



THE HISTORY OF

HOCKEY EQUIPMENT

Presented by the



RBK





New York Americans, 1928-29 team
[Photo: Hockey Hall of Fame]

As the game of hockey has evolved, so, too has its equipment. In the game's earliest days, when players skated on natural ice and substitutions were rare, a hockey uniform's most important job was to keep its wearer warm. Innovations in ice-making, skate design and coaching strategy would soon launch hockey on a century-long progression that has led to today's short shifts played at top speeds by bigger players who shoot the puck harder. Modern hockey equipment is asked to perform a multitude of complex jobs: **maximizing performance and agility while offering protection, keeping the athlete dry and—paradoxically for this winter game—cool and comfortable.**

The pages that follow outline a detailed description of the history of hockey equipment, from the late 19th century to the present day. Hockey equipment has seen tremendous advancement over the past century, and now the new standard for the uniform will be established with the **Rbk EDGE Uniform System.**



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A Timeline

1880s Players began to protect their **shins** from sticks and pucks by using strips of leather or felt, reinforced with thin lengths of cane. **Leather gloves** were worn less for protection than to keep a player warm from the outdoor elements.

1896 The first goaltender to wear **leg pads** was George Merritt of the Winnipeg Victorias in the 1896 Stanley Cup challenge game against Montreal. Merritt strapped on a pair of cricket pads and posted a 2-0 shutout over the Montreal Victorias.

Circa 1900 Players began to protect their **kneecaps** with a large square of leather or canvas, reinforced with felt. They also wore **gloves** that were made from leather and had padding consisting of animal hair and felt. Some gloves added thin sticks of bamboo or rattan positioned over the wrist portion to provide extra protection.

1910 Fred "Cyclone" Taylor, a star player in the early part of the century, is said to be one of the first players to protect his **shoulders** and **back** from injury. Taylor took some scraps of felt from a harness shop in his hometown of Renfrew, Ontario and sewed them into his undershirt around the shoulders and down the back.

Players began to use **elbow pads** made from felt.

1920s **Knee** and **shin pads** were attached together to provide increased protection.



1930 After having his nose broken from a Howie Morenz shot, Montreal Maroons' Clint Benedict became the first goaltender to wear a **mask** in an NHL game on February 20, 1930. The leather facemask did not prove practical and Benedict abandoned it after just two games. Montreal Canadiens' goaltending great Jacques Plante became the first netminder to use a mask on a regular basis in the NHL in November, 1959. On March 31, 1973, Pittsburgh's Andy Brown played against St. Louis without a mask —the last appearance by a maskless goaltender in an NHL game.

1930 Beginning with the 1930-31 season, it became mandatory for each player to wear a **number** on the back of his sweater, measuring at least 10 inches in height.

Circa 1931 After Montreal Maroons star Babe Siebert suffered a broken thumb, trainer Bill O'Brien put a shoehorn inside Siebert's glove to provide reinforcement and protection to his thumb. This clever invention was the impetus for the **reinforced fiber thumb** which would become a staple on hockey gloves in the 1930's.

1930s Players began to better protect their **elbows** by wearing leather pads on the outside of their sweaters. Players also began to protect their **forearms**, sewing felt pads onto to their long-sleeved undershirts.

1933 Toronto Maple Leafs' star Ace Bailey suffered a career-ending head injury when he struck his head on the ice after a collision with Boston's Eddie Shore. Shore became the first high profile player to wear a **helmet** regularly in the NHL after the collision. Helmets, though, were still not widely used in the NHL until the 1970's. In 1959-60, only four players—Charlie Burns and Vic Stasiuk of the Boston Bruins, Warren Godfrey of the Detroit Red Wings and Camille Henry of the New York Rangers—wore helmets on a regular basis.

1937-38 As improvements continued to be made to all forms of equipment, the League passed a rule that prohibited the use of pads "made of metal or any other materials likely to cause injury to a player."

1940s

1945 Post World War II, felt and leather **shoulder** and **elbow pads** began to be replaced by pads made of plastic and fiberglass. The shoulder pads were similar to those that had been developed for football. By the late 1940's, numerous players were being injured by this latest equipment innovation. NHL President Clarence Campbell in 1950: "There is considerable support for the view that the elbow pads and shoulder harnesses being supplied to teams at the present time are taking on the appearance and effect of heavy armor, which, while protecting the wearer, is inflicting much more serious damage to opponents, and obviously this cannot go on. It is completely ridiculous for us to permit one player to protect himself with a type of equipment which is constructed in a manner which can injure another. In my opinion, the present day elbow pad does not have anything like a sufficient covering over the hard circular piece of fiber to afford any appreciable resilience so as to minimize the risk of injury to another player and the fact that we have had quite a number of facial fractures from "elbowing" this current year only serves to emphasize the necessity of eliminating all dangerous equipment."

