

SEQUEL & Robbins Sports Surfaces Team Up To Floor The World

by Bob Balderson

In 1891, James Naismith nailed two solid peach baskets and 13 rules to two walls in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the game of basketball was born. It caught on fast (with a few modifications to the baskets and the rules), and the demand for quality floors on which to play basketball wasn't far behind. In the late 1890s, the Cincinnati Floor Company was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio to manufacture, distribute, and install athletic floors. They quickly developed a reputation for quality and craftsmanship that they maintain to this day. One of their greatest innovations was the development in the early 1950s of the Cincinnati AllStar, a portable basketball floor designed perfectly to meet the needs of the newly founded National Basketball Association (NBA). Today, after some shifts in ownership and some name changes, Robbins Sports Surfaces has emerged as the undisputed leader in the market of indoor flooring for sports. Currently, in more than 60 nations around the world, millions of square feet of Robbins floors support competition among athletes, playtime for children, and assemblies in schools. In the United States, Robbins manufactures the majority of all NBA floors, providing portable floors that can be taken up and put back down again, along with permanent structure flooring. Over the years, their reputation for attention to detail and outstanding quality has made Robbins, "The Most Trusted Name in Sports Flooring."

Chuck Fieger is a Business Systems Analyst at the corporate office in Cincinnati, Ohio. As he explains, "Robbins specializes in sports flooring—basketball, volleyball, the gym floor that you see at your local school, church, or university, including the NBA floors in large coliseums. For our hardware, we use an IBM® Power Systems™ model 810 for about 60 users at sites in Wisconsin and Michigan, with three IT people supporting these users. We recently converted from the INFOR BPCS Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) application to the latest release, called ERP LX V8.3.3. It was a huge change—

master file changes, many new files, everything was modified. It had been six years since our last upgrade, so it was a major project."

The company has been using SEQUEL ViewPoint® for a long time for ad hoc reporting, standard management reporting, sales reporting, and more. When they converted to the new ERP software they took a long hard look at the different options and functionality available with SEQUEL. It had a report function and scripting to handle their different business requirements, including generating PDF reports with form overlays. As Chuck describes, "I use a command to take a jpeg file from the IFS forms overlay directory containing the Robbins logo. Then, I overlay my report spooled file data over the jpeg form and produce a customer document/form."

"During the conversion, we had many reports to upgrade based on the changes in the ERP application. SEQUEL helped us determine whether the conversion process was working. For example, before the conversion we had a total sales year-to-date report in SEQUEL. We re-ran the same report after the conversion to see whether we still got the same numbers. We used simple views to check the data and verify that the master file was converted, the general ledger was in balance, and that we still had our orders from before."

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"Now, we're generating documents from our SEQUEL script. For example, when a customer service rep generates a customer order, a spooled file is sent to an output queue in a library. We monitor that queue and when a file is written to it, we submit a job that creates a customer document—the document is formatted

with the Robbins logo from the jpeg file and the data from the ERP application. We save the results to the IFS for reference and send the document to the customer service representative to e-mail to the customer.

“We also create database files from spooled files. We use a command and a view that reads the database file by row ID and checks whether it is a customer quote, an order, an invoice, or something else. It also checks whether the order is coming from the test system. If so, it uses the database files from the test system.

Chuck likes the fact that SEQUEL really simplifies some tasks. “I had a project to verify our lumber shipments. When we get logs from a sawmill, they go down a conveyer belt to be ‘read’ by a laser to a PLC control unit that writes the results to a file. Every 20 minutes, a series of scripts ‘reads this file’ to calculate how much lumber actually came in. For example, when a truck arrives and the driver says there are 10,000 board feet, this process verifies how many board feet there really are. That way, we pay for what we received, not what they say was delivered. This was not a big project —we did it with four views—but it saves the company a lot of money. It’s cool and we couldn’t have done it without SEQUEL.”

SEQUEL’s ease-of-use is also huge for Chuck. “For training, I went to the introduction class in Chicago. It was a three-day class that used a real-life scenario complete with sales information. You had to put tables together and set up WHERE, GROUP BY, and ORDER BY clauses. I used SEQUEL ViewPoint and the graphical interface made things so easy. To be able to quickly go into the data, extract important information, put it in Excel, and send it off is amazing. The training was very good and it gave me a great foundation.”

Chuck’s basic project philosophy is twofold: “Don’t reinvent the wheel—someone has done a similar project. And, use the support resources available. Whenever I encounter roadblocks, I rely on the SEQUEL instructors and support people. I tell them what I’m trying to do and they offer suggestions to steer me in the right direction. I will typically pick their brains when I run into a problem. We pay for support and we use it—I’m not a trial-and-error person. If I can’t get it right in a few

times, I ask somebody. I start with a colleague and if they don’t have an answer, I rely on SEQUEL Support. I highly recommend both the training and the support because they can save you a lot of time.”

The company has some clear software goals, as Chuck explains. “We’re trying to move away from multiple third-party software packages to a single preferred SEQUEL solution that uses views, scripts, reports, and dashboards. That way, we only have

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to learn one tool, all of our queries run on one server, and we don’t impact normal production. We also want to define a dedicated server for SEQUEL ViewPoint, a separate system that acts as a kind of data warehouse. We’ll use the data warehouse with SEQUEL to build dashboards and pivot tables. For example, we do a lot of reporting about types, size, and thickness of the wood for our floors. We can put all that in our data warehouse and use SEQUEL to display it in dashboards.

“We have two developers and about 20 users who work with SEQUEL ViewPoint or reports. Our other users use the views that these people build. Currently, we plan to train our users to use SEQUEL dashboards and tables to create an environment where customer service people, sales managers, accounting people, and the company owner can see the status of orders and month-to-month items. The more I learn about SEQUEL and our ERP system, the more I realize that SEQUEL is a perfect fit for us.”

Chuck sums it all up. “We made the decision that SEQUEL will be our tool of choice and I know it’s the right decision—it’s been a life-saver. Between scripts, views, reports, and tables, we’re going to achieve all of our objectives, including eliminating unnecessary tools. We have come up with our preferred tool, SEQUEL ViewPoint, and our preferred vendor, SEQUEL Software.”