

Arkansas roller skating center re-packages business as Family Entertainment Center

By Jan Mowle

When George Babineau re-opened an old roller rink in Caddo Valley, Ark. in September of 2007, he aimed to set the center apart as a family entertainment center every which way he could. He re-branded the rink under the Crystal Palace name, using a cookie-cutter floor plan used around the country.

"It is the most organized floor plan I've ever seen," he said. "The layout is huge so we wanted to bring in products and brand names that people know and trust."

He brought in Pepsi, Icee and Pizza Hut, which delivers to the skating center. To draw families, Babineau said he marketed the Roller Skating Association's RollerRoo everywhere, including at local schools. From this, he got a really good birthday party booking response.

Babineau, managing director of Intersport, LLC, the parent company that owns the real estate, added that he brightened the rink with a new LED light show. He also added a new sound system and re-coated the skating floor. Most importantly, he said, they totally overhauled all of their

rental skates.

"When families started coming into the rink, they saw we weren't just some 'po-dunk', old, plain rink," Babineau said. "They could tell with all the work we'd done that we were here to stay."

In order to emphasize the family entertainment center side of the business, he hired an entertainment operations director.

"The director is the heart and soul of the facility's entertainment," he added. "He is on the skate floor interacting with the kids and building up the hype for the next physical activity or game. He is the direct contact for our entertainment opportunities – we don't call them public skating sessions – we have entertainment opportunities. This individual is not just a person in a costume. He goes out and plays all of the games."

Babineau auditions all of his staff, often pulling candidates from a local community college. When he re-opened the skating center, he interviewed about 40 people. He had them work with three or four other people and come up with a dance to a song.

"Though they have to be able to teach someone to skate, they almost



With a 'huge' layout, brand names and unique offerings, The Crystal Palace in Caddo Valley, Arkansas is a community gem.

have to be a cheerleader," he continued. "Therefore, they like what they do and are here for the long haul."

Games are a large part of this family entertainment center's repertoire. Babineau said they created a lot of fast-paced, skills-based games and make them a part of the sessions. Skater favorites include red light/

green light and shoot the duck. They give out glow sticks as prizes, which boosts glow stick sales and can be used in the glow skate later in the session. Another favorite is dodge ball, which is played with material-covered balloons that go about 20 feet or so.

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Another thing that Babineau is really proud of is that they re-branded the learn-to-skate programs as Arkansas Skate University.

"It's something bigger than lessons," he said. "It's something they can belong to. Their skills are tested, they get a diploma from RollerRoo and a superskating medal from the RSA. Graduation is quite an event here."

The family entertainment center also offers speed skating lessons that are basically a learn-to-race program. In Speed Skate University, skaters take an RSA achievement test by beating the clock and RollerRoo hands out the medals. These classes are given at levels two and three as well.

The rink also has a Tiny Tot Fun Skate "learn-to-skate" session on Saturday mornings from 10:30 a.m. to noon. In addition, they offer a figure skate school on Saturdays from noon to 1 p.m.

Crystal Palace Skate Center also offers school skate nights that they call the "We do all the work rebate party." The center collects admission and skate rental at the door. They offer a staffed snack shack and a session programmer to entertain the students, families and friends with games. They donate a one dollar rebate to the school and teachers skate for free.

If the school reserves a minimum of three school parties in advance, RollerRoo goes to the school with pre-printed fliers one week before the

event to remind students of the upcoming school "FUNd-raising" event.

Private birthday parties can be arranged too. For \$250 per hour, the family can rent the building for a minimum of two hours for 50 guests. There is a \$10 charge for each additional guest with a maximum of 200 guests.

In addition to admission and skate rental, the cost covers a birthday party hostess to welcome, set up and serve the party in the snack bar area. It includes two hours of private roller skating entertainment with a session programmer to entertain the guests. Also included are all paper products, a balloon bouquet, one ice cream cup per guest, unlimited soft drink refills, a birthday t-shirt for the birthday child, and discount passes for all guests. For \$50 more, RollerRoo can be booked for a 20-minute game and photo session.

The family entertainment center has special events throughout the year as well, including Halloween and

Thanksgiving skates, midnight and country music jam skates and a New Year's all night skate.

They also have day care fun skates, a read and roll program and a roller derby boot camp. The latest roller derby boot camp took place in January and was eight hours long. Babineau said 45 girls from different teams came to learn skills.

"It wasn't about learning the rules," he said, "because they already

knew the rules. It was more of an intense drills and skills session. We're hoping the roller derby craze will evolve in our area."

Crystal Palace certainly has plenty to offer patrons in this county of about 26,000 people one hour south of Little Rock.

"They're coming to a little piece of Disneyland here," Babineau said, "and parents like that."



The new LED light show at the Crystal Palace draws "ooh"s and "aah"s.



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