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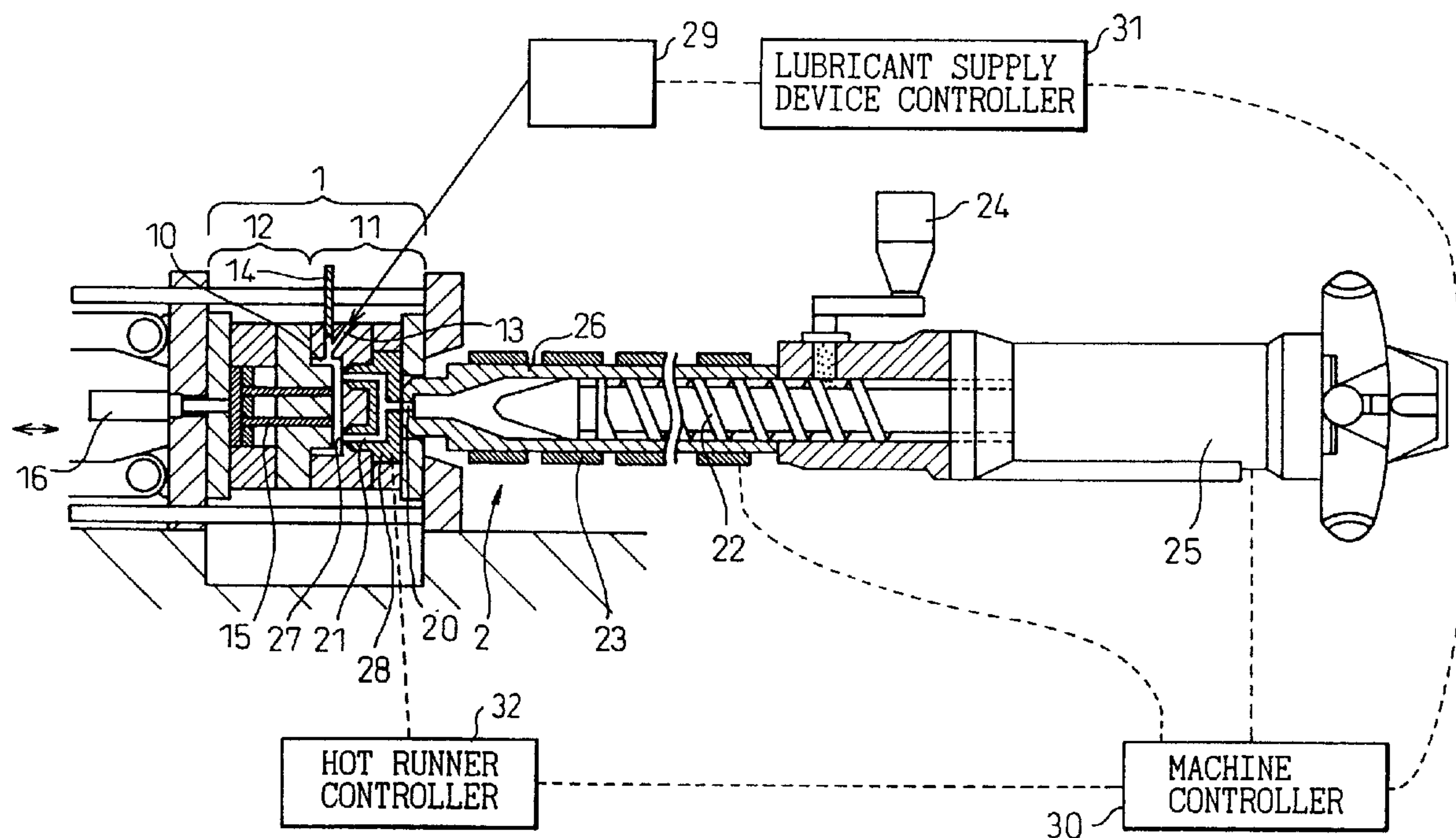
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(54) Title: METAL MOLDING METHODS AND APPARATUS



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

According to the present invention, between the mold-clamping process S1 in which the mold 1 is closed and the injection-pressure increase (solidifying) process S3, the gate-melting process for heating the hot runner 21 to melt the plug (metallic material) of the gate 27, the mold-lubricant coating process for spraying the lubricant onto the wall surface of the cavity 10, and the material-metering process are simultaneously carried out in parallel to each other. Thus, the molding cycle time can be reduced to a great extent.

