the rear guard, their lights shining on me like an escaped convict, and a wiry old yellow-shirt in tiny jean shorts yelling "*Allez, allez, allez!*" like a coxswain. I have never felt so lame in such a large group.

The whole thing comes apart on the gradual and winding descent from the 300-foot "summit of Paris" in Belleville. Racing at 30 miles per hour or more, the skaters—helmetless kamikazes, all of them—ping off curbs and topple over speed bumps and crash in sliding clumps, each of the five or so falls threatening a peloton-style pileup.

Maybe one-tenth of the starters finish. The rest, I'm sure, have died. Those who survived, of course, thought it *très sportif*.

"Very nice," says one skater, a twenty-something computer programmer known to other skaters as Raoul in Ze Zone. Raoul in Ze Zone wears a uniquely dorky black sweat suit lined with green flexi-tubes of light.

"What about the crashes?" I ask.

"Yes, I like that," he replies.

"You do?"

"Yes, it presents the adrenaline," he says.

"Why do you skate?"

"I skate to make sport, to feel good, to go fast—for the liberty!"

His friends nod in hearty, helmetless agreement.

THERE'S NOTHING LIBERATING about a hospital visit, so the next day I leave my skates behind and walk to the Palais Royal. The clerk at the Nomades skate shop suggested I check out the "freeriders" there. After the *randonnées*, freeride is the most popular style of skating, and it involves sprinting, jumping, and sliding without really going anywhere.

Any afternoon at the Pont au Double, off Île de la Cité, jumpers might throw back layouts off a quarterpipe ramp, or a guy called RollerMan, who invented a bodysuit that has wheels at every joint, might skitter

around like a crab. Beginners prefer to teeter across the Place Henri Frenay, opposite the Gare de Lyon, or study the art of braking at one of the handful of schools, like the Roller Squad Institut.

Half a dozen groups of twenty-something males congregate for extreme underground "suicide skates." Calling themselves Les Randos Sauvages ("the Wild Skaters") and Les Randos Belettes ("the Weasel Skaters"), they blast through tight alleyways and down subway-station escalators, flouting the law and generally behaving like the bad-boy gang in a Broadway musical. I know this because I watched them on YouTube. An unemployed graphic novelist predicted, correctly, that this would be the only place I'd see 'em. "The Sauvage are everywhere," he said, very Frenchily, "but most of the time, they are alone."

Street-style skaters, essentially tricksters, prefer the angular architecture of Bercy (the Ministry of Finance building) or La Defense (the business district) or the skate parks at Porte de la Chapelle and Jules Noël.

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OUT OF BOUNDS

One could argue that the scene is so big and varied because Paris itself is one big skate park. But, then, I'm not sure this isn't also true of, say, Houston. What is irrefutable, however, is that Parisians are not ashamed to skate in public, especially at the Palais Royal.

At the square beside the art deco Métro stop, some 20 skaters have taken over, and shoppers exiting the subway find themselves pushed down the stairs by a recolling crowd of spectators.

A pasty white Gaul lines up to jump over shipping palettes, an Indian in a Cosby sweater tries to attempt daffies over a line of police tape, a rainbow of slalomers moonwalk through the cones, and one gangly white kid practices his skid, throwing his forward skate sideways and sliding ten yards, over and over and over.

But the kings of the square are the 20-to-35-year-olds playing the acrobatic freeride game *Épervier*—"Sparrowhawk," or what American ten-year-olds call Shark in the Middle. They dodge and weave and skid and arc their backs and face off and juke and hop left, lean right. The exhausting game of tag is mesmerizing and, I gotta admit, pretty cool.

I fall into talking with a local illustrator about the relative hipness factor of Paris's few skateboarders (high) versus its hordes of rollerbladers (no conclusion), until one of the athletic skaters, a 35-year-old data processor from the Côte d'Ivoire, overhears our conversation. Alexis isn't interested in debating cool. He wants to point out something else entirely.

"Roller is for everyone," he says, nodding toward the rainbow of different races skating in the square. "Algerian, Tunisian, me, Jewish..."

He's right; it's a melting pot. And, yeah, a concern with cool is, well, not cool.

OR IS IT? On my final sojourn, I return to Nomades for the Sunday-afternoon Rollers & Coquillages *randomnée*, supposedly the easiest and quite possibly the dorkiest in the city. Near the sign-up, people grab a description of today's route, named Humankind, and free Love Kits, including a Durex condom and Play Lubes gel.

The crowd is a hoot: a guy in a floppy-eared bunny outfit, others in manpri's and homemade roller skates, couples dressed for church, a chubby skater in full pink and yellow and blue spandex.

Before the start of the event—a roughly

mile-long stream of skaters following two volunteers holding a streetwide banner—an expat toy designer and longtime R&C volunteer named Peter explains the carnival mood.

The key, he says, is in rollerblading's rebellious history. In the early nineties, before this or Le FNF, the cops were unable to suppress the informal *bandit randomnées*, which were kind of like today's suicide skates.

So in 1995, when a citywide bus-and-subway strike swelled skating's ranks, the police grew worried. The authorities talked with Boris and Tanao in 1997 and agreed to form the Brigade de Roller, or the rollerskating cops, to accompany the increasingly popular *randomnées*.

Hundreds of policemen completed rigorous rollerblading tests, including jumping over curbs and hockey-stopping, and eight were selected for the elite corps. (The athletic, crew-cut members now number 36, live in their own compound, and train daily on an obstacle course. "We're always on skates," laments one. "I don't skate so much for fun anymore.")

The only catch was, the government wanted *randomnée* participants to fund the Brigade de Roller. Skaters disagreed. An agreement couldn't be reached, so naturally, being French, Le FNF organizers went on strike. On July 14, 2000, some 20,000 skaters without a plan or a leader flooded the touristy Latin Quarter. The next day, the government agreed to fund the brigade. And this, says Peter, is the spirit that the organizers of the Rollers & Coquillages wanted to capture.

Indeed, the idea of joyous defiance is imprinted in the word *coquillage*, or "seashell." Back in the sixties, leftist protesters justified prying up cobblestones and throwing them at the police by saying that there was a beach under the cobblestones and they were simply looking for seashells. So the Rollers & Coquillages is not only a silly skate but one with a subversive element, the whole thing pushed along by the force of history.

All of this heady Franchiness makes me really excited. I feel part of the tribe, am ready to join another world for the body! With its dopey friendliness, its freedom to go insanely fast, and its bizarre connections with justice and equality, rollerblading appeals to the deepest, most philosophical part of the Parisian soul.

"*Liberté, égalité, fraternité—rollez!*" I want to holler. I check my wrist guards and elbow pads and knee pads and shuffle toward the door. o

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