

Capture and Use Olympic Fever

by Bob Bebber, Manager, Sun Microsystems Ice Centre

The Winter Olympic games of 2002 are only three months away (February 8 – 24). It's time to implement a strategy to capitalize on increased interest in all ice related sports.

With effective pre-planning you will be able to experience an enthusiastic re-birth of interest in ice sports that only occurs once every four years. We, as operators and owners, must be ready to embrace the new users who will be seeking opportunities to participate in the sports that captivate their minds. Scheduling programs that will meet the needs of our new guests is a must. Do not get caught up in long range scheduling that will restrict your ability to promote new programs and ultimately increase your revenue base.

First and foremost, public skating sessions must be made available during prime times and on a consistent basis. Your staff must be friendly, knowledgeable about all the programs you offer, and enthusiastic in answering questions that are repetitive. The questions that are asked the most (FAQ) should be addressed in readily available flyers, your arena brochure and your website. With the majority of customer inquiries being generated during public skating sessions, it is sound strategy to have your most knowledgeable and guest-friendly employees available to answer questions and register customers in your programs.

After an initial blitz of great public skating availability, your group lesson program should be ready to handle the new influx of skaters. Is your instructional staff well trained, prompt in reporting to the ice, friendly and dressed professionally in mandated rink attire with nametags? Is there a staff member present at the entrance to the ice where there is frequently concern and confusion for parents new to the program? It is extremely important to nurture your group lesson program to integrate these skaters into your various ongoing programs. They are your future!

Another program that generates a new revenue stream is instructional hockey for beginning adults. If you reserve time for a late night Hockey 101 class, you will be surprised at how successful this can be. Both men and women are more than willing to learn the basics of the game in a group session that includes structured drills to learn skills and a controlled scrimmage for fun. This will also translate into sales in your pro shop. Put together a complete 'beginner package' that is advertised with your program registration.

Is your arena ready for guests? Have a look at your housekeeping, we all overlook items that need attention and put them on the backburner. Now is the time to clean and shine up those areas. Even if you have an older arena there are ways to make it comfortable and attractive. Painting is a very inexpensive way to get a "new look" but it won't leave much of an impression unless all the nooks and crannies are scrubbed and polished. Nothing leaves a negative impression like dirty and scarred Plexiglas. Surely adding new tempered glass to your 2002 budget will have a dramatic impact on your facility and give visitors a clear look at your on-ice activities. **MAINTAIN CLEAN, STOCKED RESTROOMS.** Everyone wants a clean restroom – make it a priority!

Another area that is often neglected is the exterior of the arena. The parking lot should be maintained for cleanliness on a regular basis and well lit to ensure guest and staff safety.

The historic upward skating cycle associated with the Winter Olympics also translates into expanded advertising and sponsorship opportunities for community ice arenas. Do you have dasher board

space available? Do you have an advertising agreement in place for your ice resurfacer? If not, now is the time to pursue it!

Since most new skaters rent skates, it is very important to have enough rental skates on hand that are sharp, supportive enough, and have good laces. We all know that if skaters' first experiences are positive, they will be back. Be sure your skate rental staff know how a skate should fit and be laced.

Arenas that have little time for new programming would be wise to inform special interest groups (hockey associations, figure skating clubs, adult leagues, etc.) immediately of their plans to schedule time to capitalize on the Olympic interest. You will surely experience resistance from these groups that have had a foothold in your arena for many years. If you can convince them of the long-term benefit for their clubs and the arena, their cooperation and involvement will be invaluable.

The Winter Olympics offer us the opportunity to showcase ice sports and our facilities without any advertising costs. It is the managers and owners responsibility to embrace and take advantage of this wonderful opportunity.