This chapter is about how skaters make sense of how roller derby became ‘a lot more structured, and a lot more of a sport’, as the research drew to a close in 2013. After deciding to ‘be competitive’ participants were faced with how to organize the league in pursuit of winning games – how to put the value of competition into practice. Given the shift from roller derby as ‘sport for women who don’t like sport’ to the prospect of ‘really athletic people’ being ‘interested in roller derby’, I discuss organizational shifts through an account of changes in who roller derby is for and in participants’ understandings of membership. As competition was instituted, participants’ organizational practice continually raised and responded to questions of who belonged to the league, and how.

Getting taken seriously can be understood as a ‘mode of ordering’ (Law, 1994 and see Breeze, 2013). Participants’ pursuit of serious recognition becomes a ‘recursive ordering pattern’ (Law, 1994: 83) identifiable in ‘specific strategies of reflexivity and self-reflexivity’ (Law, 1994: 107). Getting taken seriously informs decision-making processes and justifies some courses of action over others. I elaborate upon this analysis here, with a precise focus on the codification and enactment of competition. This chapter is an exercise in examining how participants’ creation of
bureaucracy had consequences for the possibilities and limits of their future practice.

DIY organization is encoded in the league’s written constitution and code of conduct, both documents devised and revised by league members. Just as Law posits the social world as a ‘remarkably emergent phenomenon’ that ‘in its processes shapes its own flows’ (1994: 15) not only do skaters do the voluntary work of running their league but they have made, and continue to re-make, some of the structures that they act within. To what extent the league can change in response to skaters’ reflexive decision-making is subject to tangible renegotiation as participants work out what roller derby is as they put seriousness into practice.

The formalization of the league’s DIY organization involved instating bureaucratically enacted distinctions between skaters, particularly according to routinized notions of competition. Themes from classic sociologies of organizations, institutions, and bureaucracies are relevant here, particularly the idea that as bureaucracies develop different forms of solidarity and interest groups emerge, the relation between ends and means shifts, and deliberate reflexive actions have unintended consequences (Michels, 1959; Weber, 1978, 2006). The league is only just beginning to embark upon the beginnings of such sociologically well-rehearsed trajectories, and is an exemplary case study of seriousness in organizational practice.

Distinctions between professionals, amateurs, and consumers of roller derby are only just beginning to emerge. There is no ‘professional’ level of roller derby competition – no skaters are (yet) paid to play. Understanding skaters as ‘amateurs’, however, does not take into account the distinctions that are increasingly made between skaters. For instance, some skaters have set up their own derby-related businesses and outwith the league a small handful of skaters have won sponsorship contacts. The possibility of being paid to play roller derby can be a tantalizing, if conflict-ridden, prospect:

Due to the time commitment, the financial expenses, and frustration with the slow, democratic, decision-making process, rollergirls admit there are times when they wish a league owner paid them to skate. However, they also recognize that working for someone else would result in the loss of control over their athletic activity and the bouts they produce.

(Beaver, 2012: 45)