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Flooring company aims high

Robbins Sports Surfaces at top of its game

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COLUMBIA TUSCULUM - When Erica Franke drives down the lane or jumps for a block, the rising Mariemont high school senior can feel that her school's gymnasium floor is special.

"It is a lot softer to land on and more forgiving" than the typical high school court, said Franke, a forward on the varsity Lady Warriors basketball team and middle hitter in varsity volleyball. "I feel I can jump higher in here."

But what Franke cannot feel is that the court she and her teammates play on happens to be one of the most advanced basketball courts in the world, says the chief executive of the Cincinnati company that designed the floor.

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He says it is superior even to the courts used by the Cleveland Cavaliers and San Antonio Spurs in the NBA Finals.

Mariemont has the special court thanks to Robbins Sports Surfaces, a privately owned Cincinnati manufacturer of basketball courts.

Mariemont athletic director Tom Nerl said the company offered in 2005 to build it a prototype of its new "MVP floor," originally nicknamed the "Big Mac."

The high school received a significant discount on the premium floor, and Robbins gained a showpiece 2 miles northeast of its Linwood headquarters to demonstrate to customers its latest product.

So far visitors include Chinese and Olympic officials, Nerl said.

The gym is the start of the next chapter for the 113-year-old, 210-employee company on Eastern Avenue.

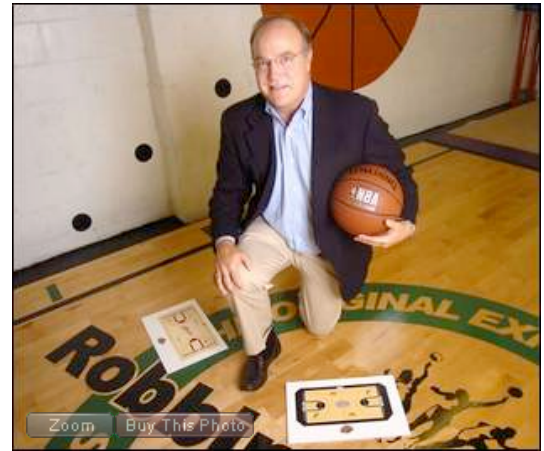
It has staked out a niche developing high-tech maple wood floors that minimize vibrations and are environmentally friendly.

Nearly 60 years after the firm built its first portable basketball floor for the Cincinnati Gardens, today 18 out of 30 NBA arenas, including the Cavs and Spurs, use Robbins floors, CEO Jay Stoehr said. Not to be left out, the WNBA championships have been played most years on Robbins courts since 1997.

Robbins is now ramping up its sales efforts for the MVP floor. One of the first installations will be a high-end basketball training facility in Chicago for NBA players, regional manager John Ficks said.

The company builds two types of products: permanent floors designed for gymnasiums and portable floors designed to be taken apart in a few hours, for use in arenas. Contractors across the country install the permanent floors; Robbins delivers the portable courts itself, Stoehr said.

For all the glamour and pride the NBA courts bring the company, they are a small part of Robbins's business. Portable floor installations represent about 2 percent of Robbins' sales, according to Ficks. Profit margins are tight for the jobs, and each year Robbins builds only 15 portable floors for use in large arenas.



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Jay Stoehr, CEO of Robbins Sports Surfaces, shows off the plans for the courts played on by the San Antonio Spurs and the Cleveland Cavaliers, the two teams in the NBA Finals.

Robbins re-entering old family business

Along with its core business of manufacturing floors for gymnasiums and arenas, Robbins Sports Surfaces is also expanding into the commercial and residential hardwood floor market.

The expansion is a homecoming of sorts for the Cincinnati company.

For nearly 100 years the Stoehr family, Robbins' owner, manufactured hardwood floors for homes and business. Robbins CEO Jay Stoehr said the company sold its residential and commercial floor business, which then accounted for 60 percent of revenue, in 1997 to Triangle Pacific.

That year Robbins was the second-largest hardwood floor manufacturer in the country, he said.

Along with the sale, Robbins agreed to stay out of the residential floor market for 10 years. With the agreement now expired, the company re-entered the market in April through a subsidiary, Pro Linea. The subsidiary sells its floors through a network of wholesale distribution companies.

Stoehr said with a downturn in the construction business he does not expect fast growth, but hopes to position Pro Linea for a future market rebound.

The residential and commercial floor market is a 1-billion-square-foot industry, he pointed out. It would be "phenomenal," Stoehr said, for Pro Linea to capture 1 percent of the market.

Jay Antenen

But the high-profile sales help the company market its permanent basketball and volleyball courts to high schools and universities. Robbins captures about 30 percent of the national gymnasium floor market a year, Stoehr said. The permanent courts use largely the same technology - but often at a lower grade - and can be painted to look identical to particular NBA teams' arenas.

"It's nice that a high school in Indiana can say, 'We have the same floor that the Pacers practice on,'" Ficks said.

Stoehr declined to provide revenue numbers but said his industry saw a downturn from a peak in 2001 until the first quarter of 2005 and contracted as a whole 25 percent. During that period Robbins saw flat sales, he said. Since then, he said, Robbins has had annual sales growth of 3 percent to 4 percent.

SOME REBOUND

A Robbins floor has two parts: a thin top layer of hard maple and a sub-floor made of plywood and rubber cushions. The result, athletic officials and company executives say, is a floor that is thinner, safer and provides greater performance than older floors.

The MVP floor is the latest version of the design. Nerl said players and referees notice the difference.

"The floor minimizes shock on kids' ankles, knees and lower backs," Nerl said. "There is a certain amount of rebound -- enough give to (protect) their ankles and knees, but not enough give to make it like running on a mattress. By having the right mix it helps keep them fresh."

WORKING TOGETHER

The Stoehr family founded Cincinnati Floor Co. in 1894 to build residential hardwood floors. As basketball and other gym sports became more popular, Cincinnati Floor began building gymnasium floors.

Jay Stoehr said the company entered the portable floor market in 1949, when the Cincinnati Gardens asked Cincinnati Floor to build a portable basketball court so the building could also host hockey matches.

In 1977 Jim Stoehr purchased Robbins, a manufacturer of sports floors. The family operated the two companies as separate entities, with Robbins focusing on developing new technology for basketball courts.

The Stoehr family sold Cincinnati Floor a decade later to Douglas Drenick, and the companies still work closely together. Robbins designs new floor technology and mills the hard maple at its plants in Wisconsin and Michigan. Cincinnati Floor sells and installs Robbins permanent floors to gyms and arenas across the region. It is one of Robbins' largest regional contractors, Ficks said.

Cincinnati Floor's president, Charles Maricle, who worked for Jay Stoehr in the 1980s, said his company could sell other manufacturers' maple floors but has decided to stay with Robbins.

"Robbins leads the way in our industry in almost every turn," he said. "We believe that they're the best."



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Stoehr stands on sample flooring for a basketball court in the Robbins showroom. The Eastern Avenue company makes permanent floors for gymnasiums and portable floors for arenas.

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