

Teach them and they will come!

By Suzy Weinland

Want just one good reason to offer lessons at your roller skating center? Just ask 20-year rink operator Roberta Molaro: "Lessons give the skater something to do besides just *skate-down-to-the-end-and-turn-left-all-night!*" But read on and you'll discover MANY more good reasons to add lessons to your rink offerings.

Molaro and her husband, Donald, have owned and operated The Skatery, Inc. in Pillow, Pa., for the past 20 years (it has been in existence for 27 years). The 17,000 square foot facility is in a rural area "surrounded by corn fields," and caters mostly to middle-class, blue and white-collar families and children up through about age 14.

According to Molaro, they don't get many teens coming through the doors, but have a "great group of adults ages 50-88 who skate weekly... much more faithful than anyone else! A couple of them take private dance and figure lessons." And they get to practice their moves on a 995 square-foot (72'X150', with the corners cut out) maple floor laid in a log-cabin pattern.

Lessons have been a staple at The Skatery since the Molaros took it over. Roberta teaches beginners, and both Molaros teach dance and freestyle. They feel that lessons should be a priority for any rink, and offered on a regular basis. "If someone can't skate they're embarrassed to try and don't come back," said Roberta. "If I give them a class pass, they might start to build confidence and come again."

Roberta Molaro's philosophy is one the industry could adopt as a mantra: "People who have fun roller skating come back. If they take lessons, they have fun ... and come back."

Beginner Lessons

So, how do you go about starting up lessons? Molaro suggests starting with beginners. "They're the ones that will pay the bills over the long haul," she said. The Roller Skating Association International (RSA) sells a DVD and booklet set called Teaching Beginners the Fundamentals of Roller Skating, which Roberta and her husband put together for the RSA's 2006 IMPACT series.

"Guided by these, anyone with some grasp of skating could teach beginners – the floor guard, an adult skater, party hostess, a rink rat," offered Molaro. "They probably already know half the material, but just don't know how to teach it! They will often do it in exchange for skating time."

She suggested starting with a tiny tots program for 3- to 10-year-old pre-skaters. "We offer a free 15 minute class – geared for short attention spans – at our Saturday

afternoon session." She said parents are ecstatic when they see how pleased their child is with themselves. Guests booking a private party can pay an extra \$20 and receive this same 15-minute group lesson.

The size of these pre-skater sessions run anywhere from a few skaters to between 25 and 30 "beginners," which often include adults and seniors. On the RSA DVD, one of these "PiXiE" classes is shown.

"In the class, I teach them how to fall and get up, march and a small 'trick' each week," explained Molaro. "Then we play a game that reinforces one of the points learned. A trick can be as simple as a

like to have at least 6 and can easily handle 30. When the group is larger, I recruit Don to deal with the more experienced skaters. Each student should get a couple minutes of personal attention ... even if you just tell them that they're doing well."

Molaro suggested that to find a suitable professional for advanced classes or private lessons, contact the RSA for a listing of Society of Roller Skating Teachers members.

When looking at credentials, Molaro said to look for experience, but remember that "the World Champion can't always teach a beginner ... they're just too far from

another series of classes) right away, they get a \$5 discount. I prefer they pay up front. If they want to go by the week, each class is \$9. Almost everyone buys the card."

The Star Class has 5 levels. As students pass the simple test at each level, they earn a certificate and patch, which is awarded at The Skatery's Show/Achievement Night.

Series length

Molaro shared that the length of your class series is important. "You could plan on a strict 6 week series; however, with the fragmented families in our area, we find that doesn't work. We give them 4 months to get in their six classes." She shared that four weeks is not quite enough time to get them "hooked," and more than six weeks is too much of a commitment – and too much money.

She suggested pulling in more people "by discounting the fee if they pay up front. This way they are more likely to complete their series. We also take off about \$5 when they re-enlist as soon as they complete a card."

The results

While preparing for her presentation at the six RSA IMPACT seminars in '06, Molaro said she was shocked to learn that 90% of RSA rinks **DID NOT** offer any kind of lessons. Molaro concluded, "That means, if a rink is in the 10% that offers classes, they will attract people who want to learn!"

Here is proof of the impact the Molaro's lessons have on gaining new skaters: "I have beginners that pass 2-3 other rinks to come here for our classes! Two kids from Virginia vacationed at a nearby campground and took lessons here. The next summer, they skated frequently and told us that they'd begun skating regularly at their local rink. That operator has our lesson program to thank for that family's business!"

"One of our (Special Olympic)/Star Class students visited in-laws in Iowa and persuaded them to go skating at their local rink. They had a blast and now skate regularly ... Another operator can thank our class program! If every rink offered classes there would be a ripple effect and we would all benefit."

In the "very" rural area where The Skatery is located, the Molaro's teaching program grosses an average of \$5,000/year. That includes class and show income, but does not include equipment and skating outfits purchased, nor does it include admissions from parents or friends who pay to skate the session after the student's class, said Molaro. "Can't you just imagine what the income could be in a metropolitan area?!"



Want to fill your rentals and your rink? Offering lessons can do the trick.

'dip': stand up straight and without looking down, touch your knees.

"Afterward, the game would be 'Downtown.' I play that tune and when they hear the word 'down' they do the dip. When they hear 'town' they stand up and stretch their arms out to form a 'T'. The dip teaches them balance and control."

As for choosing beginner skates, Molaro said to stick with rentals, versus skates from toy or sports supply stores. "While feet are growing, they can use a rental that's just the right size. If they buy skates, Mom and Dad want to get something to 'grow into,' so it winds up being too long and hard to control. The ball of the foot should be right over the front axel. If the skate is a couple of sizes too large, the axel is way up front. It's like trying to drive a car from the back seat. Don says, "The bigger the skate... the bigger the blister!"

