



## **Do's and Don'ts: Picking the Right Equipment Part I.**

One of the most unique and, for many, attractive aspects of goaltending is the gear. Goalies at all levels are known to be extremely particular about their gear and spend an inordinate amount of time stressing themselves out over the particular specifications and style of their new equipment. Like most things that goaltenders do, "regular" people usually don't get it, and it is frequently added to the long list of things that make goalies the quirkiest members of most teams. But this obsession over gear, I would argue, is rational. As any parent or player knows, goalie equipment is expensive. When you invest in a new pair of pads or chest protector, you are hoping that the purchase will be able to last. If there is a problem or particular aspect of your gear you don't like that makes the goalie uncomfortable or too often results in unfortunate goals, you won't be happy with the purchase. In this article I'll go through the different pieces of equipment and what to consider before buying. Getting new equipment is one of the most exciting parts of playing goal, and, if done correctly, can help to improve your game.

Leg pads are usually the most expensive single piece of equipment that goalies wear. With that in mind, it is important to do plenty of research before buying that brand new, top of the line custom set. If you are at a point in your playing career where you are playing in front of college/junior/prep scouts when your performance really matters, custom leg pads can be a worthwhile purchase. Almost everything can be customized now, from sizes and color schemes to the internal materials and pad breaks. Unless you are playing at a high level (college/junior/prep school), don't stress out about these. The more you play, the more your preferences develop and the more confidently you can make these changes. Most modifications are minor and they are most beneficial to the goalies that are wearing their pads almost everyday. If you are just starting out playing goalie, playing only a few times a week, or a youth player playing at a lower level than A or B travel, opt for a set that is not top of the line. They are significantly cheaper and will still get the job done. If you have played goal for a few years, play more than 2 or 3 times a week, and are hoping to play at a high level in the future, it may be worthwhile to spend a little more money for top tier, non-custom "stock" pads. These can be bought online or in store and don't offer the same kind of customization but offer the same level of performance as custom pads. Additionally, because of their higher price point, they are crafted with higher quality craftsmanship and materials and have the ability to last longer without succumbing to detrimental wear-and-tear than cheaper pads, meaning you can wear the same set more than two or even three seasons. I would recommend,

however, if you are still growing, to buy them a size up to grow into them. As long as your knee is rested on the knee block and isn't hitting the ice either above or below, the pad fits. If possible, get sized at a local equipment store before committing to a new pair.

Every goalie has a different preference when it comes to their glove. Like pads, there are a lot of different types of modifications that you can make with custom gloves. Again, these preferences evolve the more you play and are not worth stressing about before you know exactly what you prefer. Break angles, palm types, and webbing material give gloves a different feel, but every glove is manufactured and engineered to catch pucks and will work if given the chance to do so. The best advice I can give when purchasing a new glove is to try them on. You will know almost immediately after putting it on your hand whether or not it feels right. If you can open and close it a few times without feeling uncomfortable, it will more likely than not be effective for you. In terms of quality, much of the same advice for pads can be said for gloves. If you play a lot, especially against players who can really shoot the puck, invest in quality. There is nothing worse than getting a "stinger" off your palm after a big slap shot on a cold morning. Lastly, be patient with your new glove. I know a lot of goalies who get a new glove and are frustrated after their first few skates that they aren't catching as much as they would like. New gloves can be difficult to adjust to, but make sure you are doing extra work off the ice to comfortably break it in. Modern gloves are remarkably adjustable, so don't be afraid to try to tighten or loosen different straps until you find what works best for you.

Blockers, for the most part, are more or less the same. They are the least customizable of any of the three pieces of equipment we have discussed so far and it is really hard to go wrong. My biggest suggestion, however, would be to get gloves and blockers in pairs if possible. Brands manufacture their gloves and blockers to be similar weights, making it easier for you to maintain balance in your hands when in your stance. This isn't essential, however, especially for older goalies. I have personally used different brand gloves and blockers with success and no issues.

