





A LEAGUE OF ITS OWN

A wife keeps her football-fanatic husband at home by letting him build his dream theater

Deadline pressures aren't exactly uncommon in the custom installation business. But racing alongside a team of builders to complete a dedicated home theater on time was probably the biggest challenge facing Michael Blacker, owner of Dallas-based MB Audio/Video, during a recent installation in Plano, Texas. • The homeowner, Dave Johnson, is the CEO of a hospitality-management company — and an avid Minnesota Vikings football fan who regularly flies off to see his team in action. But he

THE HOME THEATER was built as an addition above a 3½-car garage. Its walls were framed 12 inches on center for greater structural rigidity, and the sub-floor is made of double-layer plywood. Facing page, top: The built-in wall unit will hold the front speaker array and a 140-inch Screen Research screen. The finished room features a Sony VPL-VW100 front projector and has two Samsung 40-inch LCD HDTVs flanking the projection screen. Facing page, bottom: Components are stored in a rack at the end of the bar area, left.

BY KEVIN JAMES • PHOTOS BY VERN STEINMAN

INSTALLER MICHAEL BLACKER QUICKLY FOUND OUT THAT THE ENTIRE PROJECT — FROM DEMO TO DÉCOR — WOULD HAVE TO BE COMPLETED WITHIN 2 MONTHS.



THE PHILIPS PRONTO TSU9600 touchscreen remote (above) was programmed so that the Minnesota Vikings logo appears on the opening screen. Below: Parasound THX Ultra2-certified electronics — including 2- and 5-channel amplifiers, a universal DVD player, and a surround controller — comprise the system's core components.



also travels extensively for work. Dave's wife, Stacey, thought that having a home theater where he could watch the games with his friends would keep him home a bit more with her and their three daughters. So the couple decided to build an addition above their 3½-car garage to house the theater. The only catch: The room had to be ready for the start of football season.

Michael was brought in by one of the project managers from LTC Professional Builders in Denton, Texas, who had met him while working on a job near Michael's home. When Michael was told of the project's 8- to 10-week deadline, he assumed that meant he'd have close to 2 months to complete the A/V and home-networking installation. What he quickly found out was that the entire project — from demo to décor — had to be done within that time limit, and the builders had already started framing.

"The framing kicked off Texas-style, with 4 days of catering food, barbecue, and beverages," Michael remembers. That incentive inspired the crew. "They ripped off the roof and framed the addition in 3 days. On Day 5, the last nail went in, and the work was inspected."

The nearly 1,000-square-foot addition encompassed the 28½ x 19½-foot theater room plus a small foyer, a bar area, and an equipment closet. Because the room is located away from the center of the house, construction was straightforward, except the walls were framed 12 inches on center (rather than the standard 16 inches) for greater structural rigidity, and the sub-floor was built with double-layer plywood. To help quiet the airflow from the HVAC system, the air-conditioning ducts have multiple 90° bends.

Michael's approach to planning the installation was a bit unusual. He never asked the Johnsons their budget. Instead, he asked Stacey what Dave is like as a person. "She looked at me a little strangely," Michael recalls, "and I said, 'I know that Dave's a mover and shaker professionally, but really, what's he like as a person? Is he quiet, or is he full-throttle, going 120 miles an hour all day?' She laughed and said, 'Yeah, he's full-throttle.'"

Similarly, Michael met with Dave and asked about his daughters, and how he thought the theater would be used. Michael then designed three room models that offered different levels of performance.

"Using Dave's football passion as an example, I said I could give them one design that would put him up in the stands at the game, another that would put him on the 50-yard line, and a third that would make him feel like he was on the shoulder pad of the right tackle." Not surprisingly, the Johnsons chose the last one.

Says Dave: "When you put that kind of money into a theater, you want to make sure you have equipment that matches the room. And it does. I couldn't be happier with the results."

The focal point of the theater is an acoustically transparent 140-inch ClearPix2 screen from Screen Research, which is mated to Sony's VPL-VW100 SXRD 1080p front projector. Helping to give the room a unified, custom appearance is a built-in wall unit, designed by Michael and made by a local cabinetmaker. It spans the front of



THE CUSTOM-BUILT WALL UNIT holds the James Loudspeakers left and right front speakers, the Samsung LCD HDTVs, and the Screen Research screen, which conceals the center speaker and two 10-inch subwoofers.

the room — and along with providing the framework for the in-wall front left and right speakers and the projection screen, it has cutouts for the pair of 40-inch Samsung LCD TVs that flank the screen.

