

ROLL MODELS

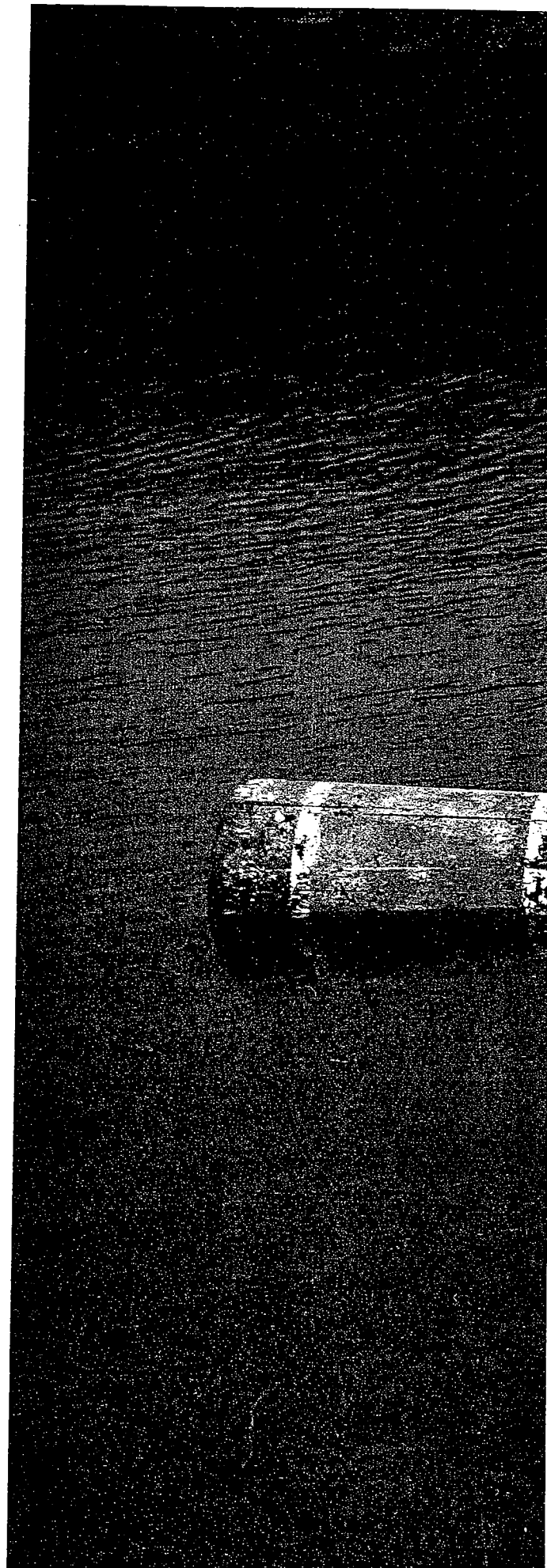
FAMILY TRADITION AND FANCY FOOTWORK TAKE 3 WISCONSIN SISTERS TO THE TOP OF A ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE LUMBERJACK SPORT