1950-51 Because of the number of injuries incurred by players from elbowing infractions, the NHL Rules Committee adopted a new rule requiring that **shoulder** and **elbow pads** include a soft outer covering. All elbow pads which do not have a soft protective outer cover would be considered dangerous equipment. The League also adopted a new rule that results in a major penalty to a player when an injury is suffered as a result of an elbow.

1955 A new **elbow pad** was developed by Lippman's Tool Shop in Detroit, that added a sponge rubber covering over the hard plastic, fiber or leather elbow protector. The Detroit Red Wings were the first club to use this new elbow pad.



1955 Eye injuries suffered from the butt end of the hockey stick had become more prevalent in the League in the early 1950's. Harry Doughty of Walkerton, Ontario developed the "Doughty Safety Grip," a piece of rubber, two inches in length, which attached to the end of the hockey stick. One of the game's all-time greats, Gordie Howe, was a keen supporter of the new piece of safety equipment. Howe called the grip one of the greatest developments in hockey history. He added: "I received a severe head injury in the Stanley Cup Playoffs a few years ago, which nearly ended my career. If there been such a safety grip at that time, I doubt very much if my injury would have occurred."

1957 The New York Rangers became the first team to wear **colored gloves** (red, white and blue). The Toronto Maple Leafs followed suit in 1958-59, while the Detroit Red Wings were the last team to switch from natural leather gloves to colored gloves (in 1967-68).

June 1958 President Campbell called a meeting with all equipment manufacturers and announced that equipment must gain approval from the NHL's Rules Committee. The League had concerns that equipment manufacturers were designing equipment that, while intended to protect players, was also inflicting injury to opposing players.

1959 The Rules Committee mandated that sponge rubber covering on elbow pads must be at least half an inch in thickness.

November 1959 Montreal Canadiens star Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion suffered a serious injury in a collision with Boston Bruins' defenseman Doug Mohns. Geoffrion suffered a severed tendon in the back of his leg after being clipped by Mohns' skate. Shortly after Geoffrion's injury, former Montreal Canadiens' defenseman Ken Reardon, who was an executive with the Canadiens at the time, approached CCM with a request. "Couldn't we build some sort of protection that goes right around the leg and protects players from flying skates?"

1970

Circa 1961

CCM developed a **new shin “guard”** made of 12 ply-nylon; the same material used in shrapnel vests during the Korean War. The shin guard was lightweight so that it didn’t interfere with a player’s skating ability and provided the protection that Reardon was seeking for NHL players by having material that wrapped around a player’s leg to protect against skate cuts. The front of the pad was also made of a new plastic which resisted puncture.

1961

CCM introduced the **Prolite skate with the “Pro Guard”**—a hard plastic cover on the heel of the skate blade. The new skate featured “armor plate nylon” rather than the bronze mesh that was formerly employed. For the first time, tendon protection became a focal point of the boot. The issue of durability was addressed with the addition of a tough, premium grade kangaroo leather.

1976

Fiberglass blade introduced on the hockey stick.

1979

Helmets became mandatory in the League for any player signing his first contract after June 1, 1979. Craig MacTavish was the last NHLer to play without a helmet, retiring in 1996-97.

1980

The Winnipeg Jets became the first NHL team to test a **new pant system** at their training camp. The “Cooperall” was a new pant system that was up to 40 percent lighter than traditional hockey pants and socks. The new pant featured an inner girdle which covered from the top of the knee to the middle of the rib cage and an outer shell made of a woven nylon. CCM had developed a similar new pant system that would be worn by some members of the Hartford Whalers during the 1981-82 and 1982-83 seasons. The Philadelphia Flyers wore the Cooperall pant for those same two seasons. The new pant system was designed to make the player as cool and comfortable as possible while still offering maximum protection. The new pant system lasted only two years in the NHL due to the fact that the material tended to rip more easily and, when a player fell on the ice, the nylon material tended to propel him rapidly.

1980



1981 NHL approved the use of **aluminum shaft sticks** in League play.

1988 **Cuffs on gloves** that are as much as two inches shorter began to be manufactured. The so-called "short-cuff" gloves, which cut-off just past the wrist instead of reaching several inches up the forearm, are used by the majority of NHL players by the early 1990s. Players felt that the smaller glove increased their ability to stick-handle and shoot. Because the short cuff gloves exposed the wrist to potential injury, players began to attach specially-molded plastic to the front part of their elbow pads to reach down to protect the lower part of the forearm. Manufacturers also began at this time to produce longer elbow pads.

1994 **Composite sticks** made their first appearance in the NHL.

2007 The NHL and Reebok unveil a new uniform system at the 55th NHL All-Star Game in Dallas, designed to enhance player performance and increase protection and safety. The **Rbk EDGE Uniform System** features four fabrics which will help keep players lighter, drier and better protected while also maintaining durability. Worn by NHL players for the first time in the 55th NHL All-Star Game in Dallas, it will be introduced to all 30 NHL teams for the 2007-08 regular season.



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Sidney Crosby, Pittsburgh Penguins

photo: Alain Desjean



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