

cleaning bearings and wheels

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Bearings roll better clean and wheels last longer when you rotate them. How often you need to clean yours depends on how hard you use them. Here's the lazy skater's guide to cleaning 'em quick.

Are they dirty? Good indications that yours need cleaning include:

- They make noise or whine when you're skating
- You can feel resistance when you turn your wheels by hand; some wheels spin slower
- A bearing is hot to the touch after you've been skating
- It's been six months or so since the last time you cleaned them

What you need:

- 30 minutes or so
- skate tool or 3/8 or 13mm socket wrench
- citrus cleaner or bearing cleaner
- bearing or sewing machine oil
- low-fuzz rags (I like old T-shirts)
- aluminum baking tin (coffee cake size works great)
- bucket
- soapy water (dish soap is fine)
- old toothbrush
- paper towels
- canned air (like you would use on electronics)

Optional but super helpful:

- a bearing press / puller tool

1. INSPECT YOUR WHEELS FOR WEAR

Before you take your wheels off the skates, take a damp rag and wipe off your wheels and really look at them. Your wheels are probably showing wear at different rates. If you are like most of us, your wheels will show more wear on your

“pusher” wheels. For most of us, that is your left skate, front left wheel; and your right skate, front left wheel – with various degrees of wear on the other inside wheels. Usually your least worn wheels are the back right of both skates, not counting wear perpendicular to the treads from dragging your skates for T-stops. Save your wheels and brake with toe stops! Anyway, remember the wear pattern you see (maybe even write it down). We're going to come back to it in a minute.

2. TAKE THE WHEELS OFF AND CHECK YOUR NUTS

Then take your wheels off your truck axles by removing the axle nuts with a skate tool or socket wrench. Inspect the axle nuts – they have nylon seals inside and those do wear out. If the fit is loose or you've had any indication the nuts are loosening themselves – or if you've taken them off and put them back on more than a dozen times, it might be time to replace the axle nuts. We'll come back to this later when you're putting them back on. The nylon ring prevents the nut from flying off!

3. TAKE YOUR BEARINGS OUT OF THE WHEELS

Next you need to remove the bearings from the wheels. Be really careful taking them out and putting them in. If you dent the dust covers, which is the soft flat ring, often with engraving on it (where it says your ABEC rating) – the cover can press on the ball bearings inside, creating

resistance and slowing your roll. Dust covers are very easy to dent if you're not careful. Many newer common bearings have plastic dust covers that are much harder to damage. Regardless, it's best to handle them with the stainless part and avoid touching the covers.

You can use your truck axles to carefully pry your bearings out – or you can use a bearing puller like bench-mounted press or a hand-held puller. I would recommend using a tool because it is possible to mess up the threads on your axles. If you use the axles, be careful, or get a skate tool with an axle threader.

4. DUMP THE WHEELS IN SOAP

Take the bearings out carefully, then throw all your wheels – NOT THE BEARINGS, JUST THE WHEELS – in a bucket of soapy water and leave them while you clean your bearings.

5. SOAK & AGITATE

There are a lot of things you can use to clean bearings. Skate shops sell bearing cleaner in small bottles for a lot of money – but you can also get a jug of citrus cleaner at a home depot or other hardware store for a lot cheaper – and it's the same stuff. We used to clean ours in gas – until a Riedell rep told us the soap in gas dries and cracks covers and races. I am told mineral spirits are also fine, but I recommend citrus cleaner because it's cheap, easy to get, and is recommended by experts like the folks that make Bones Bearings.

Place your bearings in the baking tin and then pour enough cleaner in there to cover every bearing. Let them soak a while, agitating every couple minutes. Then, depending on how much crud is in the tin, dump the liquid carefully and do the whole process again.

6. BLOW 'EM

Once you can spin the bearings without hearing or feeling any major resistance, take them out. Since there is no oil in them, they're not likely to spin easily, but you should be able to feel hitches in the roll if there is still crud in there. If you live in a super dry climate, lay them out to air dry on a clean, non-fuzzy cloth or paper towel. If you live somewhere humid or your bearings are really dirty in the first place, blow them out with the canned air computer nerds use to clean out electronics. Make sure they are completely 110% dry. A tiny amount of dampness can rust your bearings overnight.

Q: What's under the dust cover?

A: Ball bearings in a race.

7. LUBE 'EM UP

After they're dry, you want to put ONE DROP of oil in each bearing and spin it to spread it around. A particularly slow bearing might want two drops, but resist the urge to put a lot more in because too much oil attracts dirt and you'll regret it later. If you oil a bearing and it still doesn't spin freely, you might want to consider replacement – or if you can't afford new bearings, at least put bad ones aside to put on your back outside wheels, or in whatever positions wear patterns on your wheels show you use the least.

When you're oiling them, separate the fastest-spinning bearings from the rest. You want your best bearings in your pusher wheels.

8. PUSH THEM IN

Now take your wheels out of the soapy bucket and scrub them with the

toothbrush to get all the schmutz off them.

Dry them thoroughly.

Make sure they're not dripping from the hubs! Then press the bearings back into them.

Put the fastest bearings in the wheels that show the least amount of wear.

This is where most people dent their bearings, so be careful! Again, handle them by the stainless parts – like the middle part that spins – not on the covers. Even better: use a bearing press to get them back in the wheels.

Note: If you have aluminum hubs, this job is a little harder, because properly machined hubs are BARELY big enough for the bearings. A bearing press is going to make a big difference for you. But with or without it, you may want to put just a very tiny amount of oil – TINY!!! – on your finger and rub it on the inside of the hub and outside of the bearing to ease the process. Then push the bearing in at a perfectly perpendicular 90 degree angle slowly, rocking it gently if it gets stuck. Finesse is the key – you cannot force bearings into metal hubs.

Make sure the two bearings for each wheel are pressed in all the way back, then put your best wheels on your pusher positions, rotating your baldest ones back to the spots you don't need as much. Basically, you want to put them back on opposite of how you took them off – the ones you used the most for pushing will

be baldest – you want to remount your best wheels in those positions.

9. TIGHTEN 'EM UP

Screw your axle nuts back on snugly.

Note: This is a good time to hand test the nuts to make sure that the nylon isn't too worn. If you can tighten them past the nylon ring without a tool, they can also loosen without a tool. Toss them.

How tight should you put them on? If you're not sure, an easy way to figure it out is to tighten them down carefully, just until your wheels barely turn, then back them off until they spin freely. It is possible to tighten them so much you dent the dust covers, so be careful, especially if you're using power tools (set power drill clutch lower to avoid over-tightening). The nut should not be so snug that your wheel can't spin freely – nor so loose that you can rock the wheel on the axle.

YOU'RE DONE, SO GO SKATE! ●