

Get The Real Facts on Synthetic Ice

Synthetic Ice: are thicker panels better? How should that relate to pricing?

We get many calls each week about synthetic ice products and one of the things most callers want to know about is the thickness of panels. This article will address this consideration and educate potential consumers about panel material and how that can relate to thickness of the panel.

Initially when I was in the market as a hockey dad looking for synthetic ice products the companies I contacted were really big on trying to sell me thicker panels. When I asked them about that they always told me that the thicker panels would last longer. Then I began to wonder why they sold the thinner panels at all. After a lot of digging and research I realized that it was not so much the thickness of the panel that mattered as much as the composition of the material and also the connection system that was used. First let's discuss material composition as it relates to panel thickness.

Molecular weight of panels is an important aspect of panel quality and thickness. Some panels are (1/2 inch – 3/4 inch) and need to be thicker because they are extruded material and by the nature of this process require a low molecular weight relative to other manufacturing processes (such as sinter pressed). They tend to wear down much more quickly than higher molecular weight panels – so they need to be thicker. Also this is typically a low end grade skating product and one where you will often notice a white dusty powder residue. Younger children (and many adults too) find this a difficult product to skate on and won't be pleased with the performance.

Panels that are made with materials that have a higher molecular weight tend to be sinter pressed and are of a much higher density and quality. They are also faster, and priced higher because both the raw material is more expensive and so is the manufacturing process. A top

grade panel can be as thin as 6mm (0.24 inches) and outperform and outlast a 12mm (1/2 inch) or an 18mm (3/4 inch) lower grade panel.

Consumers like to ask about the price per square foot – which of course doesn't mean a lot unless the same material is being compared. A better question might be "what is the price per square foot relative to the molecular weight?" And, what is the relative life expectancy?

For example:

If one manufacturer has a 1/2 inch dovetail joint panel with a 300 grade molecular weight (lower grade extruded product) and their panel is \$11.00 per square foot, and another manufacturer has a 1/2 inch dovetail joint panel with a 600 grade molecular weight (high grade) and the price per square foot is \$15.00 – then what does this really tell the consumer? Frankly its confusing.

If the seller is not explaining the difference and the consumer has not been informed then they will buy the cheaper product and think they got a good deal. The reality is however that the higher grade product was the better deal – relative to molecular weight and performance.

Real Comparison:

Cost per square foot over Life Expectancy

A. \$11.00 per square foot / 5 year life = \$2.20 per square foot per year.

B. \$15.00 per square foot / 20 year life = \$0.75 per square foot per year.

Responsible sellers of synthetic ice panels understand these differences and will take the time to explain this to an uninformed consumer. ■

About the author

Tim Oldfield is owner of SmartRink. He has watched his daughter and son grow up playing hockey and develop into elite athletes who love the game. As company owner, Tim is committed to ensuring buyers and consumers of synthetic ice are educated and well informed on product choices.