

Vancouver Sun

Heated blades put fire on ice for pro players; Skate innovation get first big test

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Nathan Denette, CanWest News Service / Walter Gretzky (left) helps Thermablade inventor Tory Weber launch his heated skate blades in Toronto Tuesday.

TORONTO -- A former Calgary lumberyard worker is hoping an accidental fall he took one wintry day 22 years ago will help to improve the way hockey players skate, especially as the National Hockey League prepares to test his heated skate blades at practices over the next couple of weeks.

Tory Weber has spent the better part of two decades trying to launch Thermablades, an innovation that has cost a group of investors about \$12 million to develop and refine. It has Wayne Gretzky's support, and it has its basis in an idea hatched in 1985, when Weber slipped on the ice after pulling a pair of shoes off a space heater.

"I was laid up for a number of days on the couch," Weber said. "And I was thinking, 'I wonder what would happen if I heated a skate blade?'"

The result was officially launched Tuesday, at a news conference staged at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto. It will be tested by as many as 10 NHL players and will be available to average consumers in select stores by the middle of next month.

A rechargeable battery keeps the skate blade at 5 C, creating a thicker film of water between the blade and the ice. The company claims the heated blade cuts friction by up to 75 per cent, allowing players a better jump and easier turns.

The boot is not included. Curious players would have to take their skates to a specialized store to have their old blades replaced with their new, heated blades. The new product is expected to retail for \$399 and will not, according to the company, melt through the ice even if the player remains stationary.

"We wholeheartedly believe that this will be the new standard for hockey skate blades," Therma Blade Inc. president Patrick Francey said. "We have no reason to believe that we won't have a very strong penetration rate. We know the blades work."

The NHL is waiting for a list from the company detailing which players will be used as test cases. The heated skate blades have already been tested with junior players, retired players and recreational league players.

"We're not in the endorsement business, we're not in the approval business," said Kris King, senior manager of hockey operations with the NHL. "We just want to be part of the process in making sure that

our players are safe in everything that they do on the ice."

If they work in practice, the heated blades could progress to game use.

"It's not that the players are going to be going another 100 miles per hour quicker. What we get from all of this in the studies that we've done is that they're going to be able to turn tighter," Hockey Canada president Bob Nicholson said. "They're going to be able to get that quick start that is really important to the game."

Weber, who was still in his early 20s when he first hatched the idea, Tuesday donated his initial model to the Hall of Fame.

"It's been a great ride," he said. "This is my Stanley Cup, you know? I mean, 20 years, you went on the ice at 3 a.m., and then you had to go to work at seven. Back on the ice at midnight and at one point, you just say, 'When will this thing ever happen?'"