



Taking Care of Your Skates

You spend a lot of money on your skates. How do you protect that investment? Those skates can either help you or hinder you as you try to learn new moves. Poorly maintained skates are more likely to hinder than help. What are the best things to do to care for them? The following sections take a look at the Blades, Boots, and Laces separately.

Caring for Your Blades

Your blades are your only contact with the ice. You want that contact to be as effective as possible. Good care will help to ensure this.

Keep them sharp -- but not too sharp: A sharp blade grabs the ice better than a dull one. Sharpen your blades when they start to slide uncomfortably when you land. Keep a log of the number of hours you skate between sharpenings. After a while you'll figure out how many hours you can average between sharpenings, and this will help you to avoid surprises at inconvenient times.

You want a balance here -- if you wait too long, the change when you get them sharpened is pretty dramatic and your performance suffers. If you do it too often, you'll wear out the blade too soon (yes, there is a finite number of times a blade can be sharpened). In my family, we average about 20 hours on a sharpening - you might find that you like either less or more than that though.

Sharpen responsibly too -- be careful of who you trust with your blades. If the place you go doesn't have a specialist in figure skates, be careful. Figure skates are sharpened with very different goals than hockey skates. NEVER have them done by one of those automatic machines you find in some rinks. Figure skates are ground with a "hollow" in the bottom (to give them those "edges" you hear so much about). The radius of that curvature can vary anywhere from 5/16" to about 2" depending upon your weight, the disciplines you skate (FS, dance, patch), and the level of jumps you do. A good sharpener will want to know these things. If he looks like he wonders why you're telling him that stuff, consider finding someone else!

Treat them well, on your feet: Remember that even though steel is hard, it still wears down. The thin whisker of steel that forms those all-important edges can be nicked and worn down very easily.

Blades are made to slide on ice, not walk on floors. When you have to walk on floors, put "hard guards" on the blades. If you can't wear guards, try to tip up your feet and walk on the toe picks instead of the fragile edges (but be very selective about the surfaces you try this on -- rubber floor mats or carpet are ok, but don't try it on concrete, tile, or your mom's good wood floors!)

When you get on and off the rink, be careful of the "threshold" on the entry door. It's often made of steel, and because people don't think about it, it's responsible for an awful lot of nicks on blades. Step OVER the threshold, NOT ON it as you get onto the ice.

Stopping is a part of skating. But those stops are much harder on the blades than straight skating (think about it -- what do you do to purposely wear them down a little when you get them back from the sharpener "just a little too sharp"??) You obviously can't avoid stopping, but you can try to vary the nature of your stops during practice sessions. You can do 1-foot snowplows, T-stops, or Tango stops. And remember you've got two different feet (yes, I know that the left foot T-stop is harder, but hasn't your pro told you that you should learn most moves "both ways" ???) Each of those stops stresses the blade a different way, and a good mixture will help to prolong your sharpening interval.

Treat them well, off your feet: Off the ice, the biggest killer of blades is rust. Rust is much softer than steel, and once a part of your blade is rusted you can never change that part back to "the good stuff". The rusted spot will never hold an edge again. Do your very best to avoid water damage!

Always dry off your blades when you get off the ice. Slide your fingers along both sides to remove "snow" as soon as you get off -- before you slip on those hard guards. Carefully run your finger along the length of the hollow (your skin oil can help to repel moisture).

When you're done for the day, be sure to wipe them down with a towel. Be sure to get the blade area and the mounting surfaces. The screws rust too, and will loosen much more easily when they're rusted or the leather gets rotten. If you've got the time (while you're changing your clothes, perhaps), let them sit for a couple minutes and wipe them down again before you put them in your bag. You'll almost always see some more water form from condensate as they warm up.

When you do put them in the bag, always put them in "soakers". These help to draw off any remaining moisture, but more importantly they provide a cushion for your edges while the skates bounce around inside your bag. NEVER store your blades in hard guards - they hold moisture and are an almost guaranteed rust job.

