

Short-track speedskaters don new skinsuits to ward against injury

VANCOUVER - A skin-tight suit that wards off slashes from a blade sounds like something Batman might have developed to fight the baddies in Gotham City.

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Olivier Jean skates during short-track speed skating practice at Pacific Coliseum.

Canada's short-track speedskaters will pull on just such a suit to ward off a maiming menace on the ice: their skates.

The team has a new high-tech skinsuit officials hope will give skaters better protection against accidental slices, even better than the Kevlar-blended outfits they used to wear.

Some skaters showed off the flashy new red, white and black duds during training sessions Wednesday and yesterday. They wear nothing underneath but their underwear.

"We tested them out all year so that we'd come with a skinsuit that fit us perfectly and we'd have no trouble with, and as soon as we put them on we felt great," said Tania Vicent of Laval, Que.

Valerie Maltais, of La Baie, Que., said the new design with bars across the chest evoked another kind of superhero: "We look like the X-Men a little."

Two of Canada's top skaters know something about the dangers that their razor-sharp blades can inflict when they slide off course at top speeds.

François-Louis Tremblay of Montreal, and Olivier Jean of Lachenaie, Que., have had to nurse serious cuts to their ankles. Jean was sidelined for most of the 2007 season because of a slash that affected some of his tendons.

"Olivier's case was the most troubling, because he was wearing Kevlar in the area where he was cut," said team leader Yves Hamelin. "The protection wasn't resistant to the impact. He suffered a serious cut, and he had to retrain for an entire year."

Even more dramatic was the gory accident that nearly ended the career of American up-and-comer J.R. Celski in competition last September. Fans watched in horror as a pool of blood formed on the ice after the 18-year-old cut his own thigh to the bone. He was rushed into surgery, and has spent the last four months trying to retrain for the Games.

The Canadian team wasn't taking any chances, so they began working with the Quebec Industrial Research Centre (CRIQ) and their outfitter Descente to design a new skinsuit. Hamelin was interested in a new fibre that some of the European skaters were using called **Dyneema**.

"We tested it in the lab and we realized that it was far superior," said Hamelin. "We asked our supplier to develop our race suit using this material instead of the old one."

Skating federation regulations specify certain areas of the body must be covered with extra protection, such as spots near the major arteries. But the team decided to go whole hog, and cover the entire body with the new fibre.

The team has now gone through four of five prototypes, finding some of the earlier versions a bit too stiff in competition. The outfit is still evolving, but the athletes say they feel better in the new skinsuit.

"As an elite athlete, you don't want to have any doubts about your safety when you jump on the ice. When I wore the old suit, I was less confident," said Jean.