

Kickers

By Jon O'haire

No matter how talented a carpenter is, with bad tools he'll be hard pressed to produce a good product. The same holds true for a keeper. A good keeper with bad pads has a hard job, made harder.

How does the job get easier? Simple logic says good equipment helps. Somewhere along the line, though, logic has become expensive when it comes to pads. Outfitting a keeper can be expensive and money isn't always something that's available by the buckets.

It is possible for a keeper to be well kitted without spending a fortune, just as it's possible for a keeper to spend a ton of money and be poorly protected. Part of being well kitted is assessing what you have and what you need based on the requirements of the level you play, the surface you play on, your size, your aspirations, your gender and finally your budget.

In the modern game, the typical list for the well kitted keeper includes a helmet with face mask, chest protector, pelvic protection, padded shorts, hand protection, legguards and kickers. At the international level, a keeper can easily spend over US,2000 on equipment. By the same token, you don't have to spend US,2000 to have a set of useful equipment.

Very rarely does a keeper come to the goals without some kit to draw on. In assessing what a keeper inherits, questions that come to mind are does it fit? does it protect? and will it do what I want it to do? If the answer is yes, then the job is easy, take care of what you've got and it should take care of you. If the answer is no, then you've got to prioritise making do with what you've got, with what you really need to replace.

In this tip and the equipment tips to come, I've put together my priority list. Under the item of equipment there follows a description of what to look for, how it should fit and how to take care of it.

Kickers

There are still a variety of different kickers available on the market and in various stages of circulation from old equipment bags. If there's one piece of equipment that should be replaced immediately, if not sooner, whether it be inherited or recently purchased, it's bad kickers.

Bad kickers can be, but are not limited to, bamboo and leather square toe kickers, worn foam kickers, kickers that are too big, or kickers that are too small. First off, kickers determine the techniques available to you to clear the ball. Modern hockey requires a keeper to be able to first time clear a shot. In square toe kickers, that is a technique that is among other things, extremely painful, if not virtually impossible.

If you've inherited foam kickers the tests for finding out if they're up to snuff are fairly quick and simple. If kickers are too big, you won't be able to fasten the straps tight enough to secure them on your feet. If they're close, you might be able to punch extra holes in the straps to make them fit. That might keep them on your feet for a

while, but the biggest problem with kickers that are too big is that they're difficult to move in. The foot doesn't make actual contact with the field, the kicker does. As a result, you end up slipping or tripping.

When kickers are too small, the problem is usually equally obvious. Toes hang out, or the kicker doesn't sit back far enough to cover the heel. There don't seem to be enough holes in the straps on the large end. Once again, you might be able to work around it by punching extra holes, but after time and practice, you'll find that you end up getting hit in all the places that are exposed with kickers that are too small.

The problems with worn kickers are equally painful. When high-density foam kickers break down, they lose their rebound and protective qualities. They're about as useful as over-sized slippers and should be put out to pasture. Just because kickers are old and ugly, doesn't mean they have to be replaced. A well struck shot will usually sting no matter how new, or good your kickers are. There's a difference between sting and collapsing in a heap in pain when the ball contacts your arch. The rebound qualities of the kicker are far more important. As long as rebound off the kicker is fairly proportional to the speed of the shot coming in, there's life in the kicker.

If after you've assessed what you have in your kit bag and finding it lacking, or you just want new kickers there's a lot out there, good and bad. We'll start with the good (OBO of course).

OBO kickers, whether it be Robo, Cloud 9 or Yahoo, are all similarly shaped. For a young keeper that's important because he'll be playing in a kicker that's shaped the same way as he grows as a person and a keeper. The kicker is designed with a tongue that locks the leg guard in place and keeps it from twisting. In the Robo line, the straps that keep the kicker down on the foot are built into the kicker. This keeps them from sliding back on the foot, a problem with kickers that have external straps.

When selecting a kicker, durability can be a consideration. How long a kicker will last depends on how often you play, the surface you play on and the velocity of shots you face. OBO kickers are designed to wear well. The foam has a coating that stands up to abrasive surfaces like sand-filled pitches far better than the average foam kicker. The kickers also have bonded rubbing strips for the bottom of the kicker where most contact comes. This adds life to the kicker without sacrificing rebound. If there's a complaint about OBO's, it's that they last too long.

High rebound kickers use foam that is less dense than normal kickers. They offer great rebound, but over time and use, the foam compacts, losing elasticity and rebound. If you play a lot and don't have the resources to replace your kickers, high rebound kickers probably aren't your best choice. On the other hand, if you want a kicker that puts a shot back as quick as it comes in, they're the way to go.

No matter what kickers you select, they become a useless accessory if your foot won't stay in them. This is a common problem with kickers that use external, web nylon straps. Toe straps frequently slip and the front of your foot is exposed. There are a number of ways to deal with this. You can tape the toe strap to the strap that goes around the ball of the foot. Don't use so much tape that you lose contact surface with the bottom of your shoe. You can also merge the strap that goes around the ball of the foot with the toe strap so that they cross under the foot. Finally, the way some kickers fit, you might not need the toe strap at all.