If I were to suggest one piece of equipment to spend the extra money on, it would be skates. Skates are the only piece of equipment that are involved in every save you make and a good pair of skates can really help your game. Throughout my career, I was always stunned at how much quicker I found myself getting from point to point when I put on a new pair of skates. Additionally, more expensive skates tend to be more comfortable than cheaper models. There are few things more annoying than putting on skates that hurt your feet or aren't sized correctly. If your feet are still growing or you aren't willing to spend the money on the top of the line, the second tier are an excellent option, especially if you are at the age where your feet are growing quickly. Much like new shoes, find a brand you like that fits your feet correctly and stick with it.

The second piece of equipment I would suggest spending the extra money on would be your mask. Your head is worth protecting and, when you are getting hard

pieces of galvanized rubber fired at you at high speeds, a good mask can make the difference between a brief, mild ringing in your ears and serious injury. I've made the mistake of wearing a mask that wasn't up to snuff for the level I was playing and I urge you not to make the same error. Concussions, from pucks or players going hard to the net, are a real risk and, while never fully avoidable, a good mask can limit the possibility of sustaining one.

Chest protectors and pants are difficult to properly size and it can be a pain to find the right ones. Different brands offer different levels of bulk and sit differently on the body, making them pieces of equipment that are subject to a lot of preference. Some goalies like them bigger so they take up more room, some players like them smaller and more mobile. More than any other piece of equipment, chest protectors and pants should be tried on before buying. I also strongly suggest that, even if not purchasing together, that they are tried on together. Because of their overlap in the belly area, they interact with each other more than any other two pieces of equipment. If the two aren't particularly compatible with each other, they can be annoying to wear together or can leave you unprotected where they meet. Therefore, it is important that you determine how you want to wear them, either tucking the chest piece into the pants or not, whether or not to use suspenders or to tie the two together. Like all other preferences, the more you play, the more you learn what you like.

Like blockers, for the most part, sticks are more or less the same, with some exceptions. Newer composite sticks are remarkably light, but I'm not sure they offer an increased performance or are durable enough to justify their remarkably high price. I would recommend foam core sticks for goalies at any level. I used them from bantams through NCAA level hockey and never had any problems. Things like curve and paddle size, like many things we have discussed, are based on preference and will evolve throughout your time playing. The more you play, the more confidently you can make changes.

As far as accessories go, there are a few that all goalies need. A jock/jill are, for obvious reasons, essential. No matter what anyone says, you should never step on the ice without one. I know a lot of goalies, myself included, that wear the same one for the majority of their career. The less you notice it, the better it is. If it is comfortable and protects you, stick with it. Always make sure there is something that protects your neck/collarbone area. Whether it is a collar, plastic mask dangler, or both, a chest protector or padded shirt is not enough. Knees are another area that too frequently go unprotected. Whether you use the wraps that come with most pads or individual knee guards, protecting your knees will save you from a lot of problems, both immediately and in the future. Like jocks/jills, the same set can be worn for years as long as they are comfortable and are effective. I also suggest all goalies find a sweat wicking base layer for your upper body, legs, and feet. I see some goalies that opt not to wear anything on their bare skin before putting equipment on. This can be both unhealthy and dangerous.

Always make sure you wear a CLEAN layer of clothing between your equipment and skin.

I also want to touch briefly on style. If you spend any time online looking at goalie gear, you will come across numerous forums, pages, and profiles talking about goalies that have the best style of gear. Do not stress out about this too much. Wear what is most comfortable for you and you will have success. I do think, however, that there is something to be said about being comfortable in how you look on the ice. Goaltending is a mental position. If having good goalie style gives you more confidence, I do think it has the ability to help your game. Under no circumstances, however, should you sacrifice comfort or performance for what looks good. If you can find that happy medium, however, go for it. Everyone likes looking good, and if you can feel comfortable doing it, even better.

Finally, don't be afraid to change something if it isn't working for you. I've frequently stressed out about small modifications I've made to new gear or had buyers remorse after deciding to switch to a new brand. Not once have I been disappointed with my decision and I know very few goalies who have. With that said, if you find something you like, stick with it! Commit to a brand you have had success with and you will have less adjusting to do whenever you get new gear. Getting new gear can be stressful, but rarely will you find something that inhibits you that you can't fix by a little bit of tweaking. All of the gear made now is remarkably engineered to do two things: protect you and efficiently stop pucks. Do your research, get properly sized, and enjoy your new gear!