

Small Town Ice Arenas of the Future

by Jack Vivian, Ph.D.

Can small towns afford an ice arena? The answer to that question is being played out in a town of 25,000 people in Wooster, OH. The Alice Noble Ice Arena (ANIA) opened in August of 2002 and is pioneering a programming concept that allows smaller communities to have ice, indoor soccer, lacrosse and an event center in the same venue on the same floor. A similar plan was successful 17 years ago and offers promising possibilities for smaller communities in the future.

Small Market Demographics

Ice arena experts and theorists have long dictated a population of 60,000 to 70,000 (some put the number at 80,000 to 100,000) to properly utilize and support a single-surface ice arena. This means most small communities in America would have little chance of having a permanent, year-round indoor ice facility. The same conclusions could be made for indoor soccer/lacrosse/field-house facilities. Together, however, they could provide full occupancy in the winter months, especially if they use the same venue.

The Concept

The author of this article began addressing the possibility of a multi-use sports facility in 1986 while managing an ice arena in Findley, OH, a town of 38,000 residents. The hockey and skating population could support three or four days per week of ice operation and the indoor soccer, lacrosse and flag football groups only utilized two or three days of field time. That's when putting an artificial turf rug on top of the ice became a consideration.

While this was not a new concept, the manner of accomplishing it makes the concept unique and affordable for community arenas. Professional soccer and arena football are played indoors on top of ice arena floors with a wooden floor placed over the ice and artificial turf installed on top of the wooden floor. The cost of the floor, the cost of labor to install the floor, and the rug and storage space required rule out this option for a small community-sized arena. That's when the idea of putting a turf rug on the ice and freezing the joints to the ice became an option. Now, with the invention of Velcro fastener strips, freezing the joints is no longer necessary.

The Right Pioneer for the Concept

The ANIA was the dream of Alice and Don Noble who met and fell in love in an ice arena and continued to skate each year on their anniversary until well in their 70s. They dreamed of building an arena to benefit the youth of their community. Don Noble, 20 years the CEO of Rubbermaid, President of the Noble Foundation and a great visionary, donated the \$5.5 million facility, named for his wife, to the local school system. Being an astute businessman, Don quickly realized the benefits of having a wide variety of programming. The programming model calls for ice skating and hockey Wednesday through Saturday each week, November to March, and soccer, lacrosse and flag football Sunday to Tuesday. Each activity has weekend dates for out-of-town league play. The turf is placed on the ice late Saturday night and taken off late Tuesday night. In the off-season, arena activities include hosting dry floor events, hockey spring leagues, learn-to-skate classes, and summer hockey, skating, lacrosse and soccer schools.

Conversion Process

Turf installation is accomplished with one forklift operator and five or six part-time employees in 90 to 120 minutes. Removal takes 45 to 60 minutes with the same size crew. Conversions are easier with the roll-back soccer dasher board goal sections designed and installed by Athletica/Crystaplex. By lifting two levers, the goal section rolls back from being regular dasher boards to being indoor soccer goals and back for indoor lacrosse or other field house activities. A forklift transports the turf onto the ice and the conversion crew rolls out the rug and fastens it with Velcro strips. During removal, the rugs are rolled, banded, taken off the ice and stored for reinstallation.

Win - Win

The benefits of this concept are obvious: increased participation by patrons of all ages; increased revenues from ice, field rentals and ancillary sources of income, especially during winter months; and better utilization of a valuable community asset. However, the most important benefit may be the ability to combine sufficient users to garner support for building and maintaining this unique facility in small-town America.