Care of kickers is fairly straightforward. Kickers can get dirty and do need to be cleaned even on artificial surfaces and especially on natural surfaces. A plastic scrub brush and a mild household detergent are usually all you need to put a sparkle back into the foam bits of your kit. Avoid cleansers that are abrasive or caustic. On the maintenance front, two tools are very handy, an awl and needle-nose pliers. An awl is great for punching holes in straps when your feet seem to fit just between the pre-punched holes of the kicker. Needle-nose pliers are good for crimping the roller part of buckles that always seem to come off when you tighten your straps. They're also quite useful when you first slot the internal straps through Robo kickers.

There is a breaking in period for high-density foam kickers. Like any new piece of new equipment, you should use them in training before you break them out in a game. When breaking in kickers, I'll usually wear two pair of socks for the first three or four training sessions. Foam can be stiff and will rub all the sensitive areas around your ankles. An extra pair of socks will eliminate most of that chafing.

Most kickers are shipped flat from the manufacturer. To help shape the kicker, I'll tighten the straps as far as they'll go. Beating the kicker with a stick or wrapping them snugly in an elastic bandage are also good ways to speed the break in process. Know that bottom line, all kickers usually need to break in are three good training sessions with lots of shots.

Getting the best out of your Kit

By Rachel Durdin

Kickers

Seven steps to getting the best rebound out of your kickers

1. Start in the attacking position with feet slightly apart, knees bent slightly, body weight forward, hands in a position to save high balls i.e. above waist line and finally raised comfortably on the balls of your feet.
2. Attack the ball (meet the ball slightly in front of your body.)
3. Rotate the ankle so that the instep of the foot meets the ball. (Like a soccer short pass.)
4. Contact with the ball should be made in the centre of the kicker to get maximum projection.
5. Follow through with the foot to ensure a solid clearance. (This is like a putter swing, you need to have the same amount of back swing and follow through).
6. Contact with the ball should be made with force. This does not mean that you have to kick the living daylight out of the ball as the most important thing is the timing of the contact with the ball.
7. Finally you need to keep your head over the ball to ensure flat rebounding.

Threading Kicker Straps

Kicker Straps can be a nightmare to thread first time - Simon Barnett, OBO's owner, showed some of the OBO team that it really easy if you knew how to do it. After we showed a lack of faith in his ability, Simon threaded all four straps in 2 minutes, which was pretty amazing. His tips are as follows - the first three are the most important.

Simon Barnett's Tips:

- Pre bend the straps to the shape you want them in.

- Make sure holes at the top of the kickers are a decent size, cutting them to enlarge if necessary.
- Cut the straps to a pointed end like > rather than the / which we are phasing out, but this may take a while.
- Put a small amount of dishwashing liquid on the tip of the strap. Don't get any on your fingers or you will not be able to pull the straps through.
- If you are still having problems, try gently forcing the end of a spoon or fork down the holes to force them further open.

Right Hand Protector

If your Right Hand Protector is not performing as well as you had hoped, try tightening the straps. If you can not hang on to your stick and move it in all different directions because you are worried about the grip you have on the hand protector, this will be why. A small change makes a huge difference, both to the feel & to the performance of the product.

Equipment: Part 1

By Jon O'haire

One of the most important parts of any keeper's game is his (or her) equipment. Good equipment, effectively used, is one of the cornerstones of goalkeeping. When a keeper chooses his equipment, he's choosing a style of play. That's an important choice. Unfortunately, that's not a choice that all keepers get to make for themselves. Many keepers are provided with kit through their clubs or schools. Other keepers are responsible for providing their own equipment. Whether you or your team is responsible for your equipment, money can be an issue. You can't spend what you don't have. Having said that, there are ways to get the most out of the kit you do have and a number of things to consider when selecting new equipment.

In the next two tips, we'll cover equipment. We'll give you an idea of what to look for, how it should fit and how to take care of it. In part one, we'll cover general things to think about when selecting and caring for equipment, and specifically, equipment bags, kicker and leg guards. Part two will cover pants, upper body protection, hand protectors, sticks, helmets, shoes and everything else.

Before we start, there are a number of things to consider when selecting equipment. First and foremost is the level you play at. Above all else, goalkeeping equipment must be protective. If you're getting hurt with what you're using, new equipment is more than a good idea. Identifying the level you play at isn't just a matter of age. Playing level is impacted by the skill and size of your teammates and opposition, as well as the surface you play. Twelve year old club girls on grass don't need the same gear as 25 year old International men on turf. That much is obvious. The point where a 16-17 year old moves on to senior elite pads isn't always so easy to identify. If you are consistently being exposed to dangerous shots, especially lifted shots that don't allow you time to react, adequate protection is essential. Adequate equipment should not leave a keeper consistently bruised and battered.

Equipment can be an expensive investment. You want to make sure you get the most out of your investment. If you're still growing physically, it's a good idea to wait before spending a lot of money on pads that might only fit you for a season. By the

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same token, hold off on making a substantial investment in kit if you're not sure that you'll be playing in two seasons. We talked about the importance of having kit that's appropriate to the level you play at. It's also important to consider the level you ultimately want to play at. Junior level pads have different playing qualities than more elite type pads, especially leg guards and kickers. If your aspiration is to play at the highest level, playing with and getting used to that gear is important. It doesn't make a lot of sense to spend time on a tricycle if you want to ride a bike.

When selecting equipment, do your homework. The internet is a great resource for information on equipment. Many manufacturers have websites that illustrate their products. Make sure what those websites illustrate. Nice photos and catchy slogans are great, but technical information is important. What materials are pads constructed of? How are they made? What is a company's history? Who is using their gear? How are their products serviced (i.e. where are their local agents, what are their return policies, what kind of customer support do they offer?)? These are all important things to consider when investing in equipment.

