Ice-Resurfacing Machine Encyclopedia Article

Ice-Resurfacing Machine

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Ice-Resurfacing Machine

The modern ice arena, professional hockey, and touring ice shows all owe their great success to an ungainly machine invented in 1949 by its namesake, Frank J. Zamboni. Born in Eureka, Utah, and raised in Idaho, Zamboni joined his brother George in Paramount, California, at the age of 21. The brothers built a refrigeration plant and began selling ice to local farmers and householders. When the home refrigerator began destroying the market for home-delivered ice, the Zambonis decided to build the Iceland Skating Rink across the street from the ice plant.

The rink business did well enough, but Frank Zamboni was bothered by the inefficiency of the nightly cleanup. Five men starting at 10 o'clock took as much as an hour and a half to scrape the old ice, clean off the scrapings and other debris, squeegee up the dirty water, and spread a fresh layer of water with a hose. Using a Jeep he had on hand, Zamboni began experimenting in 1942 with ways to mechanize the ice clean-up process. His fourth version, a huge and lumbering contraption completed in 1949, did the job--it scraped the ice, scooped up the debris, squeegeed the surface, and spread fresh water, all in the space of 15 minutes for the entire rink.

The Zamboni machine might have remained a local phenomenon if it had not been for Sonja Henie, who rented practice time at the Iceland Skating Rink for her touring troupe. As soon as she saw the ice machine in action, she ordered two Zambonis to take along on her national tour, publicity better than any paid sales force. Ice arena managers nationwide saw the machines and began ordering them, as did the Ice Capades. International exposure came in 1960 when Zambonis were used to clear the ice at the Squaw Valley Winter Olympics. Distributorships were soon set up in Switzerland and Japan, and a secondary plant opened in Ontario, Canada.

Today Zamboni machines are used in more than 30 countries. New machines are test-driven down the streets of Paramount to Iceland and make a few turns around the rink before shipping. The Zamboni company has no competitors in the United States, though a few exist in Canada and Europe. Zambonis are so ubiquitous in ice arenas, the term Zamboni has become almost generic for all ice-resurfacing machines.