

‘Gangsters’ offers thorough history of Buffalo mafia

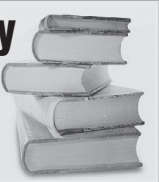
Mafia is one of those words that instantly evokes a certain level of excitement and interest by pretty much everyone who hears or reads it.

As such, the new book by local author and tour guide Michael Rizzo automatically draws some level of interest. When you combine that with the local angle he takes on La Cosa Nostra — succinctly outlined in the title of his book, “Gangsters and Organized Crime in Buffalo” — you have a book that would appear to be a natural must-read for any Western New Yorker or organized



PAUL Lane

Sunday Book Nook



- **WHAT:** “Gangsters and Organized Crime in Buffalo”
- **BY:** Michael Rizzo
- **DETAILS:** Published by History Press, 256 pages
- **GRADE:** B-

crime enthusiast.

And he delivers a book that is loaded with names, dates and various news accounts of the Niagara Frontier’s most notorious turn-of-the-century criminals. While it’s informative, “Gangsters” is a bit too heavy to digest, as it reads more like a textbook than a casual Buffalo criminal background check.

What Rizzo does not

do is leave any stone unturned. He lists seemingly every low-level street thug and second-rate bank robber who ever menaced the public. While 20th century crime-fighting methods resulted in a decent number of arrests, it’s compelling how many of these criminals disappeared without a trace — something that would be pretty much impossible in the age of cell phones and “CSI” investigative work.

When it comes to hardcore gangsterdom in Western New York, the solar system of thugs revolved around the sun that was Stefano Magaddino. And much of “Gangsters” is devoted to the Niagara Falls don, who had his hands in pretty much every misdeed conducted in the north-eastern United States and southern Ontario for some 50 years.

His family — just like his influence — stretched far, ensuring local mobsters a share of the take from gambling and other rackets as far away as Ohio. He abhorred the drug trade — although he didn’t mind its profits as much — and he ran several legitimate businesses to mask his criminal activities, including a Falls funeral home through which he was said to dispose of his victims in the caskets of paying customers.

From Magaddino’s home in the Town of Lewiston — he bought houses for himself and family members along one road that became known as Mafia Row — to his dealings in Buffalo and his downstate affairs, “Gangsters” takes the reader through every major event in the don’s life that’s known to the public.

The book also does that for its other profiled

criminals. One of the book’s highlights is that it lists every known address for every event that took place in every criminal’s life, allowing crime-lovers to retrace the steps of the region’s past champions of crime. Many of these buildings are vacant, renovated or torn down, but literally being handed a guide of what once were the area’s criminal hotspots is — let’s face it — pretty darn cool.

Rizzo also does a decent job of detailing the mob’s brutal methods of “taking care of” people who stood in its way. In one particularly gruesome case, he described a death by which the victim had his hands tied behind back and his legs pulled back behind him while attached to a noose around his neck. As much as the victim wanted to, he’d eventually have to relax his legs, which would slowly hang him. Countless other

victims were shot, beaten, brutalized and carved up in all sorts of gory methods, which mobsters would use as a sign to others to steer clear.

You will not want to steer clear of this book, though. It is not light bedtime reading — this scribe found it impossible to read for more than a few chapters at a time due to its information-heavy style.

The book could have been about 50 pages shorter while being written in a more conversational tone. But the knowledge it shares is worth ingesting if — for no other reason — than because it pertains to the mafia.

The author clearly knows what he’s talking about, and thankfully he’s willing to share the secrets mobsters worked so hard for decades to keep.

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ART ...

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those will be the big main stages. There will be artists and vendors all along the streets and it’s going to go down in front of Marcy Casino.”

It doesn’t stop there she said. The festival will continue on the Shakespeare Hill and there will also be a kids area set up at the playground.

As in previous years, the winners from the Music is Art High School Battle of the Bands competition will be featured at the festival. Victory for Poland, from Sweet Home High School, won first place, Landslide from Bishop Timon High School took second place and Wild Card from West Seneca came in third.

“The second and third bands will play on a smaller stage but all three of those bands are absolutely amazing, you don’t want to miss that,” Ruszczyk said.

According to Takac there will also be a strightjacket escape, with the escape artist being suspended by a crane over Hoyt Lake as well as a series of performances that are to take place on boats floating on the lake.

Another highlight this year is the presence of internationally known, Buffalo-born artist Charles Clough who will be doing an installation painting on Lincoln Parkway.