Taking proper care of equipment is as important as selecting the right gear. Care and maintenance of your equipment is a fairly broad subject and it can cover everything from "de-funking" (odor reduction) to unforeseen pre-game buckle replacement. It's a matter of taking care of the things you can take care of well before a match or training session and having the resources to take care of the unexpected mishaps that hockey brings.

First off, let's start with some of the things required to keep your kit in good shape. One of the most important things is the ability to read. OBO products (and some other makes) come with product information sheets. They're there for a reason. Not only do they give you cool schematic pictures of your pads, they also give you some technical information about the equipment and often, instructions on how to properly use and take care of it. Make sure you have it and read it if at all possible. If you're using a club or school's kit, that's not always possible, but companies like OBO do have that information online. In addition, check the Product Tips and Q&A section of the OBO website for OBO products, there is a ton of useful information there.

As I mentioned, it's important that you have the resources to handle equipment emergencies. I keep a small tool bag with my kit. You don't need to lug a whole tool box with you, but a few items are all you need for most repairs. I have screw drivers (Phillips and regular head), regular and needle nose pliers, scissors and an adjustable wrench (in a pinch it doubles as a hammer) that I keep in portable tool kit. I also keep what's called a leatherman (a multi purpose tool that has files, an awl/leather punch, knife blades, screw drivers, and pliers all on one tool) in addition to several heavy needles and threads. I'll keep an assortment of extra helmet hardware (screws and bolts), as well as spare kicker straps and buckles and duct and athletic tape in the tool kit. I have a small plastic box (like Tupperware) that I keep the tools and materials in and keep it in my equipment bag.

I also have a bigger repair kit that I keep at home. Other items to keep on hand are Shoe Goo or some other kind of plastic/rubber/foam adhesive. Plastic scrub brushes and mild household cleansers are also strongly recommended. Get in the habit of checking your equipment regularly after you've played or trained. It's a lot easier to mend/replace something that's breaking after training as opposed to trying to repair it when it's broken during warm up or worse, during a match. As we deal with specific items of equipment, we'll cover the tools and techniques used for their respective

care and maintenance.

Equipment Bag



Wheelie bag



Body bag

This is where all kit starts and ends up. While not a huge thing (figuratively speaking), a good equipment bag is quite useful. When you think about storing and transporting your kit, you start to realize all the deficiencies in your equipment bag if it isn't up to the task. Gear can be heavy, especially when it's wet. In addition, there is a lot of gear. The last thing you want is a bag that is too small, or isn't sturdy enough to carry all of your kit.

When investing in a bag, there are things to check for. Is the bag waterproof? That's important not only because hockey is a game that's played in the rain or on watered turfs, but because often after a match, your kit is wet with moisture and/or sweat. Sometimes keeping moisture in (on a very temporary basis) is as important as keeping moisture out. Plastic bags are also good for keeping wet stuff from dry stuff.

Side and end pockets are useful. Not only do they help keep things separate, like especially wet, disgusting items from the only semi-damp disgusting items, but they allow you keeper to organize your kit. The more organized my bag is, the easier it is to find things and the less likely I am to forget things when I pack. If I'm going away for a weekend tournament, I'll throw a couple of shirt hangers and newspaper in my bag. Newspaper is excellent for drying out wet shoes. Hangers are good for airing and drying pants and upper body pads.

On the sturdy front, check the stitching on the bag. There should be double-stitching or rivets where straps are attached. Make sure the material the bag is made of is strong enough to carry the load and stress of carrying your equipment. It's also a good idea to see where the stress of the bag is when you carry it fully loaded. If you've got to walk a fair distance with your bag, the last thing you want is to lose the circulation to your arm as you're carrying the bag. Equipment bags with wheels are a welcome development. It's not a bad idea to test drive an equipment bag. Wheels aren't too handy if the handle of the bag is positioned so that your bag is crashing into the back of your legs as you pull it.

Kickers



Robo kickers



Cloud 9 kickers



Yahoo kickers

There are still a variety of different kickers available on the market and in various stages of circulation. If there's one piece of equipment that should be replaced immediately, if not sooner, whether it is inherited or recently purchased, it's bad kickers. Bad kickers can be, but are not limited to, bamboo and leather square toe kickers (yes, they're still out there), worn foam kickers, kickers that are too big, or kickers that are too small.

First off, kickers determine the techniques available to you to clear the ball. Modern hockey requires a keeper to be able to first time clear a shot. In square toe kickers, that is a technique that is among other things, extremely painful, if not virtually impossible. It's like trying to drill a hole with a wrench, square toe kickers are simply not the right tool.

If you've inherited kickers, whatever the type or brand, make sure they fit. If kickers are too big, you won't be able to fasten the straps tight enough to secure them on your feet. If they're close, you might be able to punch extra holes in the straps to make them fit. That might keep them on your feet for a while, but the biggest problem with kickers that are too big is that they're difficult to move in. The foot doesn't make actual contact with the field, the kickers does. As a result, you end up slipping or tripping.

When kickers are too small, the problem is usually equally obvious. Toes hang out, or the kicker doesn't sit back far enough to cover the heel. There don't seem to be enough holes in the straps on the large end at the back of the kicker or you can't pull the buckle tight enough to get the kicker to sit right. Once again, you might be able to work around it by punching extra holes, but after time and practice, you'll find that you end up getting hit in all the places that are exposed with kickers that are too small.

