

Reprinted from *Real Answers*

What is Sub Zero's
Number One Secret?

Volume 13, Issue 3

real QUESTIONS
real ANSWERS

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What is Sub Zero's Number One Secret



About 15 years ago, Todd Palmer and his brother Mitch had the opportunity to buy a small fleet in Omaha, and created today's Sub Zero Transportation. From a start with a handful of trucks, "Some of which actually had engines in them," as Todd says, they've become a super-sharp fleet of 50 power units and 75 trailers, serving most of the United States.

Todd calls Sub Zero "a different animal." We journeyed to Omaha to discover what he meant.



SUB ZERO

Peterbilt

NEBRASKA
APPOINTED POWER
NO 1
PERMANENT

Peterbilt

Wild guess: You haul refrigerated food?

Todd Palmer: “Everything from ice cream to fresh meat. We run most of the United States, with the exception of the far northeast. We cover Atlanta, Texas, New Mexico, are in Arizona every day and deliver in the Midwest and Northwest.”

How did you get started?

“My brother Mitch and I grew up in the trucking business. We worked for Dad at Jim Palmer Trucking in Missoula, Montana.

“Sub Zero wasn’t a great fleet when Mitch and I bought it, but great fleets are rarely for sale. We’ve built it into a pretty good business with some excellent, long-term customers.”

What kind of equipment do you run?

“Our tractor of choice is Peterbilt. We have about 50, most of them 387s. The trailers are all Utility. It’s part of our philosophy: We want to run one truck, one reefer unit, one trailer, one tire, even one clutch and one engine.”

What does this “one” emphasis do for you?

“It takes us out of the equation. If we’re having a problem, say with a tire, I want Bridgestone to know we’re doing everything the way we’re supposed to.

“Bridgestone has been very helpful to us. We get much better support than with other brands, and we’ve even picked the brain of one of Bridgestone’s engineers to help us with maintenance and tire selection.”

Which tires are you using?

“We’re running the R287 on steers and the R260F on drives.”

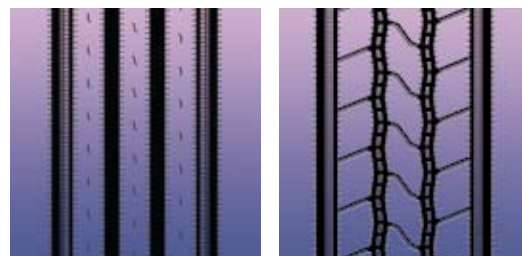
What about trailers?

We start out trying to make trailer tires. We run the R287s down to about 8/32” or 9/32” and move them back to the drives, and we run the R260Fs on the drives down to about 10/32” to 13/32” and move them back to trailers.”



Brothers Mitch and Todd Palmer bought Sub Zero about 15 years ago.

Sub Zero uses Bridgestone R287 on steers and R260F on drives. Trailers are fitted with partially worn tires or retreads.





We rarely hear about R260F on drives.

“We’re a different animal. We don’t need cross-bar tires on drives. The R260F gives us plenty of traction and very strong sidewall protection.

“Plus, it’s pretty much the rule that rib tires have better fuel economy than cross-bar treads.”

But don’t you get some serious snows in Omaha?

“Sure, but the roads we travel are plowed or have ice on them, and with an R260F, we have a better footprint than any cross-bar tire would give us.

“If we were operating in mud, where we needed to spin the tires hard enough to dig in, then to get them clean, it would be different. If you talk to an engineer, you learn that a rib tire is going to give you all the traction you need on pavement.”

How many miles are you getting?

“We pull the R287s at about 118,000 to 122,000 miles. We usually run them out on drives because that cleans up the wear pattern really well.

“With the R260Fs, by the time we get done with them, they’ve gone 400,000 to 450,000 miles. All our tires come off at 5/32” for retreading.”

What kind of retreads?

“We’re using the Bandag 4200, and all of those go onto trailers. As I said, we’re always trying to make trailer tires, so we don’t have to buy any.

“We cap once, and by the time we get some miles on those retreads, our casings are getting to be about five or six years old, so we tend to put those tires on units we’re selling.”

So you keep a watch on casing age?

