

# The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)

## Players ready to heat up the ice with blade of the future; Thermablades will 'revolutionize' hockey, Gretzky the investor says

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Illustrations: Photo: THE CANADIAN PRESS / Thermablades inventor Tory Weber of Calgary poses with his product at its introduction 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 rechargeable batteries and a microprocessor in 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," said 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 said 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.

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 said 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 homemade device on a blade -- was given to the Hockey Hall of Fame during the news conference.

"Back then, the technology was too big to encompass it in a skate blade," Weber explained.

Time marched on and technological advances led to the current product.

"We were patient and stayed with it," Weber added.

The players association welcomes trials for the heated blades.

"There is a lot of interest among players throughout the NHL right now to see how Thermablade performs under game conditions," said Grimson, the union's associate counsel.

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