The problems with worn kickers are equally painful. When high-density foam kickers break down, they lose their rebound and protective qualities. The same applies to worn square toe kickers. Both are about as useful as over-sized slippers and should be put out to pasture. Just because kickers are old and ugly, doesn't mean they have to be replaced. A well struck shot will sometimes sting no matter how new, or good your kickers are. There's a difference between sting and collapsing in a heap in pain when the ball contacts your instep. The rebound qualities of the kicker are far more important. As long as rebound off the kicker is fairly proportional to the speed of the shot coming in, there's life in the kicker.

If after you've assessed what you have in your kit bag and finding it lacking, or you just want new kickers there's a lot out there, good and bad. OBO kickers, whether they are Robos, Cloud 9s or Yahoos, are all similarly shaped. For a young keeper

that's important because he'll be playing in a kicker that's shaped the same way as he grows as a person and a keeper. The kicker is designed with a tongue that locks the leg guard in place and keeps it from twisting. In the Robo line, the straps that keep the kicker down on the foot are built into the kicker. This keeps them from sliding back on the foot, sometimes a problem with kickers that have external straps.

When selecting a kicker, durability can be a consideration. How long a kicker will last depends on how often you play, the surface you play on, and the velocity of shots you face. OBO kickers are designed to wear well. The foam has a coating that stands up to abrasive surfaces like sand-filled pitches far better than the average foam kicker. The kickers also have bonded rubbing strips for the bottom of the kicker where most contact comes. This adds life to the kicker without sacrificing rebound. If there's a complaint about OBOs, it's that they last too long.

High rebound kickers use foam that is less dense than normal kickers. They offer great rebound, but over time and use, the foam compacts, losing elasticity and rebound. If you play a lot and don't have the resources to replace your kickers, high rebound kickers probably aren't your best choice. On the other hand, if you want a kicker that puts a shot back as quick as it comes in, they're the way to go.

No matter what kickers you select, they become a useless accessory if your foot won't stay in them. This is a common problem with kickers that use external, web nylon straps. Toe straps frequently slip and the front of your foot is exposed. There are a number of ways to deal with this. You can tape the toe strap (front) to the strap that goes around the ball of the foot (rear). Don't use so much tape that you lose contact surface with the bottom of your shoe. You can also merge the strap that goes around the ball of the foot with the toe strap so that they cross under the foot. Finally, the way some kickers fit, you might not need the toe strap at all.

Care of kickers is fairly straightforward. Kickers can get dirty and do need to be cleaned even on artificial surfaces and especially on natural surfaces. A plastic scrub brush and a mild household detergent are usually all you need to put a sparkle back into the foam bits of your kit. Avoid cleansers that are abrasive or caustic. On the maintenance front, two tools are very handy, an awl and needle-nose pliers. An awl is great for punching holes in straps when your feet seem to fit just between the pre-punched holes. Needle-nose pliers are good for crimping the roller part of buckles that always seem to come off when you tighten your straps. They're also quite useful when you first slot the internal straps through kickers.

There is a breaking in period for high-density foam kickers. Like any new piece of new equipment, you should use them in training before you break them out in a game. When breaking in kickers, I'll usually wear two pair of socks for the first three or four training sessions. Foam can be stiff and will rub all the sensitive areas around your ankles. An extra pair of socks will eliminate most of that chafing.

Most kickers are shipped flat from the manufacturer. To help shape the kicker, tighten the straps as far as they'll go. Beating the kicker with a stick or wrapping them snugly in an elastic bandage are also good ways to speed the break in process. Know that bottom line, all kickers usually need to break in are three good training sessions with lots of shots.

There's a wide range of price to kickers and leg guards. If you are buying kickers, it is best to buy the matching leg guards. You should plan on spending about half your

goalkeeping budget on leg guards and kickers. If there's a place to go cheap on equipment, this isn't the place to do it. Nothing will limit the development of a keeper more than bad pads and kickers.

Leg guards



Robo SP legguards

Robo legguards

Leg guards and kickers are the most important pieces of equipment for a keeper. Watch the game for any length of time and you realize that easily more than half the plays on a ball made by the keeper are with those two pieces of equipment. Leg guards and kickers aren't important solely for the frequency that they're used. Equally important is how they're used and that's determined by the type of leg guards and kickers a keeper uses.

Leg guards came in two types before 1985, cricket pads and skeleton (or continental) leg guards. Cricket pads were taken directly from that sport. They're made of canvas and stuffed with cloth scraps. They're designed more as incidental protection, rather than primary protection (you don't try to get hit with the ball in cricket). Skeleton leg guards are made of canvas or leather and have bamboo cane ribs along the front and canvas with cloth scraps behind the canes for protection. They are designed for a person intending to be hit by a ball, but they have their own deficiencies. A well-struck shot will break bamboo.

Cricket pads, skeleton leg guards, cloth and bamboo square toe kickers are all still available and used, especially at the junior and lower club level. They can provide adequate protection with severe technique limitations. I would not honestly encourage anyone to buy them, but they are usable, especially skeleton leg guards. Why? Because when a keeper, club or school is faced with having to buy a full set of goalkeeping equipment, costs can be a major consideration. Some items might need to wait. If you have to make a decision between replacing kickers or skeleton leg guards, there isn't a decision in my mind. You replace the kickers.