METAL MOLDING METHOD AND APPARATUS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

10 According to the present invention, between the
mold-clamping process S1 in which the mold 1 is closed
and the injection-pressure increase (solidifying) process
S3, the gate-melting process for heating the hot runner
21 to melt the plug (metallic material) of the gate 27,
the mold-lubricant coating process for spraying the
lubricant onto the wall surface of the cavity 10, and the
15 material-metering process are simultaneously carried out
in parallel to each other. Thus, the molding cycle time
can be reduced to a great extent.

METAL MOLDING METHOD AND APPARATUS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a method and apparatus for molding a metal, and particularly magnesium alloy or the like, using an injection-molding machine and a hot runner.

10 2. Description of the Related Art

In general, a thixo-molding apparatus has an injection mechanism and a clamping mechanism. Mold material, comprising metallic chips of magnesium alloy or the like supplied from a hopper, is transferred by a screw into a cylinder heated to a predetermined temperature to be put into a liquidized or a semi-melted state, which develops thixotropy (the property exhibited by certain gels of becoming fluid when stirred or shaken and returning to the semisolid state upon standing, while not varying the temperature), in a co-existing state of a solid and a liquid, by applying a shearing force through the rotating screw. After this metallic material has been charged to a tip end of the cylinder, it is injected into a mold, held at a predetermined pressure and cooled to form a metallic molded product.

In this regard, a prior art system for molding magnesium alloy in such a thixo-molding apparatus employs a molding cycle, shown in Fig. 3, comprising a mold-clamping process T1, a gate-melting process T2, an injection-pressure increase (solidifying) process T3, a material-metering process T4, a mold-opening process T5, a product withdrawal process T6, a mold-lubricant coating process T7 and an air-blow process T8, while the solidifying process and the material-metering process are carried out in parallel to each other..

That is, first, the mold-clamping process for closing the mold is carried out. Then, the gate-melting

- 2 -

process T2 for heating a hot runner is carried out to melt a plug of metallic material at a tip end of a gate of the hot runner. When the injection becomes possible through the gate-melting process T2, the injection-pressure increase (solidifying) process T3 is carried out, wherein the melted or semi-melted metallic material is injected under increased pressure for preventing a sink mark from occurring due to the solidification shrinkage. Thereafter, the material-metering process T4 for preparing material for the next injection is carried out. During the metering of material, the metallic material filled in the mold is quenched by the heat-conduction to the mold and solidified. If the metallic material has been completely solidified and the mold product is in a state capable of being withdrawn from the mold, the mold-opening process T5 for opening the mold is carried out. Thereafter, the product withdrawal process T6, the mold-lubricant coating process T7 and the air-blow process T8 are conducted to complete one cycle of the molding processes. In the above cycle, as the material-metering process needs a relatively long time, it starts at an instant corresponding to the initiation of the solidifying process so that it is in time for the completion of the mold-clamping process.

However, when the material-metering process starts parallel to the solidifying process, the other processes must proceed after the material-metering process has completed, whereby a waiting time is necessary until the mold-clamping process has completed. In the thixo-molding method, it is an optimum condition for obtaining a high-quality metallic mold product that the metallic material is injected into the mold while exhibiting thixotropy so that the apparent viscosity is lowered. However, as described before, if there is a waiting time after the completion of the material-metering process prior to the injection, the thixotropy of the metallic material in the co-existing state of

- 3 -

solid and liquid charged in the cylinder is lost, and there may be a problem in that the metallic material is injected while maintaining a high viscosity to deteriorate the quality of the metallic mold product.

