

## Zamboni Means Clean Ice

In the beginning was the ice. And next the problem of keeping it clean. It had vexed every hockey player, coach, and promoter since the game's earliest days. In the 1880s, boys at St. Paul's School organized shoveling crews to clear their cherished pond. It was a common approach. The stakes were raised, however, with investments in enclosed buildings with artificial ice. Public skating, figure skating, and ice hockey required clear smooth surfaces to attract paying consumers.

The normal course of things was a conga line of humans pushing wide scrapers in a broad circle around the rink, dropping their shavings in a pile that could be removed quickly. Some crews walked. Others skated. The next step was pulling or pushing a large barrel (or two) that piped hot water down and across a wide trailing mop that swooshed along and magically turned the flat white surface to crystal gray (at least in the rinks wise enough to whiten a lower layer).

Rink managers tinkered with mechanical systems, especially to better plane the surface or to aggregate several functions. The Boston Arena management used a horse-drawn device ca. 1915. In the mid-1930s, Madison Square Garden management faced an opposite problem: how to quickly remove ice to make way for basketball, boxing, or other sports that used a wood or even dirt floor. Their engineers devised an electric-driven plow that worked like a maritime icebreaker. But these machines were basically supplemental, used for periodic planing and cleaning before a good spray, an operation that might take more than an hour.<sup>1</sup>

Consolidating all these functions remained elusive until the late 1940s, when one piece of machinery stamped its name brand on a whole product category—in this case ice-making. This machine is now an iconic hockey image: the boxy chassis; the ice flakes ascending on an endless tread that drops them into an open belly; the trailing, steamy, wet, rag that leaves a crystal clear surface; the driver usually standing, steering wheel in one hand, hot water wheel in another—cranking on, cranking off—sometimes in costume, in some rinks in top hat and tails, seemingly playing, always playing to the crowd.

We take the name for granted now. From a Utah native named Frank Zamboni. One company history explains that Frank and his brother moved to Paramount, California in the 1920s where they “opened a refrigeration plant... to make block ice for old-fashioned ice boxes and to cool local farmers’ fresh produce, such as carrots and rhubarbs.” The timing was not good, as Americans were starting to move from iceboxes to refrigerators. So Frank turned his attention toward skating ice. He opened *Iceland* in January 1940. Initially the rink had no roof. Zamboni’s son recalled, “*Iceland* was covered in canvas and then they’d pull it off at night and we’d all go skating.” One season of that was enough, and a roof went up.

Frank Zamboni, however, was an impatient perfectionist who wanted his public skating patrons to have smooth clear ice made periodically and quickly. He tried the tractor and

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Teale, “Ice Hockey,” *Popular Science Monthly*, February 1935, 49-53.

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trailer approach to no avail. Then, war's end brought an enormous surplus of military vehicles, including trucks and jeeps. Frank tinkered for several years until unveiling the Model A ice machine in May 1949. He needed a name on the all-important patent application. His first thought was "Paramount," but that name was not available. Thus, his second choice, his family name: Zamboni. Never did a second choice do so well as a brand name.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the success was luck and location. Sonja Henie, the world's most famous figure skater, used *Iceland* as a practice location for her traveling show. A shrewd entrepreneur in her own right, Henie quickly saw the revolutionary character of this machine. She ordered two to travel with her "Ice Review"—one for America and one for Europe. The Ice Capades soon followed suit. And so, in the early 1950s, it was ice shows, not hockey teams, driving demand for the now famous Zamboni.

Growth was slow but steady. Only a few per year until a breakout 14 in 1954. The company never scaled big. In 2009 it reported sales to be 200-250 custom-made machines per year, a number little changed for decades.<sup>3</sup>

What has changed is an expectation, despite competition. You go to a hockey rink. You expect to see a Zamboni.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Dregni, *Zamboni: The Coolest Machines on Ice*, (St. Paul Minnesota: Voyageur Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Dregni, *Zamboni*, 11, 14, 19-23, 29, 32, 126-127.