If you've inherited a set of cricket pads or skeleton leg guards, realize full well that if someone hits a ball on your leg pads really hard, you're going to feel it. If you play at a level where that doesn't happen, then you're all right. If injury or discomfort is something you're looking to avoid, foam shin guards and/or kneepads worn under your leg guards are a good idea. With the advent of instep kicking, many keepers find the inside of their leg is a vulnerable area. You can similarly turn foam shin guards to

cover the calf area if you're getting hit with shots there. Make sure you really need the additional padding. Many keepers who have worn shin guards with other pads will use them when they get newer leg guards out of habit. Most leg guards that have wrap around protection will not sit properly on the leg with shin guards stuffed under them.

None of these problems exist with good high-density foam leg guards. High-density foam leg guards come in a variety of styles, sizes and densities from a number of manufacturers. Make sure the foam thickness of the pad corresponds to the level you play at. The harder the shot, the thicker the foam needs to be. When buying leg guards, it's usually best to buy kickers at the same time. If you are using kickers and leg guards from two different manufacturers, make sure they are compatible. OBO kickers can be used with other leg guards, but one of their best features is the tongue that locks them in to place with OBO leg guards. Other kickers have different designs around the ankles that require modification if they're to be used with other brands of leg guards.

When you buy leg guards, the surface you play on does have an impact. Whether it is grass, sand-filled turf, dry turf or water-based turf, the surface you play and train on will affect the life of your leg guards. Playing style will also affect pad life. If you're a keeper that slides a lot on sand-filled pitches, the life span of your pads is likely to be much shorter than the upright keeper who plays on a watered turf.

There are a number of things to take in to consideration when it comes to leg guards. First, make sure they fit. Leg guards should protect from above the kicker to above the knee. Leg guards that are too short leave the keeper's knees exposed, especially as the keeper moves. Pads that are too big are cumbersome and often painful to wear. They dig into the top of the kicker and the straps often rub directly behind the knee, chafing and digging into your leg. Leg guards should protect the inside of the calf. Just as the instep is a primary clearing surface, the inside of the leg is a frequent saving surface.

Depending on the type of leg guards you wear, maintenance will take different forms. Leather skeleton pads need to be left out to dry after use. Leather straps will crack or rot quickly if you don't properly air dry your pads. In addition, metal buckles will rust. You should replace broken canes in skeleton pads. Obviously foam leg guards don't have these problems. You should check straps periodically. Most foam leg guards now have nylon straps with plastic buckles. Occasionally the stitching around the buckles will wear and they should be re-stitched before you have them go in the game. Most manufacturers sell replacement straps and buckles for their pads, but if you're in a bind many sporting goods or camping stores sell backpacking supplies (plastic buckles and nylon strap) that can be used.

It's a good idea to clean your pads periodically. Skeleton pads can be scrubbed down with a wet hand brush. Foam pads can be cleaned using a mild household cleanser and a scrub brush. Even if you play on watered turf and your pads seem clean, washing and rinsing them on a regular basis is a good idea. Foam can absorb sweat and you can easily get a nice coat of bacterial slime going if you don't clean your pads. In addition to smelling, that bacteria can cause a nasty rash. When drying foam equipment, always air dry it and avoid keeping it in direct sunlight or extreme heat for extended periods of time. The inside of a car can reach 100 degrees centigrade in the summer, hot enough to damage foam.

Equipment: Part 2

By Jon O'haire

Last tip we made a start to covering goalkeeper equipment. We talked about what to look for, how to take care of it and specifically looked at equipment bags, kickers and leg guards. In this second part, we'll look at helmets, hand protection, body pads, pants and assorted other items.

Helmets/Masks



Robo CK Helmet

Starting from the top, helmets or masks are one of the most important pieces of equipment a keeper can wear. Too often, though, fashion rather than function become the criteria for selecting head protection. The most important factor when selecting a helmet or mask is whether the item can provide adequate protection for the level you play at. In other words, can it stand up to a shot in the face that you're likely to see (or not see)? Unfortunately most keepers don't consider the possibility until it's too late. We talked about a number of factors to consider last tip in selecting equipment, cost, durability and the level you play at. These factors are very relevant when it comes to head protection.

One of the most basic types of head protection is an ice hockey helmet with wire cage attachments. They are among the most affordable types of protection and also among the most durable. When selecting a helmet, make sure it fits your head. Most helmets are adjustable within a range of head sizes. Most manufacturers use hat sizes to calculate the range that a helmet will fit. It helps to know that information when you go to buy your helmet. When properly fitted, a helmet shouldn't move when you shake your head. Many helmets are available with wire cages already affixed. That's usually the best way to make sure that a cage will fit your particular helmet. If you are buying a cage separately, make sure that it's compatible with your helmet. Cages from manufacturers different than your helmet may not fit and that can be a big problem when you get hit. Also make sure the cage is properly fitted to your face. If there is a chin cup, your chin should rest in it. At no time, should the wire cage be able to come in to direct contact with your face.

Masks with built in cages are becoming more and more popular. They are available in a number in a number of different styles from a variety of manufacturers. If you're looking at this type of protection, make sure you pick a mask that's compatible with the shots you're facing. I've seen extremes at both ends; junior keepers playing with OUS carbon/Kevlar masks where shots are rarely hit in the air and on the other side, elite level keepers playing in the equivalent of glorified street hockey masks.