Moving Up

Once several skaters have mastered the basics and are ready to move up, Molaro said to add more advanced classes and eventually private lessons, if there is a need. "Our Star Class is 55 minutes and I

that level." She advises that the teacher "look the part."

"Avoid extreme dress, hair, etc; speak well (crude language is a no-no); have a way with children; be patient; be fun-loving; enjoy teaching; don't berate the skater who is struggling. The student should feel good when the lesson ends and be excited for the next class." She suggested that operators or managers watch them teach a couple of students some basics and see how they handle themselves to decide if you want them dealing with your customers on a regular basis. "Remember they're representing your rink."

Pricing

While each rink must set its own pricing structure based on a variety of factors, Molaro shared that her Star Class is \$45 for 6 lessons and includes skate rental plus the session that follows the class. When they pay up front, they receive a card with 6 spaces.

She explained, "Each time they arrive to class, the card is punched. That way they know how many classes they have left. When the card is full, if they sign-up (for

Another bonus: "Our students are faithful even through the summer months," she added.

"Golf clubs, tennis clubs, ski resorts, tackle shops, sewing centers, ice rinks, pools ... even the local ceramic shop offer classes for those who want to learn. If we don't offer classes, our prospective customers go elsewhere!"

Promote and they will come

To get those customers in, you must promote in whatever way(s) you can. Molaro recalled once reading that:

*"He who has a thing to sell,
And whistles softly down a well,
Will never make as many dollars
As he who stands on a roof and hollers!"*

She emphasizes, "Just like everything else you do, you've gotta promote your classes. Use Direct mail, flyers, brochures, press releases, bulk e-mails and word-of-mouth. When all else fails, go ahead and take out an ad!"

Molaro gives out class passes as prizes at school, scout, birthday and church parties. Each child holding a birthday party receives a "Skate Class Scholarship" for 3 free classes. Each child purchasing a pair of skates receives a scholarship, too. If Molaro sees someone struggling at a session, she gives them a class pass. At private parties, she'll sometimes stick a class pass in the shoes of those who rented skates. When she sees someone who looks like they'd

do well in lessons, she also gives them a class pass.

Molaro puts class information on The Skatery's web site and sends out press releases touting student achievements. And during the first three weeks each October (National Roller Skating Month) the Molaros offer free classes for 8-14 year olds, with announcements in their local papers.

While fewer passes get used than she'd like to see, Molaro shared, "One scholarship resulted in a student that stayed with us 10 years! Others take a couple of classes, spend some money here and are never seen again...until they bring their kids skating!"

Long-term benefits

The benefits - to your rink AND to the roller skating industry - of teaching guests how to skate are immeasurable. Molaro reminds operators, "Remember that the backbone of a rink's budget has always been the session skater: *Whether you add laser tag, soft-play, lights and other frills, remember, it's the session skater who pays the bills!*

"People come to our rinks for FUN. They don't have fun if they get hurt or feel foolish. Students in our beginner class are frequently accompanied by friends and family who pay admission, frequent the snack bar and sometimes even join the class too! Turning our occasional session skater, birthday guest, or first-time visitor into a class student makes them more valuable to us as they become faithful session

skaters.

To emphasize why it is important that every skating center offer beginner classes, Molaro offers this thought: "Imagine that the roller skating industry is a boat adrift in an ocean of recreational possibilities. If any of us aren't paddling, it makes it harder for everyone else. If EVERY rink offered

beginner classes, there would eventually be more skaters to go around. Roller skating could be brought out of the closet and experience a much needed renaissance.

For questions about lesson materials, contact the RSA at 317-347-2626 or Roberta Molaro at 570-758-1775 or sk8coach@tds.net..

Roberta Molaro offers up 13 commandments for the FUN-damental Instructor:

1. If class is FUN, students nag parents to come again!
2. Don't teach the Flamingo before the students have developed some balance and control.
3. Appraise the skill level of your students before choosing the "Skill of the day."
4. When you just say, "Do this," the new skater doesn't know if you mean what you're doing with your feet, hands or head. They may *not* have seen that your feet were together before you did the Kangaroo Hop, etc .
5. Keep it simple.
6. Roller skating is 99% confidence and only 1% talent ... Help them develop that confidence!
7. DON'T use technical terms like "edges" or "skate on a curve."
8. Research shows that a student can absorb no more than 3 new concepts per lesson. Anything else is wasting time, so don't overwhelm them.
9. Does the skill you're teaching today help them develop balance or will it help them get lower for the limbo?
10. Especially at the PiXiE level, a game helps you achieve the FUN goal while reinforcing a skill.
11. A little praise, a hand stamp or sticker goes a long way toward building that all-important confidence.
12. Research also shows that an athlete must practice for at least 1/2 hour after learning a skill to develop Muscle Memory. (This is why we include the session following a class in the fee.)
13. AND if students are practicing neat moves in the middle of the floor during the session, they will inspire others to enroll in class, too.

SkateCourt THE ONLY FLOOR DESIGNED FOR SKATING
Your Colors, Your Design, Your Success



"We have now 3 SkateCourts in Malaysia and another one coming soon. Each floor is designed differently with custom colors. After 2 years, our first SkateCourt floor still looks beautiful, even with thousands of kids skating on it week after week. If you are in the skating business, SkateCourt is your best investment!"

Dato' Richard & Datin Jean Koh, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



Contact The Expert
Ask About Financing

John Matejec (918) 488-1955
www.SkateCourt.com