

Rolling into Entertainment

The ancestors of the Finns used animal bones 5,000 years ago to move across lakes and rivers to reach fishing and hunting grounds. By the 14th century, the Dutch were using ice skates to travel and transport goods along their canals. The king of England saw the ice skates and imported them to England. He then held the first ice-skating competition in 1763. The skates were limited to frozen water.

In 1735, John Joseph Merlin of Belgium came up with a faster way to move on land and decided to show off his invention at a large masquerade party. This new invention is known as the in-line roller skates. He showed off the skates by rolling around the room playing his violin.

There was a slight problem in that the skates did not handle curves, and Merlin could not command his direction on the skates. He also had not practiced stopping. This led to him skating into a mirror valued at \$100,000 in today's currency. Merlin was wounded by the broken pieces of mirror, and the violin broke. However, he demonstrated that movement on land by skates was possible.

In 1819 Monsieur Petitbled patented a four-wheel in-line roller skate, and in 1818, a ballet was performed on roller skates. Then in 1823, Robert John Tyers developed a five-wheel skate that also had difficulty with curves. In the 1840s, in a German beer hall in Berlin called Corse Halle, barmaids served drinks to patrons on roller skates.

The first usable four-wheel skate that could manage curves was introduced by James Plimpton in 1863. Then in 1884, the pinball-bearing skates were introduced, and skating started to become popular. The Coliseum in Chicago opened for public roller skating, followed in 1908 by Madison Square Gardens.

Leo Seltzer saw an opportunity in 1935 with the popularity of skating and introduced Roller Derby at the Coliseum in Chicago. The new sport was one of the first to allow women to compete in contact sports on co-ed teams. Today, women's Roller Derbys are international. In 1971, Melanie Safka wrote the song "Brand New Key," which made a few generations remember the old roller-skate keys they used back then, and Jim Croce's "Roller Derby Queen" in 1973 made the top music charts. Cher, Beyonce and others produced music videos with or about roller skates.

The skates have improved in the 20th century with the development of plastic skates and the modern in-line skates developed by the Olsen brothers, who were looking for a way to practice ice hockey in summer months. In 2016, the sale of in-line skates reached almost 20 million before sales dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic. But since then, sales have increased 300%.