

A Timely Exit: It's up to the adults to ensure skaters clear the ice in time for the resurfacer to do its job.

EDGE – SEPT/OCT 2005

by Al Tyldesley

Every experienced ice arena manager or resurfacer driver has considered the possibility of an accident on the ice. Those fears were realized a few years ago in a Canadian city, when a resurfacer driver was suspended after a Midget Trip-A hockey player who had not vacated the ice in time became pinned under the resurfacer. It was only a matter of time before such an incident would make the headlines.

In this case, the hockey team was on the ice doing its team cheer. The resurfacer had already completed one circuit around the boards when it started down the middle of the rink where the team's 19 players were huddled. The first player hit was the goalie, who lost his balance and knocked down other players. One player's leg was caught and he was dragged until players managed to free him, frightened but unhurt.

The incident of a Midget Triple-A team failing to leave the ice on time should not surprise anyone. And the older the players, the more demanding and bold they become. The attitude of "We will leave the ice when we are ready to leave" is a problem in far too many ice arenas. Resurfacer drivers are under pressure to resurface the ice in 10 minutes and to keep the ice rental schedule on time. You can announce the end of the session, blow the horn and yell at coaches, but skaters still remain on the ice after their time is up.

Don't blame it all

on the driver

One wonders where the adult supervision was in the above incident. Were the hockey coaches on the ice, or in the bench area? Were the game officials on the ice? Was the time allocated for this game expired? Was leaving the ice at the end of a session a recurring problem in this arena? Had employees complained about this problem to management? Had management taken any corrective steps to eliminate the problem?

Nothing can justify the ice resurfacer being on the ice when skaters are present, but we also know how frustrating it is for this problem to be dumped on the shoulders of the resurfacer driver.

The problem involves more than skaters being slow to leave the ice. Hockey coaches love to begin conditioning drills when the session ends. The three-dozen pucks used for practice never get picked up until practice is over. The coach often insists on giving last-minute instructions to the team while on the ice; why can't that be done in the locker room? The senior hockey group with a tied pick-up game will likely continue to play. The same senior group also might have a couple of players who just have to do a few post-game laps to cool down.

It is not unusual for figure skaters to leave the ice before realizing that they've left something behind and dash back onto the ice after the resurfacer has begun its work. Figure skating coaches (like hockey coaches) often insist on giving instructions on the ice — while the resurfacer waits.

Every ice arena suffers from this problem. What do you do about it?

Put it in writing,

then enforce it

The solution begins with written instructions on arena policies that every coach, program administrator or person in charge of on-ice programs receives at the start of each season. Every arena policy must be spelled out: acceptable and unacceptable behavior (both adults' and kids'), first aid, building evacuation, locker-room supervision and where parents are and are not allowed. These policies should include instructions on how ice time ends and how skaters leave the ice. Explain that pucks must be picked up and conditioning drills completed by the end of the session. The adult in charge should close the dasher board door after the last skater has left the ice.

The instructions should also include possible penalties for groups that do not follow arena rules — for example, ending the session one minute early for their next ice use or denial of ice use for continued infractions. When the parent organization, youth hockey team or figure skating club understands that there will be a penalty, they will do a better job of monitoring their groups. Proactive arena managers should attend each ice user group's organizational meeting at the start of each season to distribute arena rules, explain the chain of command, outline adults' and skaters' responsibilities and explain the penalties for breaking arena rules.

Some groups tend to be repeat rule breakers. Skaters coached by responsible adults usually respond responsibly. Skaters coached by irresponsible adults usually cause problems. Go after the adults in charge. Go after them early in the season, and in writing. Back up your employees. It is unfair to blame your resurfacers for groups that are late exiting the ice when you, the manager, do nothing to help solve the problem.

Be proactive. When a group is late leaving the ice more than once, the manager should be at the bench the next time that group skates. The manager should immediately address any infraction of arena rules. Set the rules and enforce them. The first time you penalize a group for not leaving the ice in a timely fashion, you will have angry skaters, parents and coaches, but you will have delivered the message that arena rules will be followed.

Al Tyldesley is past chair of ISI's Safety Committee and the iAIM Board of Regents.