

# What your rental skates say about your business could make –or break – it

By *Connie Evener*

An inside industry source recently heard about the owners of a skating center who are so embarrassed by their 20-year-old rental skates that they won't even get close to their rental counter. Their rental skates look and smell so bad that they want nothing to do with them. They make their employees hand them out.

"You may have the best popcorn in the world. You may have the best décor. Your lights may be terrific. But good rental skates are the marquee item in any rink," said RC Sports Vice President Dale Hanson. "If a roller skating center doesn't have high quality skates, what's the point?"



**Sure Grip's 150 Speed**

"First impressions don't just count - sometimes they can make or break your rink or even discourage someone from skating in general," said Jim Ball, president of Sure-Grip International. "Rental skates say the same thing about your rink that a rental car says about a rental car company. If the car's got 100,000 miles on it, and someone smoked in it, there are ashes everywhere and holes in the upholstery, you're not going to want to rent it.

Easy for them to say - they're in the business of making and selling skates. But that's not the point, said Ball. "Rental skates are pretty much a break-even thing for manufacturers, anyway. That's not me wanting to sell rental skates. That's me wanting to sell skating itself."

For most people, their first experience skating is in a pair of rental skates. If it's a good experience, they come back - again and again and again. But if the skates look as though they've been "rode hard and put up wet," don't smell so good and the wheels don't roll free, it's not a good experience. They may write skating off for good, and go bowling or drive dodgem

cars or hit the movies instead.

Good rental skates sell skating, which means more skaters who go skating more often. And when people skate more often, they want to buy their own skates, which means more business for Sure-Grip International, RC Sports and Riedell Skates - and more revenue for skating center pro shops.

"So that's our concern - seeing skating continue to grow as a sport. We offer financing programs, incentives to buy from the distributors, to get those new rental skates into the rinks because we know the value," said Ball. "I bet a lot of people have bought certain models of cars because they've rented them and liked them. Car manufacturers probably don't make much on what they sell to Avis and Hertz, but what better advertisement could they get?"

And once your rental racks are giving off "new skate smell," it's important to follow the manufacturer's recommended maintenance schedule, noted Margie Kulak of Riedell Skates. Wheels should be rotated regularly, based on usage. "It's just like rotating the tires on your car," said Kulak. "They wear better, they wear evenly, and they last longer."

Every manufacturer provides guidelines for maintenance. "We recommend that every month or 150 hours of skating that they inspect, rotate, and or replace the toe stop and pivot insert and any cushions, the bushings and king pins," she said. Toe stops that aren't rotated, for instance, she said "may wear flat and when they wear unevenly, sometimes they get so bad that the bolts are exposed and then the skate floor gets scratched. I would imagine it could be a hazard if it's worn flat and comes up shorter on one side and makes it harder for the skater to stop."

The people who do the maintenance should be well-trained and keep meticulous records, because when someone falls at a rink and wants to lawyer up, they aren't going to admit they fell because of their own carelessness or negligence. They'll say the skate was defective.



**Riedell 1900 - Traditional Tan Suede**

If the center has professional detailed maintenance records, it can help prove the skates weren't defective. And, noted Ball, although all owners and operators hear it from their insurance carriers again and again, it bears repeating: Whenever there's even a suggestion of a liability issue, "You put the skates in the office and lock them away in case of any future litigation." That pair of skates, plus their maintenance records, could save a lot of money and headaches. "I think that you also risk the chance of more liability problems the older your skates get, and that's because you're doing more things to them to fix them up," said Ball.

Manufacturers work hard to keep pace with trends and to continue fine tuning their skates to make them more user friendly. Riedell's youth series, for instance, includes a boot with a Velcro fastener. "They're great

for kids because they're easy to get in and out of," said Kulak, noting that they still offer lace-ups in small sizes, too, because some operators think it's easier to replace laces than Velcro fasteners.

Pacer's New Generation and Extreme rentals now feature liners that can be removed and washed. "The liner has bacteria fighting agents and odor resisting agents in the material. It's not sprayed on, or dipped, it's in the material, therefore you can wash it without damaging those features," explained Hanson.

The Pacer Platinum Custom Rental continues to grow in popularity, said Hanson. "When I say custom, I mean custom. When a rink operator buys a minimum of 300 pair, they get to pick the color of the leather, the color of the trim, the color of the wheel, the color of the toe stop. They can even have their logo put on the side."

Sure-Grip's 140 suede rental is all leather, inside and out, said Ball. "We think the suede doesn't show dirt as much and the leather liner will wear better longer." Because they are all leather, Sure-Grip recommends storing them in an area with adequate ventilation so they can dry out between wearings. "I'd also have enough skates to rotate, so you're not always renting out the same pair of size 5s. They'd go out one side and you put them back on the other side," said Ball.

Many manufacturers offer incentives and interest-free financing on larger quantity purchases. They can also help you figure out how many skates you'll need in each size, and how long it'll take to recoup your investment. Depending on the number of skaters you see every week, adding a rental fee or increasing your current rental fee could mean those new rentals will pay for themselves within six months to a year.



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