5 To solve this problem, Japanese Unexamined Patent Publication No. 2001-25852 proposes a method for molding a metallic product using a thixo-molding apparatus. In this method, a time at which the material-metering process starts is determined to make the
10 completion of the mold-clamping process coincide with the finishing of the material-metering process, so that the metallic material as metered is immediately inject into the mold just clamped, whereby the above-mentioned waiting time is eliminated. However, this method is
15 problematic in that the mold-lubricant coating process is carried out after the mold-opening process and prior to the mold-clamping process so that the metallic material-metering process and the mold-lubricant coating process are simultaneously carried out while the mold is in a
20 open state. Thus, there is a risk that molten metal drops down from the tip end of the injection nozzle to adhere to a touch surface of a nozzle or a metallic mold face to result in lack of touching of the nozzle or clamping of the mold, which may cause a risk of flash
25 during the injection. Also, the mold-lubricant itself may splash out of the mold to deteriorate the working environment.

 According to the metal molding method disclosed in the above publication, although the molding-lubricant coating process requiring a relatively large working time
30 is carried out simultaneously with the material-metering process, the former is independent from processes other than the material-metering process, whereby it does not provide a solution for saving time necessary for the molding cycle. Thus, a saving of the cycle time cannot be
35 expected because the effect of saving the solidification time by the use of a hot runner is reduced by the process requiring the relatively large working time.

- 4 -

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is intended to solve the above problems in the prior art in which the mold-lubricant coating process, the material-metering process and the gate-melting process are carried out parallel to each other, and an object of the present invention is to provide a method and apparatus for producing a metallic mold product, capable of reducing a cycle time to a great extent, preventing the lubricant from being splashed outward and avoiding pollution of the working environment.

According to one aspect of the present invention, a method for molding metal by using the thixo-molding method is provided, wherein a gate-melting process for heating the metallic material solidified in a tip end portion of a nozzle of the hot runner, a mold-lubricant coating process for spraying a mold-lubricant onto a wall surface of the mold, and a material-metering process for metering the metallic material are carried out simultaneously in parallel to each other between a mold-clamping process for closing the mold and an injection-pressure increase process for injecting the metallic material into the mold. Thereby, the cycle time of the molding cycle can be reduced. Also, as the mold-lubricant can be coated while closing the mold, it is possible to prevent the lubricant from splashing outside the mold, whereby the working environment is improved.

In the method for molding metal according to the present invention, after a mold-opening process for opening the mold, a metallic mold product-withdrawal process and an air-blow process may be simultaneously carried out in parallel to each other, whereby the cycle time of the molding cycle can be further reduced.

An apparatus for molding metal according to one aspect of the present invention comprises mold-clamping and opening means for closing the mold and opening the mold; injection-pressure increase means for injecting the

- 5 -

metallic material into the clamped mold; gate-melting means for heating the hot runner to melt metallic material solidified at a tip end of a nozzle of the hot runner; mold-lubricant coating means for spraying the lubricant onto a wall surface of a cavity within the clamped mold; material-metering means for metering the metallic material by the displacement of the screw; and control means for controlling the operations of the above-mentioned means; and wherein the gate-melting means, the mold-lubricant coating means and the material metering means are simultaneously operated in parallel to each other under the control of the control means, after the mold has been clamped by the mold-clamping and opening means and prior to injecting the metallic material into the mold and increasing the pressure by the injection-pressure increase means.

An apparatus for molding metal according to another aspect of the present invention further comprises product-withdrawal means for withdrawing the metallic mold product from the mold by the action of an ejector pin and an air-blow means for applying an air blow onto the mold to clean a wall surface of the cavity and the material supply path wherein, after the mold has opened by the mold-clamping and opening means, the product-withdrawal means and the air-blow means are simultaneously operated in parallel to each other under the control of the control means.