“There’s something for everybody, the young and the old,” said Ruszczyk. “There’s something that you already like, and there’s also something that you’ve never seen before. It’s a time to discover something new, see something you already like, bring your whole family and just experience a gigantic diversity of art, music and dance.”

The festival is free to all and will be held from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Saturday in Delaware Park behind the Albright Knox Art Gallery. For more information, www.visitmusicisart.org.

“We encourage anyone who would like to, to come down with a guitar and sit on the grass or dance around, that’s what this whole weekend is about,” said Takac. “Just be creative, and share in that creativity. Ten years going strong and we can’t wait to see what we do next year.”

HAYNES ...

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instance, is a flatter lace, constructed from tiny, labor-intensive stitches. The style was developed in Youghal, Ireland, and was popular in Kenmare, Killarney and New Ross.

The exhibition certainly serves as an education on this very niche, albeit beautiful form of needlework. And many young — and perhaps not-so-young — people could probably use a little bit of a lesson when it comes to this sort of folk art.

DERBY ...

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How is it played? What are the positions?

In modern flat-track roller derby, each team has five players on the track at once. One player on each team is the jammer, who wears a star on her helmet and can score points. The rest of the team consists of three blockers (whose job it is to keep the opposing team’s jammer from scoring and to clear the way for their own jammer) and a pivot (who wears a stripe on her helmet, controls the speed of the pack and can take over from the jammer in certain strategies ... although not in the case of a penalty).

A derby match, called a bout, consists of two-minute playing segments called jams. A regulation WFTDA bout includes two 30-minute periods with a halftime break. The team jammers line up on the track 20 feet behind the respective team packs as play is about to begin.

According to the QCRG website, “At the first whistle, the pack takes off and gets up to speed and into position: at the second whistle, which is both jammers take off and try to catch and lap the pack. The first one through the pack with no fouls or passes out of bounds is declared lead jammer, and can stop the action at any time by signaling to the refs. If neither one makes it through cleanly, there’s no lead, and the action must continue for the full two minutes.”

Lisborg called it a “combination between a race and hockey and football.”

While jammers have to be very quick and agile, she said, blockers don’t get a lot of the glamour, but a lot of the action.

“It’s unusual that one blocker can stop a jammer from passing,” she said. “Blocking is about working together. They’re the anchors of the team. When you are a wall with your teammates, you are so much harder to get through than if you are spread out or working as an individual.

“You have to switch from offense to defense and back again in the blink of an eye. Not just you as an individual, but as a team. That’s the same in any sport ... Good teams are very cohesive.”

Lisborg has played both as jammer and blocker, and



DOUG BENZ/NEWS

SKILLS: In flat-track roller derby, blockers have to work together, switching between offense and defense to prevent a jammer from scoring points. The Lake Effect Furies practiced some of these skills Aug. 30 at the Rainbow Rink in North Tonawanda.

has both positions have their own strategy and challenges.

“It used to be a very defensive game, where the blockers really only paid attention to the opposing jammer,” she said. “The higher up you get, the more the five players play as a team. We specifically set up players to help our jammer get through — because the more points you score, the more likely you are to win.”

How do players score?

According to the WFTDA, “once a jammer laps the pack, she begins scoring one point for every opposing blocker she passes legally. She can continue to lap the pack for additional scoring passes for the duration of the jam.”

Whichever jammer is lead jammer, however, (the first one to make it through the pack legally on that first, non-scoring lap) has the power to call off the jam at any time by placing her hands on her hips. There may not be a lead jammer, however, if neither jammer keeps it through the pack cleanly on that lap.

What are the penalties?

While derby is a contact sport, not all contact is legal ... including the stereotype of skaters throwing elbows. According to the QCRG website, while players can hit, block or push their opponents using their upper arms, shoulders, chests or hips, it is illegal to hit opponents in the head, lower legs or back. Players cannot use their head, elbows, hands, forearms, legs or feet to hit or push opponents. Other illegal moves include tripping or falling intentionally in front of another

skater or holding arms or hands with teammates to block an opposing skater.

Four minor penalties count as a major, and more serious fouls are immediately called as major penalties, according to QCRG. A player who incurs a major penalty must sit in the penalty box for a full minute. Her team cannot replace her for that time.

What should derby newcomers watch for?

Both Lisborg and Amanda Buraczewski, the president of the WFTDA, suggested that newcomers watch the jammers to start out, but as they pick up more of the scoring and rules, try to keep an eye on the pack of blockers.

“I would say in the second half, try to watch the blockers a little more,” Lisborg said. “You’ll get to see them make plays and strategize. You’ll appreciate the game more fully.”

