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STORY

BANDING ABOUT FOR HOCKEY SKILLS

By James Turner

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He's in a band apart.

Charleswood's Bob Unger, 42, an ice-hockey goaltender since his youth, has come up with an invention to help fellow goalies, especially developing ones, get the most out of their game.

Simply put, Unger has invented what's known as the Goalie Band – a long piece of reinforced plastic which clamps on firmly to the side posts of a hockey net.

Its purpose is to prevent goalies from retreating into the spaghetti, while at the same time encouraging confidence to stand up against shooters.

"I find that a lot of goalies are backing into their nets too much. That's the original reason I developed this thing, I got frustrated with them backing up all the time," Unger said.

Alternately, Unger's invention also works the opposite way as well – positioning the band in front of a goalie while huddled in the net, they can practice turning away shots while it screens their vision.

"Older goalies really like working on their screen shots," Unger said.

The Assiniboine Park AA Rangers minor bantam hockey team, which won the city championship this year, used Unger's invention to focus more on training their two goaltenders.

According to team manager Bob Peters, a Charleswood resident, one of the notable stats from the year was his team's leading goals-against average, which was a slim 1.92. He said the other closest team was 2.60.

While Peters said he didn't want to take away from the efforts of all his team members who worked hard to play defensive hockey, using the band paid off in spades for the team's two alternating goaltenders.

"Our goalies played with a lot more confidence... at the beginning of the year, I'm not so sure we were there," Peters said.

"It played a big part," he added.

A former Western Hockey League net-minder himself (at one point in his career, NHL star and Carman native Ed Belfour was his backup), Unger said he knew he was onto something when no other than Russian pipe-pounding legend Vladislav Tretiak gave him kudos after seeing the prototype in Toronto two years ago.

"Once I impressed him – I knew I was onto something – because he's an old-school type of guy, he likes the 'hard work, army, work your butt off' with none of these gizmos and gadgets... He really liked it, he wanted to take one back to Russia," Unger beamed.

Unger has been manufacturing his saving invention entirely in Winnipeg and he claims to have sold nearly 50 of them to date.

He resisted suggestions he'd make more money by having it manufactured in Asia or China.

"I wanted to keep it Canadian," Unger said, adding the Manitoba Moose

have been using one at practice.

He's been attending trade shows in the U.S., which he said has netted him about 10 sales so far to teams as far away as San Jose, California, and Philadelphia.

While Unger says his venture is for the time being, a hobby, he said he hopes to one day be able to leave his job at Manitoba Telecom Services in order to work on building up the Goalie Band brand.

A January report in Hockey Business News magazine highlighting innovations in hockey featured a blurb about Unger – a fact he seemed chuffed about.

He said he's had some interest from companies like Nike and CCM about his invention but, at this stage, nothing's come of it.

A video of Unger's invention in action (featuring his son Jordan), can be seen at www.goalieband.net.

