

DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!

The sparks fly with Barbie on Rollerblades

As executive director of the Bureau of Consumer Alarm, I am always on the alert for news stories that involve two key elements:

- 1) Fire.
- 2) Barbie.

So I was very interested when alert reader Michael Robinson sent me a column titled "Ask Jack Sunn" from the Dec. 13, 1993 issue of the Jackson, Miss.. Clarion-Ledger. Here's an excerpt from a consumer's letter to this column, which I am not making up:

"Last year, my two daughters received presents of two Rollerblade Barbie dolls by Mattel. On March 8, my 8-year-old daughter was playing beauty shop with her 4-year-old brother. After spraying him with hair spray, the children began to play with the boot to Rollerblade Barbie. My little girl innocently ran the skate across her brother's bottom, which immediately ignited his clothes."



DAVE BARRY

The letter adds, "There are no warnings concerning fire on these toys. ... I feel the need to warn potential buyers of their danger."

In his response, Jack Sunn says, cryptically, that "Mattel does not manufacture Rollerblade Barbie anymore." He does not address the critical question that the consumer's letter raised in my mind, as I'm sure it did in yours, namely: Huh?

I realized that the only way to answer this question was to conduct a scientific experiment. As you may recall, last year, in response to a news item concerning a kitchen fire in Ohio, I did an experiment proving that if you put a Kellogg's strawberry Pop-Tart in a toaster and hold the toaster lever down for 5 minutes and 50 seconds, the Pop-Tart will turn into a snack-pastry blowtorch, shooting flames up to 30 inches high. Also your toaster will be ruined.

The problem was that I did not have a Rollerblade Barbie. My son happens to be a boy, and we never went through the Barbie phase. We went through the Masters of the Universe phase. For two years our household was the scene of a fierce, unceasing battle between armies of good and evil action figures. They were everywhere. You'd open up the salad crisper, and there would be He-Man and Skeletor, striking

So at the end of a recent column, I printed a note appealing for a Rollerblade Barbie. I got two immediately; one from Renee Simmens of Clinton, Iowa, and one from Randy Langhenry of Gainesville, Ga., who said it belonged to his 6-year-old daughter, Greta. ("It would help me if you could get Barbie back to north Georgia before Greta notices she's gone," Randy wrote.)

Rollerblade Barbie is basically a standard Barbie, which is to say she represents the feminine beauty ideal, if your concept of a beautiful female is one who is 6 feet 9 inches tall and weighs 52 pounds (37 of which are in the bust area) and has a rigidly perky smile and eyeballs the size of beer coasters and a one-molecule nose and enough hair to clog the Lincoln Tunnel.

But what makes this Barbie special is that she's wearing two little yellow Rollerblade booties, each of which has a wheel similar to the kind found in cigarette lighters, so that when you roll Barbie along, her booties shoot out sparks. This seems like an alarming thing for Rollerblades to do, but Barbie, staring perkily ahead, does not seem to notice.

To ensure high standards of scientific accuracy, I conducted the experiment in my driveway. Aside from Rollerblade Barbie, my materials consisted of several brands of hair spray and — this was a painful sacrifice — a set of my veteran underwear (estimated year of purchase: 1968). I spread the underwear on the driveway, then sprayed it with hair spray, then made Rollerblade Barbie skate across it, sparking her booties. I found that if you use the right brand of hair spray — I got excellent results with "Rave" — Rollerblade Barbie does indeed cause the underwear to burst dramatically into flame.

(While I was doing this, a neighbor walked up, and I just want to say that if you think it's easy to explain why you're squatting in your driveway in front of a set of burning underwear, surrounded by hair spray bottles, holding a Barbie doll in your hand, then you are mistaken.)

At this point, the only remaining scientific question — I'm sure this has occurred to you — was: Could Rollerblade Barbie set fire to a Kellogg's strawberry Pop-Tart? The answer turns out to be yes, but you have to be in the act of hair-spraying the Pop-Tart when Barbie rollerblades over it, so you get a blowtorch effect that could very easily set fire to Barbie's hair, not to mention your own personal self. Plus you get tart filling in the booties.

So we can see why Mattel ceased manufacturing Rollerblade Barbie. I imagine that whichever toy designer dreamed up this exciting concept has been transferred to Mattel's coveted Bosnia plant. But what should be done about all the Rollerblade Barbies that are already in circulation? I believe that the only solution is for all concerned consumers to demand that our congresshumans pass a federal law requiring that all underwear, snack pastries and other household objects carry a prominent label stating: "WARNING! DO NOT SPRAY HAIR SPRAY ON THIS OBJECT AND SKATE ROLLERBLADE BARBIE OVER IT!" But that is not enough. We also need to appropriate millions of dollars for a massive federal effort to undo the damage that has been done so far. I'm talking about scraping this crud off my driveway.

Also, the taxpayers owe Greta a new Barbie. Dave Barry is a humor columnist for the Miami Herald.

Name: _____

Date: _____ Period: _____

Article Questions:

"The Sparks Fly with Barbie on Rollerblades"

1. What was Dave Berry's **purpose** of the experiment?
2. What type of **research** did he do in preparation for the experiment? What background information did he get?
3. What was his **hypothesis** for the experiment?
4. What was the **procedure** of the experiment?
5. How did Dave Berry **analyze** the experiment? What did he do to determine the result?
6. What was his **conclusion**?