Buraczewski has also skated with the Atlanta league and its All-star team, the Dirty South Derby Girls, since 2008 under the derby name “Alassin Sane.”

In many ways, she said, the jammer fulfills the role of the ball in other team sports— taking all the attention from the other team.

“I think a lot of people tend to watch jammers. They’re going fast and it’s really easy to focus on them,” she said. “I think that if you’re trying to learn the rules, though, the pack is the place to focus. You can really see how teams have to play offense and defense at the same time. You can almost predict how that next pass is going to go if you’re really paying attention.

“That’s where the amaz-

ON THE NET

- hwftda.com/faq/watching-roller-derby
- www.qcrg.net/derby-101/

ing stuff happens.”

Why the nicknames?

Most derby participants take a nickname to use as their derby alter-ego — as do many referees and coaches. On the QCRG teams, derby names range from “Roxanne Debris” to “BJ Harmstrong” to “Day TripHer” to “Legs Luther.”

Lisborg said the practice carried over from old-school derby. There has been a move to get away from that vestige of theatrics, especially as the sport moves toward consideration for the 2020 Olympic Games, but most skaters have continued the practice.

“I think it has to do with how women in society, we’re supposed to be nice, the nurturers, the moms, the healers,” she said. “This can help us find that part of us that can be more physically confident and athletic.

“It’s fun and creative. Derby is very much a team sport, but it’s about individual expression as well.”

Buraczewski said the names are a part of the fun of derby.

“There are some things we feel are necessary from the past we want to keep, like the nicknames,” she said. “It’s not mandatory, it’s just what some people choose to go by. It’s fun having an alter ego; it’s kind of like having a superhero version of yourself.

“After playing derby for five years, I’m Lass, I’m Amanda, it’s all the same thing.”

Is this a real sport?

Lisborg has two words for that question: “Play it.”

“Come put on some skates and some gear and play it,” she said. “When I sit down in practice because they’re explaining something, and the sweat is pouring off me and I’m drenched by the time I get out of there ... there is no way you can’t tell me that’s not a sport.”

Buraczewski said that derby has had to fight its old reputation — as in, “If Raquel Welch can do it in the movies, it’s really not that hard.” — but what happens on the track speaks for itself.

“All the things that happen here that are exciting are real,” she said. “If

someone falls down and they’re not getting up, it’s because they’re hurt. All the things that may have been exciting about ‘70s derby, it’s being replaced by the athleticism these girls are bringing to the track.”

As derby grows in the public eye, she said, that perception is becoming less of a problem.

“You just have to come out and see it to really understand,” she said. “I can tell them how tough the tryouts are; I can tell them that people are flying places to be on the best team they can possibly be, because they want to compete. No one buys it until they see it.

“It’s a sport. There should be no question. If you watch it, you can’t deny it. Especially at a tournament level, there’s no question. ... It’s about being an athlete. We want to be as athletic as possible and none of us are doing it without having a real life to have to manage as well ... which is the mind-blowing and amazing part.”

What’s going on next weekend in Niagara Falls?

The WFTDA North Central Region playoffs, nicknamed “Thrill of the Spill,” will be hosted by the Queen City Roller Girls from Friday to Sept. 16 at the Convention Center & Event Center Niagara Falls, 101 Old Falls St., Niagara Falls. The top 10 teams in that region will compete to finish in the top three and advance to the WFTDA championships in November in Atlanta (against the top three teams in the West, East and South Central regions).

This year’s competitors are the Windy City Rollers (Chicago), the Minnesota RollerGirls (St. Paul, Minn.), Naptown Roller-girls (Indianapolis), Arch Rival Roller Girls (St. Louis), Ohio Roller Girls (Columbus, Ohio), Detroit Derby Girls (Detroit), Cincinnati Rollergirls (Cincinnati), The Chicago Outfit (Chicago), Brewcity Bruisers (Milwaukee, Wis.) and Mad Rollin’ Dolls (Madison, Wis.) The tournament will feature 17 bouts, starting at 10 a.m. Friday and culminating with the region championship bout at 6 p.m. Sept. 16.

For more information or tickets, visit wftda.com/tournaments/2012/north-central.

talking, but it’s not necessary.

Nothing compares to the bonding, the sense of tradition being passed from one generation to another when learning crafts first-hand from a family member. I encourage all young women to ask their mothers and grandmothers for a little advice on how to create a little magic with thread and a needle.

And if they don’t know, there are plenty of lace-making, embroidery and knitting guilds in the area that seem eager to pass the art on to the younger generations.