

breaking in new skates and choosing them in the first place

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Buying new skates can be a big commitment, especially when considering the boot. Without trying them on ahead of time, how can you tell what will fit best on your feet? Vendors can help you out with sizing, but you're on your own to reach that nice broken-in feel once you purchase them. Read on to figure out what to expect from a new pair of skates (and what you shouldn't be dealing with).

The first thing to consider is what kind of material you want your boots to be made of. If you are considering vinyl boots, they're not going to break in much – vinyl is very flexible and is usually pretty comfortable right off the bat. If they're not comfy, you probably have the wrong size! Rather than breaking in, however, they pretty much just break down. They're great, but they don't last long.

If you are considering leather boots, just know that there's a big difference between U.S. made vs. Chinese-manufactured leather skates. I guess they don't have a lot of cows in China? The reason skates are made in China in the first place is so that they will be inexpensive, and in order to cut costs, they aren't made with the same quality of materials and workmanship as their U.S. made counterparts. What this means is that you get your money's worth – if you spend \$100 on skates, you get \$100 worth of skates.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing, however. Sin City Skates recommends that new skaters start with good but inexpensive vinyl skates for a couple reasons:

- Sadly, most new skaters find that derby is a very time-intensive sport. Not all women have the 6-20+ hours a week it can take to make attendance requirements and really excel in this sport, and therefore do not always stick around.
- As mentioned before, they are usually comfortable from the get-go.
- They're set up for new skaters – inexpensive skates usually comprise of longer plates for more stability that are mounted in the center for a girl just getting her feet under her. This can be very helpful when you're learning the basics of skating skills.
- They give you a season or so to figure out what you like. Take that time to figure out what kind of skates best suit you, what

wheels you like, what position you're gonna play, etc.

- Finally, they make great outdoor skates when you're ready to upgrade to better ones. Slap some softie wheels on them and you're ready to go.

However, we also let girls know when they order \$100 skates that they can't count on longer than a year or full season out of them. It may be even less depending on how hard they are on them. We have a cub in our league who wanted on the team so bad she skated every single day and wore out a pair of GT-40s in two months. That's unusual, and she's a big girl skating very hard on them, but it's not outside the realm of possibility.

Just remember, that's the deal: cheap skates are cheap for a reason. Get them fitted right from day one because they don't usually get MORE comfortable. Ask questions about the fit – tell the person you're ordering from if you have wide feet or narrow, high arches, weird toes, whatever. Try on other girls' skates (keeping in mind that they are bound to be busted if they've been skating in them for a while). Ask your teammates questions about their skates. Check out the roller_girls database for even more info on skates: groups.yahoo.com/group/roller_girls/database.

No matter what you get, it's worth doing some research before you buy skates. A couple years ago you were screwed – a rollergirl had maybe a handful of people they could ask, and who knows if they'd get reliable advice. Now you have thousands of rollergirls who will be happy to offer advice and opinions on everything from new skates to the state of the bathrooms in Sudanese cafés. Take advantage of it!

As far as the fit goes, if your toes are curling, they're too small. If your foot moves in the toe box, you got them too big and/or wide. In both cases, you don't need to break them in – you need to get properly fitting skates. Both too big and too small can cause painful foot cramps, blisters and worse, including permanent damage to your sweet, delicate little tootsies. Have you never spent \$100 on stupid shoes you never wore? Almost everyone has made that mistake at one time or another. Well, shoes are one thing – most of us have more than one pair and can choose not to wear uncomfy ones. With skates, few of us are lucky enough to

have a closet full of them. So make sure you get the right size and if you didn't, suck it up, sell them on Ebay, and try again!

We have some more info on getting a good fit here to help you out: sincityskates.com/2nd/about/sizing.html.

Now that you know what size you want, let's just say you can afford U.S. made leather skates, and you're not interested in waiting a year to determine what you want. There are several really good models that work well for derby. But if you are a BEGINNING skater, there's something you should know about getting good skates: they're engineered for advanced skaters.

By that I mean they were engineered to support you for miles on a track, going fast and turning left. They have extra interior support on the left side of each skate where you're leaning, pushing and stressing that leather and the connection between the leather and the sole. It's called a counter, and in U.S. made Riedell skates it is actually a really cool piece of engineering. If you know anyone with 122/125, 265 or 685/595 skates, ask them to let you feel them up. That stiff piece from about the inside ankle around the back to the other side (different on the best skates from right to left skate) is the counter.

The counter is a piece of perforated support between the inner and outer soles of leather on the skates. It allows the insoles and outsoles to be made with very high quality, soft leather, and prevents the boots from losing their shape when they get broken in. It supports your foot, arch, and heel, and prevents your heel from rolling out.

It also prevents rookie skaters from comfortably skating upright. In my opinion, as a team captain and trainer, that's

a good thing. You've heard your coach say it 1000 times: "Bend your knees!" and "Stay low!" Well, advanced skates are made for skaters who do bend their knees and stay low. So if you DON'T bend your knees and skate low, not only will you:

- get knocked on your ass easier,
- lose your balance easier,
- drag more air when you're trying to sprint,
- fall harder,
- have more trouble handing out good hits, etc. – this could be a very long list, but you get the picture...

Well, not only all the above, but your new skates will also poke you in the Achilles tendon, and it will hurt. That's because advanced skaters lean, and you aren't leaning!

People ask us all the time how to break in their skates faster because they hurt their Achilles tendon. We try to be polite about it because we don't want to assume you're a rookie or you're skating tall, but that is usually the case. So here's how to make them stop hurting you: **BEND YOUR KNEES.**

If you are particularly stubborn about skating tall, or you are skating low and they still poke you, the next thing to try is leather conditioner – the stuff baseball players use to break in a new glove. But don't just rub it in; bend the

leather back and forth. And if any part of the counter is bothering your ankle or foot, remember, it's perforated. The more you work it back and forth, the softer it will get and the less it will poke you.

If your skates are pinching where your toes meet your foot, I've heard a lot of advice for that, including putting a water bottle in them and leaving them in a hot car. You can also take them to a cobbler to stretch the places they're tight.

With a little bit of tough love, your new skates should fit like a glove once they've broken in. It may be hard to give in to the fact that you've bought the wrong pair of skates if they are still causing you woes after a significant amount of time, but that's why it's important to ask lots of questions while making your purchase. Let your skates work with you, not against you! ●

