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Skate Sharpening Tips

by Zane Collings

Skate sharpening is an easy skill to learn, but a very difficult skill to perfect. What makes perfection so challenging is the different preferences of skaters. Consistency, knowing what your client likes and duplicating the same result each time, is key. The right equipment can make or break a sharpening.

Boots and Blades

The only thing more important than the sharpening can be finding the right boots and blades for a skater. Because of the variety of boots and blades on the market, a coach's opinion and theories are important in selecting the right pair of skates for a skater. One brand of skates may work well for one skater but not work for his or her friends. Stick with what works when contemplating changing brands. If a skater has had two pairs of one brand without any problems, it's not always wise to switch as this could bring problems. Numerous skaters try a new brand of boots only to revert to the previous brand.

A proper fit is key for a boot to benefit the skater. Even though parents often want some growing room, a boot that is too large may break down improperly and will not provide support. Take the time to speak with the parent about providing the skater with correctly fitting equipment. Proper equipment will help skaters enjoy the sport and assist with improvement and success. If you have questions about a certain boot, the manufacturers are willing to answer questions and are very helpful.

Blades are not as difficult to fit as skates. Correct blade length is a must. The base plates of the blade should go from the front of the sole to the back of the sole without going over. Again, the coach is often involved in the selection of a blade since most coaches have a preference.

Most skate manufacturers have sizing sticks to aid pro shops in fitting skates. A good pair of hockey skates should support the foot and ankle. Typically, hockey skate sizes will be one-half to one size smaller than a shoe size. If the skates don't fit properly or offer enough support, the skaters' ankles may fall inwards. This will decrease the skaters' enjoyment and ability to excel in the sport. When trying on a new pair of hockey or figure skates, walk around to be sure the fit is snug and the heels stay in place.

Sharpening Basics

For success in skate sharpening, make sure the edges are level, be consistent, practice and have the right equipment. The edges must be level to produce a quality sharpening. If the edges are not level to begin with, you should make the adjustment to level the edges first. To level a blade, grind a little more blade off the high edge.

The hollow is the depth of the "groove" shape the grinding wheel cuts into the blade. The hollow of a skate varies from person to person and from coach to coach. Ice dancers usually prefer a deeper hollow such as 3/8 inch. Freestyle and pair skaters usually have a hollow around 1/2 or 9/16 inch. These are guidelines for hollows and may vary depending on a skater's preference. The hollow of a hockey skate varies with the skater, the hardness of the ice, and the skating level. Hollows for hockey skates range from 1/4 to 9/16 inch.

On a pair of skates that are well maintained, five to 10 slow passes on the wheel will produce a good edge. On used or abused skates, 10 to 20 passes may be needed to bring the edge up.

It is very important that you do not hit the toe pick or round the tail of the blade while sharpening. This can cause problems with a skater's balance point, jump take offs and landings and poor edging.

Once you have the correct hollow and have made your finishing passes with the grinding wheel, you must stone the side of the blades to bring up the edges. This will also take off the burs and make the blade run smoothly. Make sure you keep the stone parallel to the blade so that you do not round the freshly sharpened edges.

Never stop learning! Be open to new ideas and techniques. Test out new materials and products. Some ideas may produce a better sharpening and some may not.