KC company resurfaced courts at Australian Open

By BOB LUDER
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It's taking place at the other end of the world, where day is night and winter is summer.
So it's hard to believe that when tennis fans tune in to watch the Australian Open, they're actually seeing a piece of Kansas City on the screen.

But when you gaze upon the brand new Plexicushion-surfaced tennis courts at Melbourne Park, that's exactly what you're seeing. A Kansas City company, McConnell & Associates, spearheaded the project of resurfacing not only 25 courts at Melbourne Park, but also tennis courts at legendary Kooyong Stadium, former home to the Aussie Open, and courts in Adelaide, where tune-up events were staged leading up to the Open.

A McConnell & Associates employee helped work on the Plexicushion surface.

"We were pretty proud we were chosen to install," said Rob McConnell of his company, located in North Kansas City. "They could've gone anywhere, but they chose us. "When I go home and turn on ESPN, there are the blue courts. It was a real good deal for our company."

How McConnell & Associates became the installer for tennis courts a world and hemisphere away is a story of associations that led to — now follow this — a company named after California but based in Massachusetts contacting a contractor based in the middle of the U.S. to install tennis courts Down Under.

When the powers that be at the Australian Open decided to switch surfaces from the green, Australian-made Rebound Ace surface that had been used since 1988, they decided to go to Plexipave, a surface manufactured here in America by a company called California Products Corp.

"Plexipave is a well-known product," said Larry Tegtmeyer, an area representative for California Products/Plexipave. "It's used on courts all over the world. It's been around 55 years.
"It's used at most of the Big Ten schools, the pro tournament at Indian Wells. It was used at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta."

Plexipave is the surface that Craig Tiley's University of Illinois men's tennis team played on when it won the NCAA championship in 2003.

And, today, Tiley is head of the Australian national team and tournament director of the Australian Open.

When the tournament settled on Plexipave — or, more specifically, the variation of Plexipave called Plexicushion — California Products was faced with deciding which contractor to put in charge of the installation.

"We have contractors in Australia," Tegtmeyer said. "But what the Australian tennis folks wanted to do was not only change the courts for the Australian Open, but also the tournaments leading up to the Australian Open. The install process was major, and we didn't have the crew to accomplish this in a short time frame."

So California Products looked to one of its favorite contractors in the Midwest. If you see pretty much any tennis court in the Kansas City area, chances are it was surfaced by McConnell & Associates. The company has surfaced courts at The Carriage Club, Rockhurst University and Pembroke Hill prep school.

The firm also built the court at Barney Allis Plaza used by the Explorers.

"When that decision needed to be made, I went to Rob (McConnell)," said Jeff Launius, general manager of the Explorers. "Our court is different, because it's different colors, which can affect the speed. But when you tell them the speed (you want), it's done the way you want it.
"If they tell you they'll do something, bank on it. It's done."

McConnell & Associates sent its two tennis court superintendents, Don Hubbard and Jaime Ocampo, down to Melbourne for six to eight weeks.

They worked with installation crews from Singapore and India, using squeegees to apply 10 layers of the Latex-based product to each court.

And now, every night when he gets home, Hubbard can flip on the TV and see his work in action. "I've been watching it every night," he said. "I'm not a tennis fan and don't play, but I tune in just to hear if anything's said about the surface.

"If nothing else, I guess they gained another viewer."