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As a rule of thumb, the harder the shot you face, the sturdier you want your mask to be. You need to consider the techniques you're using and the conditions you play in. If you're lying down on corners or playing on the ground, your reactions are limited. The chances of getting hit in the face in situations you can't control increase. Many of the plastic masks are subject to extreme heat or cold. Combine extreme conditions with extreme impact and some plastics will shatter. Carbon/Kevlar masks may be more expensive, but they are also more durable. At the end of the day, you get what you pay for and you don't want to be cheap when it comes to your head.

Masks do come in sizes also. When ordering make sure you get the right size. Most masks have a chin cup to keep the mask away from your face. Make sure your chin fits securely in it. Once again, if your chin can slip, the mask will make direct contact with your face and you can get badly cut if you're hit in the head with a shot. Many masks also come with extra padding to help customize the fit. Take the time to properly fit the mask when you get it. As with a helmet, the mask should not move when you shake your head if it's properly fitted.

Throat protectors are more than a good idea; they can be the difference between a wake up call and a tracheotomy. Throat protectors come in two types, a collar type protector or a plastic hanging type. One thing to consider with the hanging type is whether it will flip up when you slide or go down. If the protector is flipping up, it's not protecting your throat. The clear plastic hanging type used by ice hockey keepers can be tied to prevent it from flipping up.

A few things to consider when selecting a helmet or mask, color can make a difference, especially if you play in hot, sunny conditions. Dark colors will absorb heat, making them hotter to play in. Similarly, if you play in hot conditions, look for a helmet or mask that is well ventilated. Many keepers have taken to painted masks or helmets. Most masks or helmets must be painted with special paints. The process can be detailed and expensive and if not done properly, the wrong paint can ruin a good helmet by compromising the integrity of the materials the helmet is made. The same can happen when you drill holes in a helmet to adjust the fit of a cage.

Helmet/mask care is fairly straightforward if done regularly. Make sure screws and bolts are tight. The best time to check is immediately after training or games. Keep a screwdriver handy. A towel is also a good idea. If you play on wet turf or sweat a lot, helmets and masks can get wet and some hardware will rust. Wipe your helmet dry after use. It's also a good idea to periodically wash and rinse your helmet with mild soap or detergent periodically to prevent cheese like aromas.

If you wear a helmet, make sure you attach the chinstrap. If you wear a mask, make sure the straps are secured. Helmets and masks can be loose enough to allow you to talk, but they shouldn't be so loose that they come flying off when you slide. If the wire cage on your mask or helmet gets dented, replace it. While the dent may not be serious, the welds to the cage can be compromised with a dent. If you get hit again in the same place, you risk serious injury.

Hand Protectors/Gloves



Robo Hand Protectors

Hand protection used to be gloves and they were your one and only option. The rules of the game called for keepers to wear protection on their hands that had five "separate and independent fingers". Those rules often allowed for those independent fingers to get broken by equally independent and hard shots. Mercifully, those days are gone and we've seen the development of hand protectors.

Depending on your needs, your budget or what's available, gloves can be adequate protection, particularly at the junior level. At a minimum, gloves should protect the hands, wrists and lower forearms. Basic features of the left hand (or hand-stopping) glove are a well-padded palm, in addition to wrist and forearm protection. The right hand (or stick) glove should have padded fingers, a sturdy thumb shell, as well as wrist and forearm protection.

Gloves should be big enough to cover the lower forearm, yet not be so big that they slip off. A keeper should be able to comfortably handle his stick in one hand. Some keepers prefer gloves for indoor hockey specifically for their ability to stick handle. If you do wear gloves, make sure they do what they're supposed to; protect your hands. If your hands are getting stung making saves on hard raised shots, it's time to replace them.

Hand protectors not only offer superior protection to gloves, they offer a keeper a wider range of skills to play aerial shots much the same way high density foam kickers allow keepers a wider range of skills to play shots on the ground. With hand protectors, a keeper can use the pace of a shot to deflect the ball away from him and into space. While a keeper still can't bat a ball, the rules of the game now allow him to intentionally deflect a ball out of play over the end line or crossbar.



Like kickers and leg guards, the primary difference between most models of hand protectors is the density of the foam. The harder the shots you face, the thicker and denser you want the foam. If your hands are getting stung by aerial shots, it's time to upgrade your hand protectors.

The shape of the right hand protector can also affect the way you play. Early models of some types of right hand protectors had a round hand. This often made it difficult to get your stick flat on stick tackles, especially to the reverse side. Others have padding at an angle that is better suited to playing with your hands back, closer to your body as opposed to in front of your body. It makes sense to buy hand protectors that are suited to your style of play.

At the senior men's level, hand protectors are pretty much a one-size-fits-all affair, but the distinction isn't so clear for boys, girls and women. Similar to gloves, hand protectors should protect the hands and lower forearms. This is especially critical for younger keepers who may have smaller equipment. Fingers should never be exposed on the right hand protector. If you wear arm pads, the hand protectors should overlap on the lower forearms. Your wrist should not be exposed. Even if you don't wear arm pads, your wrist and lower forearms should be protected. Make sure the finger loops on the right hand protector allow you to hold a stick with a confident grip. The strap on the left hand protector should be snug enough that a well-paced shot won't knock the hand protector off.