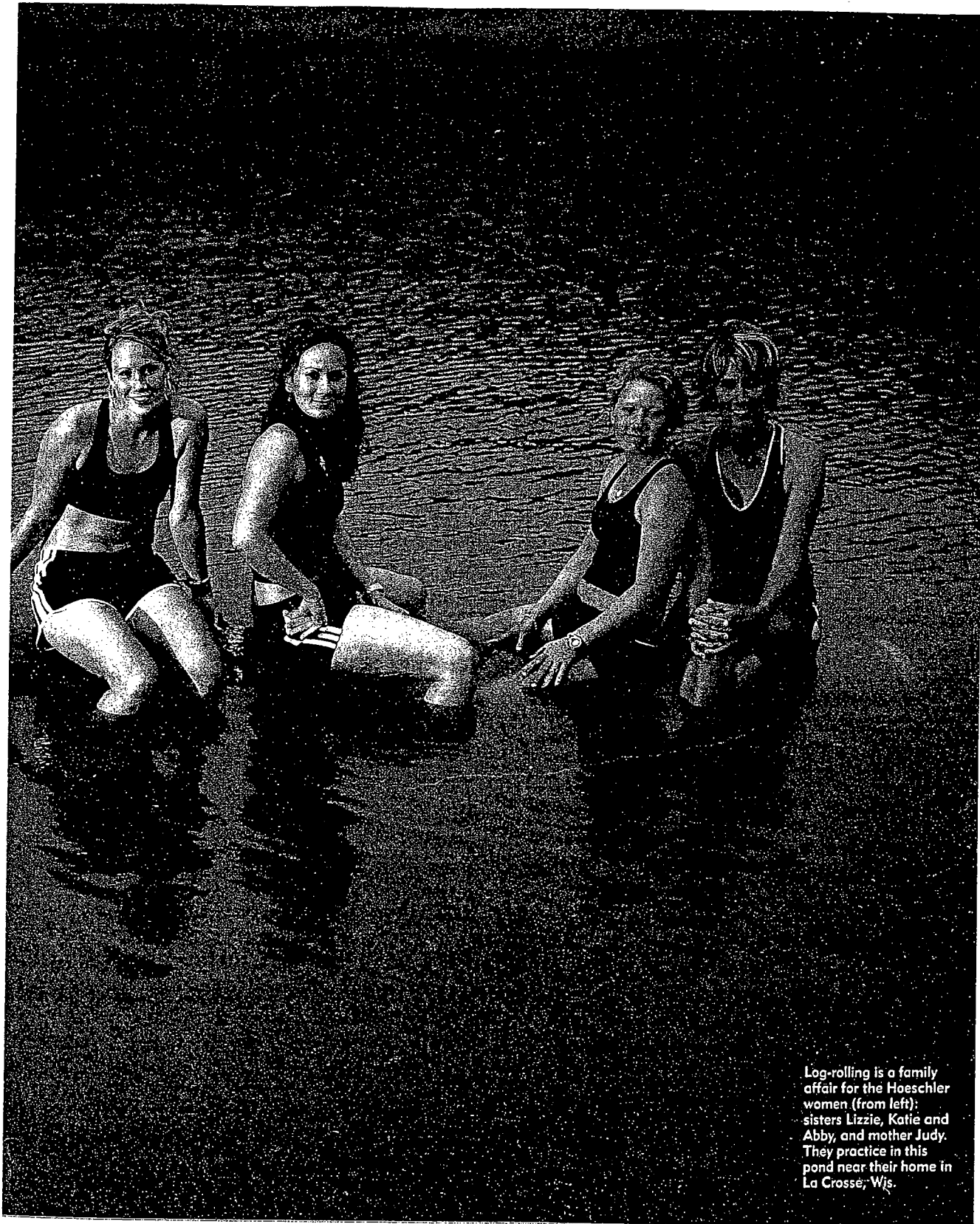
Judy Hoeschler is being interviewed by ESPN, and her image looms large on the Jumbotron screen that dominates the site of the Great Outdoor Games in Madison, Wis. After she analyzes her daughter Abby's logrolling match, the interviewer turns back to the camera: "Judy's going to have to get back to work," he tells viewers. "She's got another daughter about to compete."

■ Two more, in fact. At one end of the logrolling pool, 21-year-old Lizzie is doing some last-minute stretches before her match on this sunny July morning. At the other end, 23-year-old Katie slowly jumps rope to keep warm. Abby, 17, is still drying off from her defeat in the preliminary round. ■ So it goes with the Hoeschler family of La Crosse, Wis. All three of Judy's daughters are among the world's top professional women logrollers. Judy herself is a seven-time world champion and her daughters' coach. ■ The youngest Hoeschler, 13-year-old Will, also is a logroller and plans to go pro when he's older. Dad can hold his own, too, and is the past president of the International Log Rolling Association. But he's no match for his daughters—or his wife, a fact that was quickly established years ago when he tried to impress his bride-to-be by rolling

BY EMILY STONE

TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY E. JASON WAMBSGANS





Log-rolling is a family affair for the Hoeschler women (from left): sisters Lizzie, Katie and Abby, and mother Judy. They practice in this pond near their home in La Crosse, Wis.

