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Heated blades latest fad for NHL

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A select handful of National Hockey League players are about to begin using heated skate blades produced by a Verdun, Que., company to enhance performance.

Thermablades use a rechargeable battery and a microprocessor within each skate blade to maintain a temperature of 5 Celsius. The warm blade increases the thickness of the water layer between the blade and the ice surface, and the company says its tests have shown this reduces gliding friction and starting resistance for skaters.

"The NHL is very interested in confirming the data provided by Therma Blade Inc. to establish the safety and reliability of the blade under NHL game conditions and we have agreed to allow a small group of players to test these blades in practices over the next few weeks," says Kris King, the NHL's senior manager of hockey operations.

Six to 10 players will try them first. If there are no glitches, the blades then would begin appearing in NHL games.

King says once he receives from the company a list of players who want to participate, he and Stu Grimson of the NHL Players' Association will review it and decide who'll be asked to wear the blades.

The blades will be available in specialty stores in Canada at \$399.99 retail. Buyers will have to get the blades installed on their skate boots and only adult sizes will be available at the start.

"We are at the crossroads of hockey history," stated Therma Blade Inc. president Patrick Francey.

Inventor Tory Weber, the company's founder, brought his prototype model along with him and described how he, quite accidentally, came up with the original idea in 1985. At the time, he was a student who also worked in a Calgary lumberyard.

"I had just finished taking a class in thermodynamics. It was a cold February evening and I had my running shoes sitting on the heat register next to the front door.

"I slid my running shoes on, opened the door up, and there was frost on the stairs. When my hot running shoes hit that icy step, I went flying backwards and fell on my can.

"Over the next couple of days as I was nursing myself back to health I thought, 'I wonder what would happen if we did the same thing to a skate blade? If we heated a skate blade, would we get that

same reduction in friction?'

"Sure enough, here we are."

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