The present invention may be more fully understood from the description of the preferred embodiments of the invention, as set forth below, together with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings:

Fig. 1 illustrates an overall structure of a thixo-molding apparatus (an apparatus for producing a metallic mold product) used for carrying out a method for molding a metallic mold product according to one embodiment of

-6-

the present invention;

Fig. 2 is a flow chart illustrating a molding cycle of a method for producing a metallic mold product according to the embodiment of the present invention; and

5 Fig. 3 is a flow chart of the prior art molding cycle.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

A method and apparatus for producing a metallic mold product according to one embodiment of the present invention will be described with reference to the attached drawings.

10 Fig. 1 illustrates an overall structure of a thixo-molding apparatus (an apparatus for producing a metallic mold product) used for carrying out a method for molding a metallic mold product according to one embodiment of the present invention. The thixo-molding apparatus (the
15 apparatus for producing a metallic mold product) has a mold 1 including a stationary mold 11 and a movable mold 12. The mold 1 defines a cavity 10 by clamping the stationary mold part 11 and the movable mold part 12, for molding a metallic material such as a magnesium alloy or others.

20 To actuate the movable mold part 12, a motorized mold driving mechanism, not shown, is provided so that the movable mold part 12 is movable forward and backward relative to the stationary mold part 11. Also, the movable mold part 12 is provided with an ejector pin 15 and a
25 driving mechanism 16 thereof.

The stationary mold part 11 has a hot runner 21 communicated with the cavity 10. The hot runner 21 communicates with the cavity 10 through a gate 27 and is completely encompassed by a heat source 28. The hot runner
30 21 is connected via an injection nozzle 20 to an injection cylinder 26 of an injection mechanism 2 provided outside the stationary mold part 11. A screw 22 is disposed within the injection cylinder 26 and a heater mechanism 23 is provided on the outer circumference of the injection cylinder 26. A
35 hopper 24 for supplying a metallic material is provided in communication with the interior of the injection cylinder 26. A screw driving mechanism 25 for driving the screw 22

-7-

is provided adjacent to the injection cylinder 26. Thus, the metallic material supplied from the hopper 24 is conveyed through the interior of the injection cylinder 26 by the rotation of the screw 22, during which the material is melted and the melted metal is supplied into the cavity 10 from the injection nozzle 20 via the hot runner 21.

According to the thixo-molding apparatus of the present invention, to spray the mold-lubricant when the mold 1 is clamped, a lubricant supply path 13 is communicated with the exterior of the stationary mold part 11. The lubricant supply path 13 is connected to a lubricant supply device 29 and supplied with the lubricant by, for example, a piston system or the like. An interruption pin 14 is disposed within the stationary mold 11 to be movable backward and forward for opening and closing the lubricant supply path 13.

The operation control of the thixo-molding apparatus according to the present invention is basically carried out by a machine controller 30. That is, the lubricant supply device 29 is operated by a lubricant supply device controller 31 connected to the machine controller 30 so that the supply of the lubricant is controlled. Similarly, the heat source 28 of the hot runner 21 is controlled by a hot runner controller 32 connected to the machine controller 30 so that the temperature thereof is managed. Further, the machine controller 30 also controls the operations of the screw driving mechanism 25, the heater mechanism 23 on the outer circumference of the injection cylinder 26, a mold driving mechanism (not shown), the driving mechanism 16 for the ejector pin 15, the interruption pin 14 of the lubricant supply path 13 and others.

The operation of the method for producing a metallic mold product according to the present invention using the thixo-molding apparatus will be described based on the flow chart shown in Fig. 2.

At step S1, the mold driving mechanism is driven to bring the movable mold part 12 in contact with the

-8-

stationary mold part 11 and the mold 1 is firmly clamped (the mold-clamping process).

Then, at step S2, the injection nozzle (not shown) for the lubricant is introduced into the lubricant supply path 13, and the lubricant is ejected onto the wall surfaces of the cavity 10 to be in contact with the supplied metallic material, by the lubricant supply device 29 through the ejection nozzle and the lubricant supply path 13 so that a lubricant film is formed on the wall surfaces (the mold-lubricant coating process).