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—ABBY HOESCHLER

against her.

"Guys get all cocky," Judy says. "He was off the log in half a second."

That there is such a sport as professional logrolling may come as a surprise to anyone who didn't grow up in the North Woods. That there is an intensely competitive sport where four of the best athletes frequently battle each other before going back to the same household will surprise anyone who has ever shared a household.

"In any other sport, you're not going to have three or four of the top people living together in the same house, sharing a bathroom," Abby says.

The family's history with the sport begins in 1969 in the northern Wisconsin town of Hayward, which has hosted the World Log Rolling Championships since 1960 and is arguably the logrolling capital of the world.

Hayward is also Judy Hoeschler's hometown. She was Judy Scheer and 12 years old when her mom signed her up for a logrolling class at the local pond. "I just loved it," she recalls. And she was good. She won the World Log Rolling Championship in 1973-1977, 1981 and 1982. Her siblings learned too—her brother Fred was a world champion four times and still competes.

Judy met Jay Hoeschler when she was teaching logrolling classes at a local resort where he was the tennis pro. They married and moved to Jay's hometown of La Crosse, where he works as a real estate developer.

Judy kept competing as her children were born, first Katie, then Lizzie, Abby and Will. The Hoeschler kids grew up cheering on their mom at tournaments. Now 48, Judy retired three years ago and coaches her kids, who regularly finish in the top three at the Great Outdoor Games and the World Log Rolling Championships, the sport's two main competitions.

The sisters were all in Wisconsin this summer, devoting about two hours a day to training. Katie moved back to La Crosse in February after she graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont,

and is working as a real estate agent and general contractor. Lizzie, a senior at Middlebury, spent the summer working in Madison, but came home most weekends to train. Abby, a junior at St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, was home for the summer.

They practiced at a pond near the family home, their long hair tied back in ponytails, hopping on and off the logs, switching practice partners or rolling alone and slapping their waterlogged shoes on the surface of the log and the pond.

Katie, the one brunet among the three, is the heaviest, and her weight lets her kick and maneuver the log more forcefully. Lizzie "has the fastest feet in the family," Judy says, and can stay well centered on top of the log. Abby is the smallest of the three, which is a significant disadvantage, but her mother says she compensates with determination. Judy wants to make the competitions more even by creating weight divisions, but with only 14 elite women logrollers now, there aren't enough competitors to make it work.

She and her family are committed to growing the sport and getting practice logs into ponds, YMCA swimming pools and fitness centers around the country. Judy helped establish the U.S. Log Rolling Association this year to promote the sport, and the group's eventual goal is to bring logrolling to the Olympics.

They already have had some success: Programs at a Madison YMCA, a St. Paul Jewish Community Center and other venues have created enough logrollers that there were a dozen tournaments in the Midwest this summer, compared with just the Hayward competition not so long ago. The Hoeschlers also have moved logrolling out of the Midwest, with the three sisters teaching classes at their New England schools.

On a recent afternoon at the family's pond in La Crosse, Mike Dolan sat on the grass watching his 11-year-old daughter, Mary, practice with half a dozen other kids. Four more girls in bathing suits and tennis shoes walked over and sat down to wait their turn. Will Hoeschler and a friend rolled on a log nearby, with the green hills of this Mississippi River town as a backdrop.

"They're kind of developing this world," Dolan says of the Hoeschlers and their logrolling recruits. "They've got this nice little cadre of people."

Logrolling, also called birling, is a work-related lumberjack sport, like sawing and tree-climbing competitions. Loggers used to float felled trees downriver to the mill, and the logs would often lock together at bends in the river. Someone would have to step across the logs to break up the jam, and a false step might mean falling into the river and getting smashed between the logs. Logrolling competitions began as a way for workers to hone their skills.

Wisconsin is among the few states with a logging history that has kept the sport alive, largely through Hayward's hosting of the Lumberjack World Championships and the World Log Rolling Championships.

Want to learn how to logroll? Here's what you do:

Put a log in the water, then stand on top of it. You'll feel triumphant for about a quarter of a second. That's when the log starts to spin. To stay on top you need to start running, either forward or backward depending on the direction of spin. Keep up with it, now. Otherwise, only your toes hit the log if you're running forward, or only your heels if you're going backward, the rest of your foot making a loud thwack in the water. This is bad. The log speeds up and you get dunked.

