

As Economy Stumbles, the Zamboni Glides On



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

The first test for every new Zamboni is a turn down the tree-lined streets outside the factory in a suburb of Los Angeles.

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PARAMOUNT, Calif. — At least one well-known American vehicle manufacturer is rolling out vehicles as usual. But before a Zamboni can take the ice, it hits the pavement on Colorado Avenue.

The neighbors are used to it by now, seeing one of the blocky [ice-resurfacing machines](#) rumble out of the low-slung Zamboni factory and trudge down the block — top speed: 9 miles per hour — toward the corner KFC. It whirls and comes back, is checked for leaks and fitted with studded tires.

Then the Zamboni is sent someplace like Dubai or Prague or Milwaukee. A handwritten tag on a string near the ignition tells where. Zamboni may be the most famous name on ice, a pop-culture

icon more recognized than any of the four remaining National Hockey League playoff teams, with a moniker more familiar than Crosby or Ovechkin, probably even Gretzky or Lord Stanley, whose trophy goes to the N.H.L. champion.

And, in this day, it may be comforting to know that Frank J. Zamboni & Company, still family owned and operated, is not asking for a government bailout.

“Not yet,” Richard F. Zamboni, 76, the company president and son of the founder, said with an easy smile. “We go in cycles that don’t really go with the economy.”

In almost every way, Zamboni is a revered model of consistency. Its form, function and sales output — 200 to 250 of its all-in-one machines are produced each year, the company said — have barely changed in decades.

“It’s kind of weird — even people that don’t know anything about the sport know the Zamboni,” said Dave Schneider, a founding member of a hockey-themed band called [the Zambonis](#). When the company learned of the band years ago, the musicians pleaded, “Please don’t make us change our name to the Ice-Resurfacing Machines,” Mr. Schneider said. The name stayed, and a licensing agreement was struck.

After inventing his machine, Frank J. Zamboni, the son of Italian immigrants, wanted to name his company Paramount Engineering, to give it more credibility. The name was taken.

Canadians, especially, are surprised to learn that Frank J. Zamboni & Company is not only American but based nowhere near naturally frozen water. The factory sits in the side-street sprawl of south Los Angeles, between Compton and Bellflower, amid other industrial buildings but within a block of homes and strip malls.

When Zamboni engineers want to do some on-ice testing, a machine is driven several city blocks beneath a skyline of palm trees and fast-food signs, to the Iceland skating rink, where Zamboni became Zamboni in the first place 60 years ago.

The original machine sits in a far corner of the rink.

“The one from 60 years ago would still make a halfway decent sheet of ice,” Mr. Zamboni said. “Just not as good as the new ones.”

Moving in slow ovals, the machine scrapes the rutted surface. It gathers the ice shavings and dumps them into an on-board bin using hidden augers. It spreads water with a squeegee to leave a smooth sheen on the ice.

Charlie Brown once said there are three things in life that people like to stare at: a flowing stream, a crackling fire and a Zamboni clearing the ice.

Fans at hockey games — children and the childlike, mostly — often cheer the Zamboni when it takes the ice. They applaud precision and jeer missed spots.

On the television sitcom “Cheers,” Carla’s hockey-playing husband, Eddie LeBec, died when he was run over by a Zamboni. [Sarah Palin](#) said last year that she always wanted to name a son Zamboni. Car and Driver recently test-drove one, finding that “the vague steering is totally ’70s Cadillac.”

Mr. Zamboni’s father, with Frank’s brother and a cousin, opened the nearby skating rink in 1940. Frank Zamboni spent much of the next decade building a contraption to smooth the ice and eliminate the time it took crews to scrape, shovel and spray.

The Model A made its debut in 1949. The rest of the fleet was numbered, in order. Sonja Henie took Nos. 2 and 3 for her ice show. No. 9,056, almost complete, is headed to a rink in Monterrey, Mexico.

“It’s a small, family-owned business,” Mr. Zamboni said. “It’s got a name, but it’s sure got a small niche in a small industry when you get down to it.”

That is the key to success, according to Ron Pinelli, president of motorintelligence.com.

“It enjoys a unique niche in the market,” he said. “Your large automakers do not. Their business model is based on consumer products on a high-volume basis.”

Zambonis are custom-made, not built until the order arrives. The lead time is usually at least six months.

Richard and Alice Zamboni have been married 56 years, and four of their five children work for the company. A fourth generation has helped, too, and the family still owns the Iceland rink.

The factory has about 30 employees and produces about 100 machines a year. A second factory, run by Richard Zamboni’s son Frank in Brantford, Ontario — Wayne Gretzky’s hometown — has similar output. Most are part of the 500 series, found in most N.H.L. arenas. Such machines cost at least \$75,000 and sometimes hit six figures.

The company is privately held and declined to disclose financial information. But 200 machines at \$75,000 each would be \$15 million in annual sales.

“Thirty years ago, my dad said: ‘Gee, the market’s saturated. We’re going to run out of customers,’ ” Richard Zamboni said. “I don’t know where that saturation point is that my dad was talking about. We’re not there yet.”

Most would-be competitors have come and gone. But one, [the Resurfice Corporation](#), of Elmira, Ontario, said it produces about the

same number of machines as Zamboni. The companies are, in effect, the [Boeing](#) and [Airbus](#) of ice resurfacing.

Resurfi is owned and operated by the Schlupp family, with none of the name recognition of its competitor. Don Schlupp, the company's sales and marketing director, says he is used to hearing people call its machines Zambonis.

"We refer to it as the Kleenex syndrome," he said.

All the off-hand familiarity makes Zamboni a bit nervous. It has trademarked its name (and the block shape of its machines) but fears the name becoming a lowercase zamboni, suffering the same fate as Aspirin, Escalator, Zipper and other brand names that lost trademark protections.

The company also asks that Zamboni not be used as a noun (as it has been throughout this article) or a verb. The ice does not get Zambonied, then, and the vehicle is a Zamboni brand ice-resurfacing machine. Good luck with that.

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