Simultaneously therewith, at step S2, to melt the solidified plug of metallic material at a tip end of the gate 27 of the hot runner 21, the hot runner 21 is heated by the heat source 28 controlled by the hot runner controller 32, whereby the plug is melted (the gate-melting process).

Further, at step S2, the injection mechanism 2 is used to meter the metallic material (the material-metering process). The metering of the metallic material is carried out so that a displacement (a backward displacement) of the screw 22 from a predetermined position is controlled by means of the screw driving mechanism 25. This displacement may vary in accordance with various conditions such as the weight of the resultant metallic mold product.

Thus, at step S2, the mold-lubricant coating process, the gate-melting process and the material-metering process are simultaneously carried out.

Subsequently, at step S3, the screw 22 is advanced by the screw driving mechanism 25, and melted metallic material is injected through the gate 27 of the hot runner 21 to fill the cavity 10 with a necessary amount of the melted metal. In this case, to prevent a sink mark being generated, the pressure is increased (the injection-pressure increase (solidifying) process). After being filled with metallic material, the mold 1 is cooled to solidify the melted metallic material. At this time, the lubricant supply path 13 is of course closed by the forward motion of the interruption pin 14.

-9-

After the melted metallic material has completely solidified, the movable mold part 12 is detached from the stationary part 11 by driving the mold driving mechanism to open the mold at step S4 (the mold-opening process).

5 Then, at step S5, the driving mechanism 16 disposed in the thixo-molding apparatus is operated to extend the ejector pin 15 to withdraw the mold product from the mold (the product withdrawal process).

10 Simultaneously, at step S5, an air stream may be applied to wall surfaces of the cavity 10 from an air-blow nozzle (not shown) connected to a pneumatic pressure source to remove burrs adhered to the wall surfaces (the air blow process).

15 Thereafter, the mold is clamped again and the above molding cycle is repeated.

The series of molding cycles is controlled by the machine controller 30.

20 The inventive molding cycle shown in Fig. 2 will be compared with the prior art molding cycle shown in Fig. 3 based on experiments comparing the cycle times between the two.

According to the prior art molding cycle:

the mold-clamping process T1 --- 3 seconds

the gate-melting process T2 --- 3 seconds

25 the injection-pressure increase (solidifying) process T3 --- 3 seconds

the material-metering process T4 --- 11 seconds

the mold-opening process T5 --- 4 seconds

the product withdrawal process T6 --- 4 seconds

30 the mold-lubricant coating process T7 --- 10 seconds

- 10 -

the air-blow process T8 --- 6 seconds, and
the total cycle time is 44 seconds.

Contrary to this, according to the inventive
molding cycle:

5 the mold-clamping process S1 --- 3 seconds
 the gate-melting, metering, mold-lubricant coating
processes S2---11 seconds

 the injection-pressure increase (solidifying)
process S3 ---3 seconds

10 the mold-opening process S4 --- 4 seconds
 the product withdrawal, the air-blow processes S5 --
- 4 seconds, and

 the total cycle time is 25 seconds, which is
approximately a half of the prior art cycle time.

15 Next, the operation and the effect of the present
invention will be described.

 Generally speaking, the gate melting cannot be
conducted until the mold is closed, for the sake of
safety. Accordingly, the gate melting process can be
20 only conducted after the mold-clamping process and
prior to the injection-pressure increase (solidifying)
process. In general, it is only the material-metering
process which can be incorporated as a composite
operation. However, if the lubricant coating is
25 carried out while the mold is closed, the lubricant-
coating process is also incorporated as a composite
operation. Furthermore, as the material-metering process
and the mold-lubricant coating process have a much longer
cycle time than the other processes, it is possible to
30 shorten the molding cycle time to a great extent by
incorporating these processes into a composite operation
(parallel operation).