Care of hand protectors is similar to leg guard and kickers. You can easily clean them with soap and water. Check straps periodically. If you do wear gloves, make sure you keep them dry. Leather will crack if it's not properly dried. Balled up newspaper or a hand held hair dryer are good for drying out soggy gloves.

Upper Body Protection



Robo Body Armour

Upper body protection takes a number of different forms and what's best for you will depend on your style of play and what you're comfortable playing in. The two main types of protection are body pads with attached arm protection and stand alone chest pads.

Stand alone chest protectors are usually preferred by keepers who want lightweight protection that allows for open movement or junior players who don't face a lot of hard, raised shots. When choosing a chest pad, make sure the pad fits. The chest pad should cover the front of the shoulders and extend from below the throat to just below the abdomen. If the pad is too small, the keeper will have open areas exposed as they move. When the pad is too big, movement is usually restricted. Make sure straps are properly adjusted. The pad should be loose enough to allow for full range of motion, yet be secure enough that the pad doesn't twist or shift when you move.

If you do wear a chest pad, elbow pads are highly recommended, especially for advanced play. Sliding on abrasive surfaces like artificial surfaces can leave nasty turf burns. In addition, consider the materials chest protectors and elbow pads are made from. Look for water resistant coverings, padding and plastic as materials, particularly if you play on water based turfs. Some keepers who wear chest pads will wear separate arm pads that cover the inside of the arms as well as the elbows. If you go the arm pad route, make sure the arm pads work with your chest pad. The biggest thing to avoid is a set of arm pads that cover the same area as your chest pad. If they do, the pads overlap and the chest and arm pads tend to bunch up and restrict movement.

The second style of upper body protection is a body pad (or body armor). Body armor was first developed for ice hockey keepers and as mentioned earlier is a one-piece pad that covers the chest and arms. Because they are designed as a one-piece pad you don't get the bunching you do with separate arm and chest pads. Body armor provides excellent protection for the chest, the inside of the arms and the elbows. Having said that some body armor is more restrictive than others and may need to be modified depending on the level of protection and mobility you require.



OBO body armor is designed to provide a full range of motion for the movements of a field hockey keeper. Some keepers prefer ice hockey body armor that offers more protection, though sometimes at the cost of mobility. Ice hockey body armor can be modified to increase range of motion, particularly in the shoulders. Often times it's simply a matter of getting used to and the pads breaking in, both of which happen in time. If you haven't used body armor before, whether it is OBO or ice hockey, it can be bulky, it can be hot and it might feel restrictive. The same can be said for bruises and internal bleeding. Swelling is bulky and restrictive and it also hurts. I'll take body armor.

If at all possible, try body armor on before you buy it. As mentioned earlier, body armor will become more flexible as it breaks in, but no amount of breaking in will help if the elbow and shoulder joints of the body armor don't correspond to your body. There are usually a number of points of adjustment to body armor. Take the time to adjust straps to your body and needs. These straps may slip over time. Check them periodically. You may need to stitch or tape problem straps. Make sure protruding buckles face out so they don't dig in to you when you slide.

Contrary to popular myth, upper body equipment can and should be washed. It's best to hand wash them with soap or a mild detergent. Allow plenty of time for them to air dry. Don't ever try to dry them in a machine dryer. Plastic buckles on body pads may break. If they do, you can often find similar buckles in camping/backpack shops or on old luggage you might have

Lower Body Protection



Senior Smarty Pants Robo Hot Pants



Senior Groin Guard Senior Pelvic Guard

For the most part, gone are the thrilling days of yesteryear where lower body protection was sweatpants and a bruise the size of a grapefruit was a badge of courage. Padded pants are more than a good idea at every level of play. Once again, depending on your budget or what's available to you, there are a number of affordable and adequate options. In recent years, field hockey goalkeeping pants have been developed and the OBO pants are excellent. Regular ice hockey or ice hockey goalkeeper pants are also reasonable alternatives.

Goalkeeping fundamentals start with the keeper trying to get his or her body behind the ball when making a save. That requires confidence and confidence comes from having good protection. At the junior level, danger may not always come from raised shots as much as it may come from bad bounces on grass fields. The pace of shots is usually such that the keeper only needs pants with protection on the front of the thighs and pants with foam padding are usually enough.

Once shots start to get harder and a keeper is using more advanced techniques, needs change. A keeper is exposed to hard, raised shots in training and games and is frequently making contact with the ground while developing skills like slide tackling and logging on corners. Getting hit once with poor equipment is bad enough, to risk it on a regular basis is asking more than should be expected of a keeper.

At advanced levels of play, pants should have padding in the more exposed areas that is as hard as a hockey ball. Those areas include the front and inside of the thighs, and the front and outside of the hips. As mentioned earlier, OBO makes two types of field hockey goalkeeper pants that are designed to specifically cover those areas. They are the Smarty Pants and Hot Pants. Smarty Pants are designed for keepers who favor a loose pant that will not hinder movement. The padded panels of the pants move with the keeper, especially on the area at the front of the hips. The Hot Pants are a snugger pant that is made of a stretch material. The main part of the pant is like a girdle. The padding sits directly on the leg and the stretch material allows the pant to move with the keeper. An outer shell is worn over the girdle to protect the pants and provides additional protection. Both Smarty Pants and Hot Pants are available with a durable outer that can be replaced.