“And on the age of our aluminum wheels. Aluminum wheels have a date code, just like casings, and we find they eventually need to be replaced.”



Sub Zero checks its aluminum wheel date codes and puts the older ones onto its trade vehicles.

What happens to them?

“They oxidize, especially in the bead area. It’s a sort of ‘white rust,’ and can cause air loss. We buff that off, but over time, the bead area also gets more and more sharp, to the point where it can tear the tire beads during mounting.”

You buff the bead area of the wheels?

“Right. Every single time we break down a tire, we buff the bead area with a wire brush so we get a good seal. We always replace the valve core and the valve cap, and we always put a new o-ring on the stem.

“We were finding that sometimes, just a few miles from home, we had flats – but no punctures. The air was leaking past the bead area because of corrosion on the wheels. Now if we have a flat, we know it’s a puncture and the tire has to come off.”

Sounds like you take good care of your tires.

“We try to take good care of everything. Every time a truck comes through our lot, even if it has only been out on a run of a couple hundred miles, the air gets checked. Again, we want to take ourselves out of the equation.”

How long are you keeping vehicles?

“We try to trade tractors on a three-year cycle and trailers on a four-year cycle. That gives us some flexibility when it comes time to trade. If the market is down, we can wait a while for a more favorable price.

“In fact, we hear there are buyers who want to know when our stuff is becoming available. Our equipment doesn’t end up at auctions.”



Mitch and Todd Palmer have a special bay next to the office where they can run computer analysis on individual tractors.

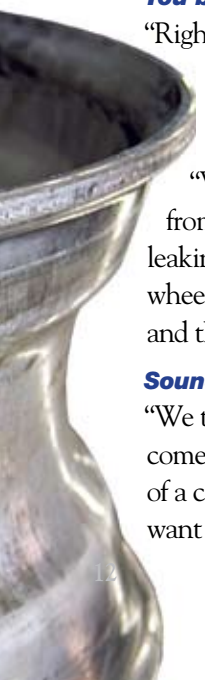
Besides good care, are there other things that add to your vehicle value?

Mitch Palmer: “We’ve done some important things to improve quality of life for our drivers. We used to have cab heaters, but about four or five years ago, we switched to auxiliary power units. We’re already on the second generation of those.

“We’ve always chased idle times, and we’re now down to single digits. The APUs have 110-volt power outputs, so our drivers can put in microwaves and refrigerators and still save fuel.”

Fuel economy is clearly a priority.

“It is. Diesel is high, and we also have to burn nearly a gallon an hour to keep the trailer cold. That makes routing and scheduling important, and makes rib tires and APUs a really good investment.”





Walker Tire Meets the Demand

Terry Shannon of Walker Tire, like the Palmer brothers, has been in trucking since his teens. “Before I got into tires, I sold trailers, and my father was also in trucking. I know Todd and Mitch know what they’re doing and their operation is very well run.

“They have a special bay next to their offices where they can hook up tractors to a computer and make adjustments to the engine. Sometimes, when I’m looking for Todd, that’s where I’ll find him, working on the computer.

“Sub Zero does most of its own tire work, except for balancing and repairs, and they’re sticklers for proper maintenance.

“Overall, I’d say Todd and Mitch are ‘tough, but fair.’ They’re demanding: Our regular meetings are at 6:15 AM on Thursdays, and I’d better be on time (because Todd gets there every day at about 5 AM). At the same time, they’re fair – and loyal.

“We know exactly where we stand with Sub Zero. And that’s what makes them such good customers.”




How else are you addressing fuel economy?

“Right now, we’re governed at 68, but we’re considering 65. Gradually, we’ve been switching over to aerodynamic tractors, and we’re considering automatic transmissions as well.

“Automatics have a small fuel economy advantage, but road congestion today is also very hard on clutches, so we hope to save there too.”

What do you see coming in the near term?

Todd Palmer: “With the price of fuel, we may see less long haul and more regional haul, with distribution centers built closer together. Or, we may see regulations changing to allow us to use tri-axle trailers with a steerable third axle and 8,000 to 10,000 lb more capacity. No doubt about it, it will be very interesting.” 

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Terry Shannon of Walker Tire and BBTS rep John Gillard check tread depth on some of Sub Zero’s R260F “drive tires.”