 As the lubricant is sprayed after the mold has been
clamped, split surfaces of the stationary and movable
35 mold parts have already been brought into contact with each
other, whereby the lubricant never adheres to these split
surfaces. Also, as the mold has been clamped to isolate

- 11 -

the cavity and the material-supply path from outside, it is possible to prevent the lubricant from adhering to unnecessary portions or splashing to the outside.

5 This prevents the deterioration of the working environment as well as suppresses useless consumption of the lubricant. This enables undiluted lubricant to be used without water for diluting the lubricant, whereby it is possible to prevent the mold temperature from lowering due to the adhesion of the lubricant to the mold and to
10 ensure the favorable distribution of, for example, molten magnesium alloy having a small heat capacity.

As described above, the method and apparatus for molding metal according to the present invention is particularly suitable for magnesium alloy, but is not
15 limited thereto. While the description has been made in the above arrangement on a case wherein the lubricant-supply path is provided in the stationary mold, the lubricant-supply path may be provided in the movable mold, provided the supply of the lubricant is possible
20 even if the mold is closed.

Any kind of lubricant may be used, including an oil type or one diluted with a solvent other than water. Also, the lubricant may be applied not only by spraying but also by any other methods including suction or the
25 like.

While the invention has been described by reference to specific embodiments chosen for purposes of illustration, it should be apparent that numerous modifications could be made thereto by those skilled in
30 the art without departing from the basic concept and scope of the invention.

- 12 -

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for molding metal by conveying metallic material with a screw within a hot runner heated to a predetermined temperature, charging the heated
5 metallic material in a semi-melted or liquidized state at a tip end of the hot runner, injecting such metallic material into a mold cavity, and cooling the material to mold a metallic mold product, wherein
10 a gate-melting process for heating the metallic material solidified in a tip end portion of a nozzle of the hot runner, a mold-lubricant coating process for spraying a mold-lubricant onto a wall surface of the mold, and a material-metering process for metering the metallic material are carried out simultaneously in
15 parallel to each other between a mold-clamping process for closing the mold and an injection-pressure increase process for injecting the metallic material into the mold.
2. A method for molding metal as defined by claim
20 1, wherein after a mold-opening process for opening the mold, a metallic mold product-withdrawal process and an air-blow process are simultaneously carried out in parallel to each other.
3. An apparatus for molding metal by conveying a
25 chipped metallic material with a screw within a hot runner heated to a predetermined temperature, charging the heated metallic material in a semi-melted or liquidized state at a tip end of the hot runner, injecting such metallic material into a mold cavity, and
30 cooling the material to mold a metallic mold product, wherein the apparatus comprises;
mold-clamping and opening means for closing the mold and opening the mold;
injection-pressure increase means for
35 injecting the metallic material into the clamped mold;
gate-melting means for heating the hot runner to melt metallic material solidified at a tip end

- 13 -

of a nozzle of the hot runner;

mold-lubricant coating means for spraying the lubricant onto a wall surface of a cavity within the clamped mold;