Many keepers also wear ice hockey pants that come in styles similar to the OBO pants. These pants also come in a girdle style that should be worn with an outer shell, or a baggier pant that is a shell with built in protection. The major problem with these pants is that they are designed for ice hockey. Ice hockey players need protection on the outside of the thighs and hips for checking. They don't want protection on the inside of the thighs as that restricts skating. The padding on the outside of the thighs is redundant for field hockey and the inside of the thigh is an area where field hockey keepers frequently get hit so the drawbacks are a problem.

Ice hockey goalkeeper pants provide excellent protection for many of the areas that the field hockey keeper is exposed, but it comes at the cost of mobility. An ice hockey keeper is usually playing within a three yard area of a much smaller goal while a keeper may have to play anywhere in a sixteen yard circle while defending a goal that is almost four times as big. Having said that, ice hockey pants are better than nothing.

Whatever type of pant you use, fit is critical. Pants need to be big enough that they don't restrict movement. By the same token, you don't want them so big that they shift when you move or prevent your other equipment from sitting properly. As a note, the Smarty Pants are designed to be big and baggy. Many keepers who are used to a snugger pant may be put off. Smarty Pants are not designed to be flattering to the figure. They are designed for function. Pants are usually held up with an adjustable belt or suspenders. Make sure they are adjusted to keep the pant from slipping down, yet still allow you to breathe.

Pants can and should be cleaned. The pads can be removed from the Smarty Pants and the shell washed. The inner pads can be removed and hand washed with soap and air-dried. The shell can be machine washed in the gentle cycle. The same holds true for the Hot Pants and most girdle type ice hockey pants. Ice hockey pants with pads built into the shell should generally be hand washed only. Periodically check the outer shell of your pants. If you've got holes in the shell, or it's starting to rip, replace it.

Pelvic protection should be worn in addition to pants. Whether it be a protective cup for boys or men or a pelvic protector for girls or women, the consequences of injuries without them makes them invaluable, end of sermon.

Sticks



OBO Goalie Stick

A keeper doesn't use a stick for the same thing a field player does. He doesn't need to hit a ball 70 miles-an-hour. He needs to stop the 70 mile-an-hour shot. For that reason, weight and stopping surface are important.

Goalkeeper sticks are becoming increasingly popular. Made from wood or composite materials, they are light and stiff and have an extended toe that provides a large stopping surface. Longer sticks allow a keeper maximum reach when making stick tackles and as long as the stick length doesn't interfere with your ability to make plays in your normal position, they are a good idea.

Some goalkeeper sticks have a shorter, flat handle. They are designed to provide a flat stopping surface for those keepers who lie down on penalty corners. While they do provide a more predictable stopping surface, their shorter length is a drawback when making stick tackles, especially when you need maximum extension. Goalkeeper sticks with especially big heads present a different problem in that you may not be able to get your stick flat when making reverse stick tackles.

Many keepers prefer traditional sticks and they are perfectly fine for goalkeeping. Indoor sticks or lightweight field hockey sticks are fine for goalkeepers as long as they allow you to perform the skills necessary for the position.

Whatever stick you use, make sure the grip allows you to comfortably and adequately hold the stick. If you sweat a lot, tennis racquet gauze tape can help prevent your stick from slipping. Athletic tape near the head of the stick is also a good idea, especially if you're a post banger. It's a good idea to have a second stick in your bag and to have at least played with it a couple of times in the event that your stick does break in a match.

Shoes



Shoes are important. All the equipment in the world is pretty useless if you can't get from point A to point B without falling on your face. Having the right footwear is a matter of knowing the surface you're playing on and the conditions you'll be playing in. These can change during the course of the match and it's critical to be prepared.

Different surfaces require different shoes. Natural surfaces like grass require multi-cleat shoes, but depending on the length of the grass and weather conditions, a shoe with a longer cleat may be needed for adequate footing. There are a variety of artificial surfaces, water and sand based, that require different footwear depending on conditions and your playing style. Athletic shoes with flat, rubber soles are good for dry, artificial surfaces and some sand based pitches. A multi-cleat shoe with lots of short nubs or studs is good for wet, water-based turfs. Shoes with longer studs may be needed depending on how heavily watered the turf is or how slick the surface is, particularly with new pitches.

When you go to buy shoes for hockey, take your kickers with you. Some shoes are better suited to wearing under kickers, especially when it comes to kicker straps and stud alignment. Ideally, you want a shoe that will allow the straps to sit directly on the sole and between the studs to provide maximum traction and prevent the straps from slipping. Barring that, look for shoes that will allow the straps to sit as close to the sole as possible. You can cut a slot for straps with shoes that have short rubber studs using a utility knife but you don't want to do have to do radical surgery on your boots if there's an easier choice.

Use your warm up to test which footwear will be best for your playing conditions. As noted, conditions can change during a match. Dry fields can be naturally watered with rain, wet turfs can dry out. Make sure you have shoe options to meet your playing conditions, especially as they might change. Also be aware of how you play. Keepers who play up on the balls of their feet may not want a shoe with long studs as they're likely to get stuck making a save. On the other hand, keepers who play more flat-footed will require a longer stud. Know how you play and what's best for you.

Shoes do need to be taken care of. They need to be aired out and dried properly, especially when wet. Balled up newspaper is good for absorbing moisture. If you play on wet turf, look for shoes made of water resistant materials. Leather shoes can be treated to better deal with water. Avoid extreme heat when drying shoes.