In a logrolling competition, two people stand only a few feet apart on a 12-foot log. They try to throw their opponent off by speeding the log up, slowing it down or suddenly reversing its direction. Some bouts last less than a minute, though they're usually more like five or 10.

Judy Hoeschler emphasizes how intense the sport is, comparing it to boxing but with the added sting of defeat by dunking. "There's an element of a knockdown to it," she says. "Your opponent is standing in the water dripping wet."

Abby, who overhears her mom say this, adds quietly to no one in particular, "Ugh, I hate that."

People often assume the sport is hazardous, with broken bones just waiting to happen during hard falls. But the family says injuries rarely surpass a strained muscle or nasty bruise. Katie and Lizzie have two scars each on their knees from surgeries to repair torn ligaments: But the injuries came from skiing and soccer, not rolling.

"This is the least dangerous sport I play," Katie says.

The Hoeschler kids all grew up playing other sports in addition to logrolling. They say they felt no pressure to follow in their mom's foot-



Lizzie battles five-time champion Tina Bosworth of Lake Geneva for first place at the ESPN Great Outdoor Games in Madison last month. Lizzie went on to win gold at the World Championships two weeks later.

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Lizzie Hoeschler (left) and older sister Katie compete in the semifinals of the ESPN Great Outdoor Games. Lizzie would go on to take second place, Katie third.

steps, but by their mid-teens they were training seriously.

That meant Judy suddenly went from being her daughters' coach and cheerleader in amateur competitions to being their opponent in professional matches.

"It's not a natural thing for a mother to do," Judy says. "They all wanted to beat me, but I didn't want to beat them. How am I ever going to feel happy beating my daughters?"

The daughters weren't too happy about it either. Lizzie's first professional match was against her mother. "She's my mom, she's my coach, she trains with me and she's a seven-time world champion—great," she says sarcastically. Katie also found it strange to compete against her mother, who would shout encouragement to Katie even as she tried to topple her.

Eventually, Judy decided to retire—a "traumatic" moment, she says—and is happy to be able to focus on coaching her children and popularizing the sport.

The buildup to a major logrolling competition is the worst time for the sisters, who regularly face each other in matches. The tension

level in the house rises noticeably, as does the bickering. But once they're on the log, they can concentrate.

"For the most part, you're competing against another pair of feet," Katie says. Each sister has beaten her siblings at one time or another.

The sisters trade friendly trash talk when they practice in the pond. Plenty of, "Take that!" or, "That last one didn't count."

Sometimes the discussion gets testier, such as when Abby and Katie recount a match in which the younger sister beat the older.

"I choked," Katie says.

"You didn't choke," Abby replies, at first sounding like she is trying to cheer up her sister. Then adds, "I just killed you."

But the grudges don't last. "We can still love each other and joke about it and hang out together two seconds later," Lizzie says.

The sisters say they often get strange reactions when they say they're professional logrollers. "[People expect] we're going to be huge, really burly," Abby says.

They are anything but. They are cute and trim, and no different from other young women in their

teens and early 20s: Lizzie and Abby have their belly buttons pierced. All three wear jewelry for competitions, and plan their outfits ahead of time. A tube of lip gloss is usually nearby and the topic of boys comes up regularly.

Then there are the guys who assume they can beat the Hoeschlers. Abby says one of her classmates, who is a strong athlete, bet her \$100 that he could take her in a match. That is, until he saw her in action. He backed out.

AT THE GREAT OUTDOOR GAMES last month in Madison, Lizzie wound up taking second to five-time champion Tina Bosworth, and Katie was third. But two weeks later, at the World Championships in Hayward, Lizzie toppled all her challengers and became the first of the sisters to win a professional gold medal. Katie helped the cause by defeating Bosworth in a semi-final match, then went on to face Lizzie for the championship. Lizzie won and Katie took silver.

So, how do the parents handle it when one daughter beats the other? "There are two of them," Katie says, one to hug the winner and one to hug the loser. □