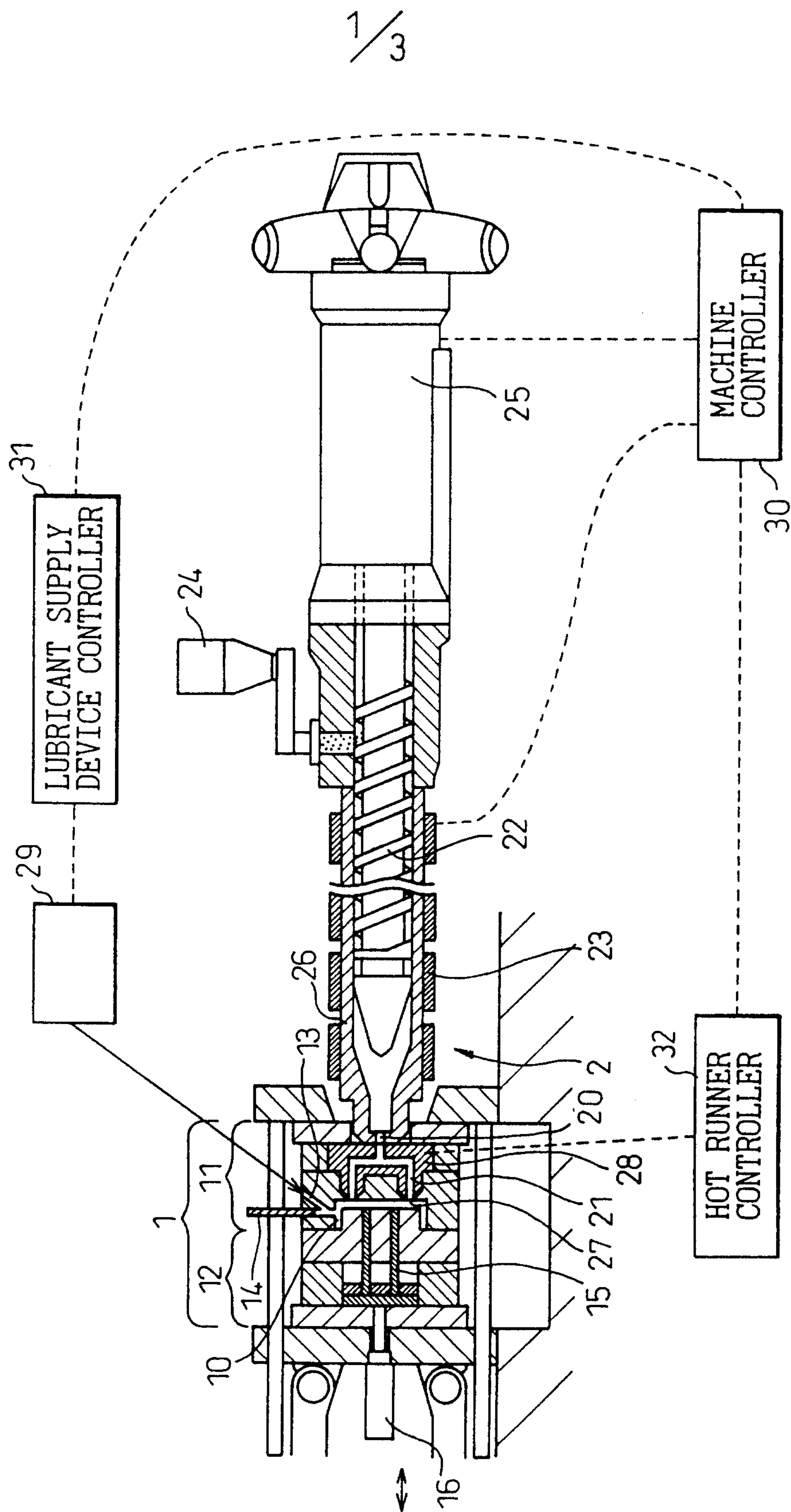
5 material-metering means for metering the metallic material by the displacement of the screw; and

control means for controlling the operations of the above-mentioned means; and wherein

10 the gate-melting means, the mold-lubricant coating means and the material metering means are simultaneously operated in parallel to each other under the control of the control means, after the mold has been clamped by the mold-clamping and opening means and prior to injecting the metallic material into the mold and
15 increasing the pressure by the injection-pressure increase means.

4. An apparatus for molding metal as defined by claim 3, further comprising product-withdrawal means for withdrawing the metallic mold product from the mold by
20 the action of an ejector pin and an air-blow means for applying an air blow onto the mold to clean a wall surface of the cavity and the material supply path, wherein after the mold has opened by the mold-clamping and opening means, the product-withdrawal means and the
25 air-blow means are simultaneously operated in parallel to each other under the control of the control means.

