



## Skates - How Stiff, How Tight?

For years I've been arguing against ultra stiff skates. They have been marketed to the hockey playing public with the reasoning that if pros like their skates to be very stiff, all other players would naturally want their skates to be very stiff.

**How can anyone compare the skating needs (or the skating feet) of recreational hockey players with those of pros?** If you skate for many hours a day, under the same grueling conditions as do pros, ultra stiff skates could be in order. Pros break in (and down) their skates quickly. They need very stiff skates so that they won't have to break in several pairs during one hockey season. But most players, youth through adult, skate moderately, anywhere from one to three times a week, in sessions lasting from one – two hours. Their boots, if as stiff as pros', may take forever to break in, and in many cases, never break down.

Recently I have been pleasantly surprised to see one or two brands of skates that are less stiff, more pliable and forgiving of the human anatomy.

I read an article in the NY Times on Sunday, January 21, dealing with stress fractures and back/hip/knee injuries in elite figure skaters. I quote from this article. "Skaters land on the ice on a thin steel blade, cushioned only by several layers of hard, compressed leather. The ankles are provided with little mobility, reducing their ability to act as shock absorbers and transferring the impact of landing along to the tibia, knee, femur, hip and lower back. It's almost like putting the kids into casts.... You have to change the skates." The same is true in hockey. The stresses, though differently induced, create the same problems. Casts do not allow for mobility. They are designed to hold the feet upright! Skates must be supportive, of course, but at the same time must be pliable enough to respond to the lean of a player's feet and legs while edging and executing complex skating maneuvers.

My opinion is reinforced when I watch videos of the great Bobby Orr speeding and weaving, turning and cutting, out maneuvering his opponents on his old time, "floppy" leather skates. Skates surely weren't ultra stiff in the 1960's and 70's.

A happy medium of supportiveness and pliability is in order for young and/or recreational level players.

As for lacing skates ultra tight, the same is true. For effective edging and maneuverability **players must be able to flex their ankles inwardly and outwardly.** I (usually) recommend that players lace their skates snugly through the middle part of the foot (the part of the foot that needs the most support), but that above the ankle (the top eyelet of the boot) they should keep them somewhat looser. More advanced skaters may choose not to lace the very top eyelet.

For the same reason I do not recommend taping the ankles. Ultra tight lacing at the top of the boot plus tape around the ankles has the same effect as putting the feet in casts! It also can cause discomfort and frustration. I also prefer that the tongues of the skates be placed outside



the shin pads rather than inside them (the shin pad must be long enough so that the lower leg is not exposed to injury by a stick, skate or puck). This allows players to flex their knees and ankles more effectively, which are crucial for Great Skating.

by Laura Stamm, © January 2001