Finally, maintain your guards. The soakers wear out after a while - they usually get holes at the ends. Replace them when they no longer cover your blade effectively. The hard guards will wear out too -- watch for thin spots or holes in the bottom, and replace them immediately when you see signs of wear. Clean out the insides of the hard guards periodically. They will accumulate grit after a while,

and that grit is very abrasive.

Caring for Your Boots

The boots that hold those blades on your feet are pretty important too. Take care to break them in properly. You'll find lots of advice on this subject -- trust your pro and your bootfitter for good advice here. Replace your boots when they get too badly broken down -- your safety and the quality of your jumps rely on the consistency of support that only a well cared for boot can provide.

The leather of your boots is just as susceptible to water damage as the steel in your blades. Keep your boots well polished all the time -- it makes them look better, but more importantly, it seals the leather and helps it to shed water. This is specially important if you've nicked up the surface quite a bit and unfinished leather is exposed.

As mentioned earlier, always dry off the bottoms (sole) of the boot when you get off the ice. You generate a lot of snow/water when you skate, and it will destroy the soles if you're not careful. This is of special concern around the blade-mounting screws, which need good strong non-rotten leather to bite into .

You might not want to admit it, but your feet probably sweat a little bit when you're skating. That moisture can get pretty well trapped inside the boot and rot it out from the inside. To help avoid this, open up your boot as much as you can when it's off your foot. Loosen the laces as far down as you can. Pull them out of the first couple holes if possible. Pull the tongue up and out from the boot as much as you can to help the inside of the boot breathe. When you get home, if mom permits, let your boots live "outside" of your bag for a little while, til they're nice and dry inside. At least unzip the bag to let it air out if you can't clutter the family room with your skates.

The Mount: If you look at the bottom of your boot, you'll find that the blade is held to the sole with a bunch of screws. It's really important that you maintain the proper tightness of these screws. Due to the stresses and bending while you skate, they will loosen with time. Loose screws are dangerous, and promote quicker wear of the leather too. Don't tighten them too tight though because the leather will strip out easily.

How many screws should there be? When you first get a brand new pair of skates, a good technician will probably do a "trial mount". You'll have two screws in the heel and probably 2 in the slotted holes in the front mounting plate. This mount is to give you a chance to verify that the blade is appropriately positioned for your body and foot geometry, without making it too difficult to adjust if it's "wrong".

Once you've skated a couple times on the trial mount, and are confident that you can skate straight and spin well then you should take the skate back for a permanent mount. That "mount" just adds a couple more screws, to the round non-slotted holes. Don't be alarmed if there's a couple unfilled holes. They provide additional locations for later, if some of the existing holes "strip out".

Extra Screws: If you need to replace a lost screw for any reason, make sure you select the proper screw to do the job. You will want to get stainless steel (to slow down the rust). The slotted holes need screws with flat "bottoms", but the round holes want the kind with a little bevel on the bottom. You'll need the appropriate lengths, too. Too short and they won't get a good bite, too long and the points will come through the leather and tickle your foot (you don't want this to happen!). The best place to get these screws is from the shop that sold you the skates. Otherwise, a well stocked hardware store can probably supply them. You should have a few spare screws for your "emergency bag".

Caring for Your Laces

Laces sound pretty insignificant, but a lace that breaks at an inopportune time can cause an awful lot of grief, and possibly can cause injury. Treat them with respect, and replace them when they start to wear or to lose "threads", or when the little plastic thingies ("aglets") come off the ends.

Always keep a few spare pairs of laces in your emergency bag. It is important to use the right "length" of lace. Too long and you'll have huge loops left over, which can drag close to the ice and become a hazard. Too short and you'll have a hard time tying them securely. I usually use an indelible fine-tip magic marker and write the proper length on the mounting plates of one of my blades (right next to my name). That way I'll always know the proper length to get in an emergency.