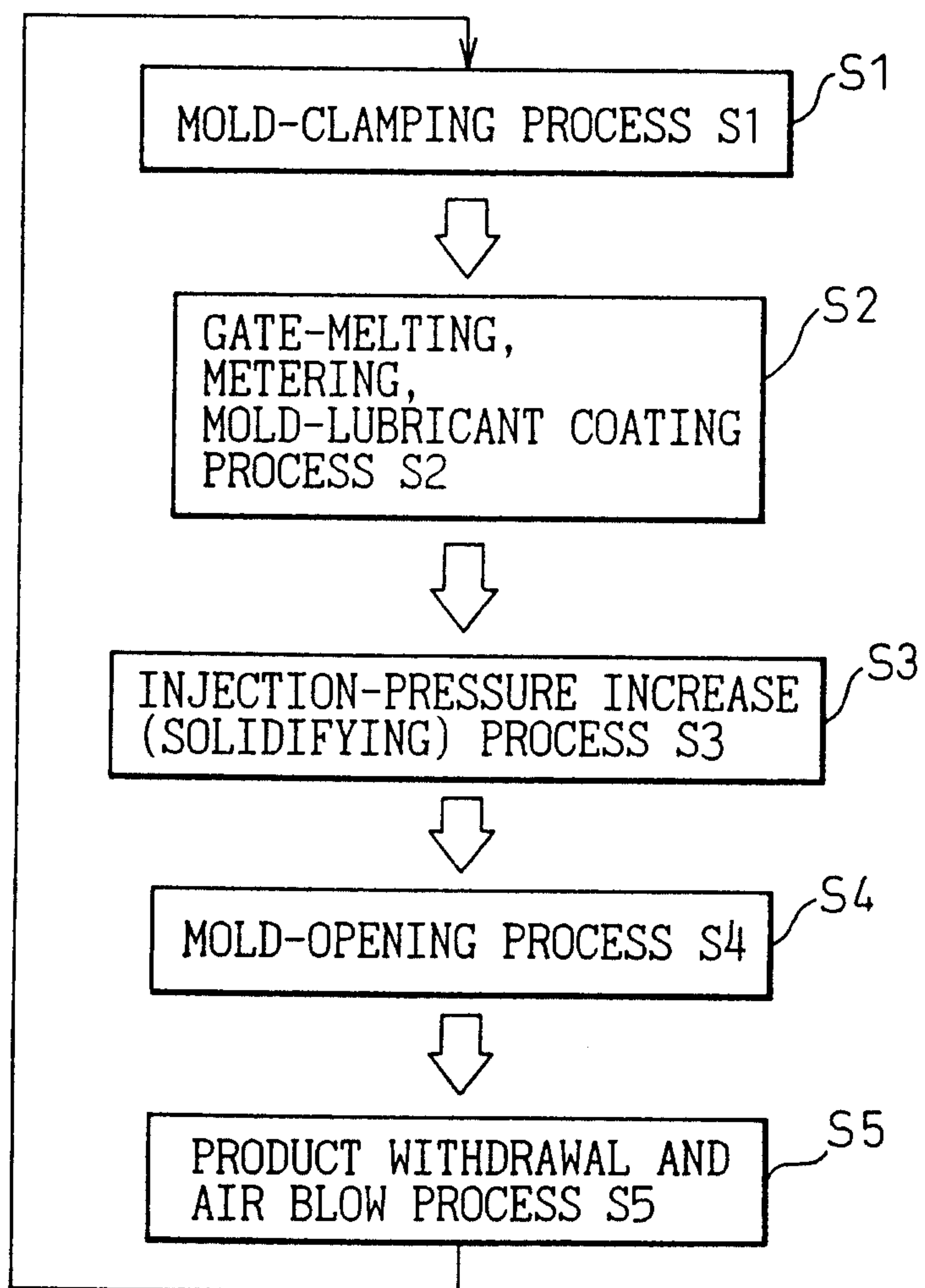
Fig.1



2/3

Fig. 2

INVENTIVE MOLDING CYCLE



3/3

Fig. 3

PRIOR ART MOLDING CYCLE

