

leather vs. vinyl

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Leather or Vinyl?

What Makes a Better Roller Derby Boot?

Most common derby and speed skating boots uppers are made of leather or vinyl. Generally speaking, high-end leather skates are superior in most ways, besides the ethical ones for those that prefer cows still mooing. But in the lower price ranges, that's not so much the case – in many ways, vinyl boots are superior to similarly priced leather – especially for rookie derby skaters. Of course, not all vinyl boot-wearers are rookies. We're often asked to help skaters find vegan (non-leather) skates that are appropriate for what we do. And actually, vinyl skates do have some features that make them an attractive choice.

fit

Vinyl is flexible and forgiving – especially compared to leather skates in the same price range. If you're not absolutely sure about what size you wear, vinyl can be a good compromise. Vinyl skates don't break in – they are not going to mold to your feet like leather will. The truth is that by the time your feet start changing the fit of those skates, the vinyl is breaking down. Depending on how hard you skate in them and how often, once the vinyl starts to break down, you may have from a few weeks to a few months left in them. But the good news is that while you do have them (usually about a season), they're good skates; usually comfy, usually inexpensive, usually a very good buy. And vinyl skates in the beginning price ranges tend to run medium width (Boxers, R3s, Pacers), while most of the similarly priced leather skates veer towards narrow (Torq, Carerra) or very wide (Rock). So your odds of getting a comfortable fit in them – especially ordering mail-order – are considerably higher in vinyl boots.

durability

Unfortunately, vinyl is not durable – not like quality leather. But the reason we often recommend vinyl boots over the leather ones in the lowest price ranges is pretty simple. \$100 skates aren't made of quality leather. The only way manufacturers can afford to produce leather boots at that price point is to use lower quality leather and overseas workmanship. And that lower quality leather typically has a stiffening agent added to it to help it last longer. The boot may theoretically last longer due to the stiffening

agent – the jury is out on that one. My experience was that my first two pairs of lower quality leather skates (both made overseas) were no more durable than vinyl. And neither one lasted longer than a season. But the same stiffener that is meant to make the leather more durable also makes it, well – stiffer. Similar quality leather boots are harder to break in, far less forgiving in slightly wrong sizes (read: blisters and calluses in loose boots, foot pain and worse in tight boots – sometimes both if you're really unlucky). The comparison of vinyl boots to really well-made, high-end leather boots stacks up a lot higher for the latter, though. When you start comparing the counters – the ankle, arch and foot support – in vinyl vs. best quality leather boots (like 265s, 595s, 695s), then it's a whole new ball game. U.S. made leather skates and some of the newest Asian manufactured mid-range boots (like the Vixens and Rebels) are a lot more durable in many ways.

cost

Vinyl boots are cheaper than U.S. made, high quality leather boots. They're also usually a little cheaper than similar price point leather boots, as well. For about \$100 an average rookie skater can get vinyl boots that will last her about a season, less if she skates hard and practice constantly – longer if she's mellow, still learning to skate, or just skates more recreationally.

However, you can't talk about cost without talking about durability again. How much did you spend and how long will that last you before you have to buy skates again? If you do skate really hard, you're likely to tear through really high end skates quickly, as well. In the durability bit above, we talked about vinyl vs. cheap leather. Again, in the very cheapest range of boots, I'd choose vinyl over pressed leather recreational skates every time. But how does vinyl do against high end, quality leather boots?

Not so good. High end boots still wear out in our sport. Quality leather hides don't wear out as fast, and good skates made of good quality materials by hand by little old ladies in a factory filled with pictures of their grandkids will be better crafted, more comfortable, better fitting, better engineered for our sport, and have more support and features you will love – and NEED, once you're out of the rookie stages. But at the rate I'm going, personally, I'm still tearing through great (expensive) skates at the rate of about one pair per season, as well. Manufacturers



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are working hard to make skates more durable with reinforced toes and other durability-related features, but if they made them bulletproof, they'd put themselves out of business. So I think durability will always be a bit of an issue. However, to compare, I sincerely doubt I'd even get a solid month out of a pair of stock vinyl boots. I guarantee that my well made, relatively expensive leather boots are better in a thousand ways than any pair of vinyl boots. But while they are far more durable, especially like I mentioned before, when you factor in the counters – the fact remains that derby beats the shit out of more than just our bodies.

So basically, to compare cost and durability you end up with an equation that is made up of your experience level, how aggressive you skate, what type of surface you're on (concrete eats skates), and how much you're willing to spend, how often. My first favorite skates were prototype 265s. At six months they looked like I had backed my car over them – repeatedly. But it wasn't until almost a year that the fit became too loose and uncomfortable. My next favorites were 695 boots. They have quality leather inside and out – and I found that they were tough to break in for my wide-ish feet. But once I did have them broken in, they gave me almost two solid years of comfort. I finally wore off the foam on the tongue, and by the time I got my replacement Sherling tongue installed, I had fallen for a pair of custom-fit and

featured skates based on the 965 design. They were beautiful blue leather, soft as a baby's butt – and I probably would have wore them out quickly, but they're still in decent shape because I upgraded to Revenge on a second pair after just a few months. Those are not a year old and they're still bedroom-slipper comfy and holding up quite well, but they're not the snug fit I prefer. So if durability was the most critical feature for me, I would choose the 695s with their double reinforced high end leather. Of course, durability isn't ever the only factor you have to consider!

ethics

All skates – without exception – in that \$100 or so price range are made in China and almost all skates, at this moment, that aren't made in China are made of leather. There is one exception, and that's Riedell's Clarino® customization, which they offer on any of their U.S. made skates. I really thought Clarino® skates would be super popular! So far our friends that have them love them. But outside of customization, which can get quite expensive, the ethical problem isn't exactly simple. For those with strong ethical reasons for choosing non-animal products, that may be a consideration. Is choosing a non-animal product ultimately better from an ethical perspective than choosing a product made in far-lower-than-U.S.-standards of factory working conditions? That's one you'll have to answer for yourself. ●