



By Will Gadd

In-line hockey (you can't say Rollerblade because it's a trademark and some lawyer will have a fit) does bear some similarities to ice hockey. For example, if you hit another player, he or she will probably hit you back. You wear lots of padding, use a stick, and fall down frequently. The difference is that when you fall on ice, you tend to hit, then slide. But when skin meets asphalt, it acts like cheese on a grater and leaves ugly red skid marks. Try to throw a standard hockey stop on in-lines and the skates often do unpredictable things that generally end with the skater flying through the air, with the above mentioned bloody results.

Something like 12 percent of the U.S. — and growing — is covered with asphalt or concrete, while only 2 percent of the population lives near ice that freezes for more than 24 hours straight. Hence the explosion in the popularity of in-line hockey, which actually isn't so painful if you have the right gear.

The right gear makes an in-line player look like an extra out of *Mad Max*, but does wonders in reducing serious cases of road rash. A good set of knee/shin pads, hockey shorts designed for in-line skating, and a helmet are the bare essentials to protect bare skin. Gloves and elbow pads are also nice: a good in-line hockey player learns to spin in the air like a drunken Baryshnikov and land on his or her pads rather than on more sensitive anatomy.

With proper gear, any level, hard piece of urban terrain becomes an ideal hockey environment. Church or mall parking lots (after hours) and even basement parking arcades are all excellent venues. A hard plastic ball works better than a puck (several companies do make in-line pucks, but they generally don't work well). Most in-liners play with a no-contact rule similar to basketball; minor jostling is okay, but anything more is asking for a deliberate high-stick to the cranium. Nets made for street hockey are a nice addition, but a couple of rocks about three feet apart make an adequate goal.

Strategy? Put the ball in the goal, avoid falling on your head, and be careful skating fast toward anything that doesn't move quickly, including other players. Nothing is more embarrassing than smacking into your own teammate while chasing a ball. And hey, if you get really good you could always try out for the IHL, the in-line equivalent of the NHL. The next in-line Gretzky is just waiting to be discovered.

Will Gadd grew up in Canada, but was too thin to play hockey. He got into rock climbing instead. Now that he's learned to eat his asparagus, he's giving the game another try.

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