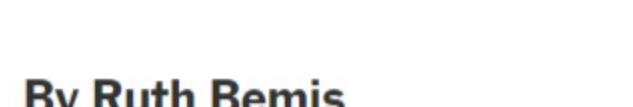


At Skating Rinks, the Good Times Roll



By **Ruth Bemis**
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With roller-skating gaining momentum as a fashionable sport for adults and children alike, owners of roller rinks have begun spending thousands of dollars sprucing up their facilities. And new rinks are opening.

In 1970 there were 500 members of the Roller Skating Rink Operators' Association of America. Today there are 1,700 operators in that organization. In all, there are 3,500 rinks nationwide.

"Members tell us their business is up considerably," said George Picard, executive director of the association. "In some cases it has doubled. Some businesses now maintain year-round the level of winter business, where there used to be a 50 percent falloff in the summer."

Rink developments had been in the suburbs in the past, where the children were, Mr. Picard said. "But now developers are looking for roller rinks in the cities," he said. "Seeing the new concepts in rink design move into the metropolitan areas is "kind of a phenomenon," he said.

New York City has a few large, older rinks in the outer boroughs and one or two small operations in Manhattan. But that is changing. A few months ago, Metropolis Roller Rink opened at 241 West 55th Street. Late in October another new facility, High Roller, opened at 617 West 57th Street.

United Skates of America, the country's largest roller rink chain, which is based in Cleveland and operates 23 rinks nationally, is planning a facility in the Jackson Heights section of Queens with a \$100,000 lighting system. The company also said it was negotiating for a spot on Manhattan's East Side.

United Skates of America runs rinks in Edison and Wayne, N.J., Massapequa and Centereach, L.I., and Plainfield, Conn.

The Montvale Skating Rink, at the northern tip of Bergen County, is typical of the older rolling-skating palaces. The one-story, 31,000-square-foot building is a stark, utilitarian slab of concrete that is painted orange and yellow. It is on the main thoroughfare of the suburban community, opposite a shopping center. Built specifically for roller-skating in 1984, it catered to people under 18 until the last few years.

Lou Collichio, who has owned the facility since 1985, is in the process of renovating the snack bar and pinball machine areas and spending \$20,000 to improve the lighting system. Mr. Collichio says business has never been better ("I wouldn't sell for \$2 million") and points to a crowd of 1,500 skaters on a recent Friday evening, his best ever.

"It takes promotion — it's strictly promotion," he said. The Montvale rink, which measures 100 by 200 feet, is the scene of as many activities as can be scheduled into one week. There are daytime skating lessons, disco lessons, private parties, group parties and exhibition dances. Skaters can dance, at specific times, to special disco, rock, classical and organ programs. Weekend evenings draw the largest crowds.

Mr. Collichio, who is almost always present at the rink, can usually be found in the disk jockey booth, raising and dimming the lights, calling out request numbers and watching over the afternoon or evening's activities.

The activity is reminiscent of the early, popular days of the roller rink the late 1800's through early 1900's, when skating palaces were an especially popular way to spend an afternoon or evening. Men and women wore their best attire to whirl around huge facilities of up to 50,000 square feet. In the 1940's, servicemen discovered that the rinks were good places to meet young women.

These days, roller rinks are also going into shopping centers and enclosed malls. They can be new buildings or renovated structures.

"You take a property that is in a prime area, but not the prime location," explained Ted Kraus, a New Jersey-based consultant to United Skates. "I don't need the visibility shopping center store would, but I have to be in a good market, so I'll try to take the back portion of that center.

"We're going into enclosed malls and that's expensive," he continued. "But sometimes the mall landlord will make a deal with us. He may not want to make the usual buck because the children coming to the rink will bring in mommy and daddy. They'll stay and shop while the kids skate. And 200,000 skaters there each year means the extra business for him.

"We're very cautious where we open up because you can't make mistakes. A rink that would cost \$500,000 a few years ago is \$1 million today. We take chances, but they're educated chances. We also take buildings with columns. We treat the rink like a doughnut. We utilize the columns for our disco concept and put the snack bar and games in the middle of the rink."

Kirk Walsh, who owns High Roller, has found space in Manhattan difficult to work with, not only because of columns but also because of the vertical layout of most buildings. A roller rink needs a spread of horizontal space. His 15,000-square-foot building had been garage.

Mr. Walsh was the owner of Trax, a West Side rock club before he entered the rink business. "I saw there was nothing here in Manhattan, and I saw the need for it, so I just went ahead," he said. "This is a way of getting out of selling liquor and staying in the club business."

Except for those in California, most roller-skating palaces serve liquor only at closed private parties. So there was no need for a liquor license. "I don't think drinking and skating go together," Mr. Walsh said. "It's like drinking and driving."

"We're going for the whole disco and lighting thing, but in addition we'll have an organ and a live band people can skate to," he said. "There will also be a snack bar and pro shop, and we'll rent skates."

Besides the usual overhead in any building — rent, heat, air-conditioning — there are costs peculiar to rollerskating. Mr. Collichio, for example, said it cost him \$500 every three months to re-plasticize the hard-rock maple skating surface. Lighting and sound systems are expensive.

Mr. Kraus of United Skates said: "You have to have supplementary facilities — lockers, game rooms, food. All these generate profit."

Mr. Picard of the roller rink owners association added: "If it's really attractive you'll draw both adults and children. You've got to draw well to make it, and if you do draw well you'll make it big. If you don't, you'll have marginal operation."

Mr. Picard and other rink owners do not feel that the inevitable waning of roller disco will plunge their rinks back to a children's operation.

"Music is an essential part of roller skating, of course," Mr. Picard said. "We see disco not as the salvation of roller rinks, but as a way of enhancing skating. If it goes, it will be replaced by something else."



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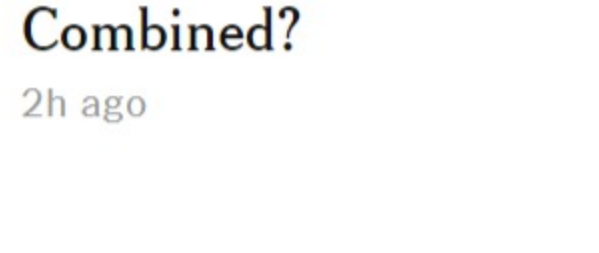
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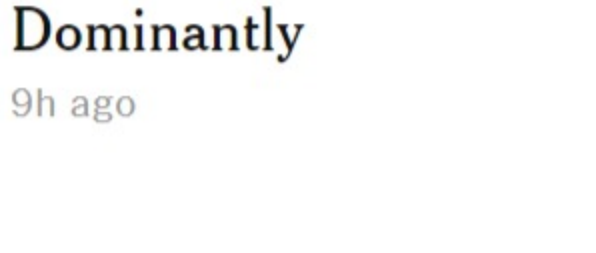


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