© 2007 Ice Skating Institute

Time to Resurface the Ice?

by Al Tyldesley, ISI Safety Committee Chair

A recent story in a Canadian newspaper reported that "The City of Saint-Hyacinthe, Que. has suspended one of its resurfacer drivers after a player on a Midget Triple-A hockey team that had not vacated the ice in time became pinned under the ice-clearing machine." Surprised? Never thought it would happen? What experienced arena manager or resurfacer driver hasn't thought about this type accident? We all know that this accident was a question of when and where it would happen, not if.

In this incident, the hockey team was on the ice doing their team cheer. The resurfacer had already done 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 in his pads. He lost his balance and knocked down the other players. One player's leg was caught and he was dragged until players managed to free him. The player was scared but unhurt.

The incident of a Midget Triple-A team failing to leave the ice on time should not surprise anyone. The older the players, the more demanding and bold they are. 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 stay on the ice after their time is up.

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 used up? Was leaving the ice at the end of a session a habitual 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 must give last minute instructions to the team while on the ice; I'm not sure why that can't be done in the locker room. The senior hockey group has a tied pick-up game and continues to play. The same senior group has one or two players who just have to do a few laps after the game to cool down.

It is not unusual for figure skaters to leave the ice, realize they've left an object on the dasher or over the glass, and dash back onto the ice after the resurfacer has begun its work. Figure skating pros (like hockey coaches) give instructions on the ice and refuse to leave the ice while the resurfacer waits. Every ice arena suffers from this problem. What do you do about it?

The solution to this problem begins with written instructions on arena policies that every coach, program administrator, or in-charge person involved with on-ice programs receives at the start of each season. Every arena policy on acceptable and unacceptable behavior and language (adults' and kids'), first aid, building evacuation, locker room supervision, and where parents are allowed and not allowed must be spelled out. Included in these policies are 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 in-charge adult will close the dasher board door after the last skater has left the ice.

The instructions should include possible penalties for groups that do not follow arena rules. These may include 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 or figure skating club, understands that there will be a penalty, they will do a better job of monitoring their groups. Proactive arena managers attend each ice user group's organizational meeting at the start of each season to distribute arena rules, explain the chain of command, explain adult responsibilities, explain 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 resurfacer driver for groups that are late getting off the ice when you, the manager, do nothing to help solve the problem. Be proactive. When a group is late getting off the ice more than once, the manager should be at the bench the next time that group skates. The manager should address any infraction of arena rules immediately. 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 a message that tells everybody that the arena rules will be followed.