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Heated skates make 'hockey history'

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Illustrations: Calgary's Tory Weber, inventor of Thermablade, the world's first heated skate blade, presents the new product to the media during the official launch event at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto yesterday.

A select handful of NHL 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 C. 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 the NHL Players' Association's Stu Grimson will review it and decide who'll be asked to wear the blades.

Wayne Gretzky was so impressed with Thermablades when he tried them more than three years ago that he invested in the company.

"I should still be playing," a smiling Gretzky said while skating on the blades for video shown during the product launch at the Hockey Hall of Fame yesterday.

The head coach of the Phoenix Coyotes says he wishes his players could get them first because Thermablades will "revolutionize the game of hockey."

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," he explained. "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."

The prototype - an extension cord plugged into a home-made device on a blade - was given to the Hockey Hall of Fame during the news conference.

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