

Cold Nights and Hot Chocolate

The first leaves of autumn have been raked from Ralph Isberg's backyard, exposing a modest rectangle of scruffy grass dotted with bags, rakes, and a lonely barbecue grill evoking the bygone summer.

Looking out his kitchen window, Isberg imagines a livelier scene: A glistening oval of ice; shouting kids on skates passing the puck, their breath turning frosty in the air; a small table laden with hot chocolate and cookies.

It is still October, but the microbiologist's thoughts are on midwinter, when his home-built rink will open for its fourth season of skating.

"I try to get as much work done as I can before January," says Isberg, an HHMI investigator at Tufts University School of Medicine, "because I don't get that much sleep in January and February." Indeed, backyard rinks are best filled, watched over, and resurfaced in the dead of night when it's coldest. "We love single-digit weather," he observes.

The main beneficiaries of his labor are his son, Max, 13, and daughter, Robyn, 10, both team hockey players. Ice time at public rinks is expensive and tough to get in hockey-mad New England. The family's frozen surface



is also a Mecca for neighborhood kids, their parents, and members of Isberg's lab when he hosts winter parties.

"I really like having the kids come over—on Saturdays and Sundays they're here at all hours. I'd like to have even more," he says. Turning to his laptop, the scientist pulls up numbers from a rink journal as precise and detailed as a lab notebook. "Last year we had 43 different people skating during the season," he says. "My goal is to get 70 or 80."

Isberg's wife, Carol Kumamoto, a professor at Tufts Medical School, inspired his time-intensive hobby after she read an article about building backyard rinks. It seemed easy enough, and the materials are relatively cheap—wood and plastic for the walls, a plastic liner to cover the ground and contain the water.

Over Thanksgiving, he sets up the framework on the slightly sloping

ground. Not until several consecutive days of subfreezing temperatures are forecast—often around the Martin Luther King holiday weekend—does Isberg get out the garden hose for the ceremonial filling with water. "It takes about 16 hours," he says. "I don't go to sleep that night," lest there be a leak or other mishap. After three or four days, the surface is ready for testing.

"They send me out on it first, 'cause I'm the lightest," pipes up Robyn, who sports a T-shirt declaring, "Friends are forever, boys are whatever." Once the rink is deemed safe, the season is under way, sometimes lasting into the first days of spring.

With constant use and changing weather, the rink needs frequent clearing and resurfacing. Isberg's version of the iconic Zamboni—the best-known brand of professional resurfacing machine—is a metal tube shaped like a coat-hanger, with perforations in the long side, and a piece of cloth trailing behind. Isberg attaches it to the kitchen faucet with a hose, then pushes it along the ice, allowing water to drip out and freeze, forming a new, smooth surface.

Ready for the next day's crowd of family and friends whizzing across the ice—or taking their first steps and spills. For Ralph Isberg, creating a backyard skating rink is a labor of love.

—Richard Saltus

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RALPH ISBERG

