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Synthetic ice-skating floor gains international popularity

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An innovative synthetic ice-skating floor made in the Netherlands is about to conquer the sports world as a Groningen-based company Betech is to present its product at a fair in Beijing next month.

Two and a half years ago, Betech, which specialises in the production of industrial synthetics, began working on a new type of synthetic designed for professional ice-skating.

Last year, their first floors, called Art-Ice, went into production. In 2007 they sold tens of thousands of square metres in the Netherlands and abroad.

Art-Ice is sold in large tiles. Once laid down and joined like a jigsaw puzzle it forms a smooth floor.

Next month Betech plans to present its product at a fair in Beijing in an attempt to sell the synthetic floor tiles for a warm-up ice-skating rink at the upcoming Olympics.

'People have been trying to develop synthetic ice-skating floors for thirty years,' Jendo Sinago, CEO of Betech, told DPA.

'But most synthetic floors do not have the characteristics of natural ice,' Sinago said.

Artificial ice-skating rinks are expensive and need continuous maintenance.

'When you skate, the irons gradually reach a heat of up to 104 degrees Celsius, causing the ice beneath the iron to melt away,' he explained, meaning the longer you skate, the less resistance you will experience on the ice and the faster you will glide.

Most synthetic ice-skating floors try to mimic this phenomenon by adding oil or another liquid on top of the synthetic.

'That does not even approach a real skating experience. The resistance is much higher,' Sinago said. 'So synthetic ice-skating floors were never taken seriously by the sports world.'

This changed with Art-Ice, which does not require added liquid. Several ingredients have been added to the synthetic, which means it behaves like natural ice once it comes into contact with the hot skating irons.

Under regular temperatures the synthetic's ingredients remain solid.

Once the floor comes into contact with hot skating irons and reaches a temperature of 72 degrees Celsius or higher, the ingredients melt and form a liquid layer on top of the synthetic. This mimics the natural ice experience.

'The gliding characteristics of our synthetic floor are to 92 percent comparable to those of natural ice,' Sinago said. Needless to say Betech is already working on increasing this percentage.

'Our current floors can last for up to 20 years. We are now investigating if reducing the synthetic's lifespan can help us improve the natural-ice experience,' Sinago said.

And the Art-Ice tiles are selling well.

In the Dutch town of Heerenveen - famous for its ice rink that has hosted European and world championships - professional hockey teams and figure skaters are training on the Art-Ice floor.

The fact that Art-Ice is gradually conquering the Netherlands is very important, Sinago said, because 'no people are as critical about ice-skating floors, let alone synthetic ones, as the Dutch. If we can sell it in the Netherlands, we will certainly sell it abroad.'

Last year, Art-Ice floors were sold to Scandinavia, Turkey, and Austria. Spain is expected to buy 1,000 square metres per month.

'Because it's basically a multi-purpose sports floor, to be used either for skating or ball sports. It is ideal for hotels, to buy or to rent. Schools can rent a floor and put it on the school yard to teach pupils how to skate.' Although Betech did not enter the business for environmental reasons, the fact that the floor does not require any energy is a major advantage.

'We introduced our floor at the right time,' Sinago said. People are environmentally conscious. An artificial ice skating rink that operates all year long uses the same amount of energy as 7,700 households.

'Our floors require nothing. You just lay down the tiles to make a floor, then you brush and polish it every evening - and that's it