Michael had limited time for the pre-wire. “One day, we stopped by to see how the electrician was doing, and the builder told us the pre-wire had to be done by the next afternoon.” To prevent electrical interference, low-voltage wires were run through PVC jackets in the top and bottom plates, and cables fed through the attic were kept 1½ to 2 feet from power lines. A dedicated circuit was run from the main breaker panel to a subpanel to keep the room’s power lines isolated from the rest of the house’s AC circuits.

Along with multiple drops of RG6 (for A/V) and Cat-6 (for the home network), Michael ran multi-mode fiber-optic cable, even though none of the gear currently uses it. “In 5 years, when you can download HD movies over fiber-optic in 10 seconds, the Johnsons will be able to plug in a laptop and download a movie,” he says.

Whereas countless home theaters are heavy on design and light on performance, this one is refreshingly the opposite. Almost all the electronics are from Parasound’s Halo series, and all the speakers are in-wall models from James Loudspeakers. Handling the front left and right channels is a pair of biamped Baby Grand Concerto SDX speakers, which have a soft-dome tweeter, two 8-inch midrange drivers, and a 10-inch subwoofer; a 1,200-watt, rack-mounted James Model Six amp sends 600 watts to each sub. The James 83-SDX center speaker, like the Baby Grand Concertos, has a soft-dome tweeter and two 8-inch midranges. Lastly, two pairs of 82-SDX in-walls (each of whose tweeters is complemented by a single 8-inch midrange) are used for the side and rear surround channels. All the enclosures are made of welded aircraft-grade aluminum and use proprietary drivers.

James speakers feature proprietary equalization circuitry called AFDC (Adjustable Frequency Distribution Circuit), which lets them be tuned to a room’s acoustics. (The circuitry replaces the conventional crossover networks used in most speakers.) By turning a

dial on the front of each speaker, you can change the speaker’s equalization curve so that its frequency output and tonal characteristics can be adjusted to deal with room anomalies.

“The goal is to get an across-the-board frequency response,” Michael explains. “These speakers let you tune the system at the output side, instead of reprocessing the signal in the processor.” The circuitry also protects against overloads (James says that none of its speakers have failed due to excess power), which is why the speakers don’t have maximum power ratings.

A pair of James EMB-1000 subwoofers sit behind the projection screen, and a 1000PPT in-wall “power-pipe” sub at the back of the room. The outward-facing 10-inch woofer on the EMB-1000 subs is actually a passive radiator that’s acoustically coupled to an amplified 10-inch woofer behind it. This lets the sub deliver very low frequencies at elevated sound levels without high-excursion distortion. Meanwhile, the 1000PPT sub uses a hidden enclosure with a long-throw 10-inch driver and a 4-inch-diameter port. The latter is actually a flexible tube that can be snaked to the edge

of a wall, ceiling, or floor and terminated with a grate or grille. The 1000PPT is powered by its own 600-watt, rack-mounted amp.

Every piece of electronics — primarily from Parasound’s line of THX Ultra2-certified components — is housed in a rack in the equipment closet. A 400-watt-per-channel Halo A 21 stereo amp powers the front left and right speakers, while a 5-channel Halo A 51 pumps equal amounts of power to the center and surround speakers. Connected to a Halo C 1 processor/controller are a Halo D 3 universal DVD player, a DirecTV HD receiver/DVR, and two DirecTV HD receivers, which feed the two LCD TVs. The gear is guarded by a Panamax MAX 5400-PM surge protector/power conditioner, as well as by surge suppression at the electrical subpanel.

Dave acknowledges that he didn’t know much about the Halo gear and had to rely heavily on his installer’s choices. Confirms Michael: “Dave gave considerable trust to my guidance. But he’s been everywhere and seen everything, so I wanted to give him a system that would really stop him in his tracks. We talked about the differences between receivers and separates, and we talked about Parasound’s product line, its warranty, and its position and image in the industry. I like the gear because it’s bulletproof — and in conjunction with the James Loudspeakers, if Dave wants to go full-volume, he can. He’s not the kind of guy who wants or needs products that have tons of bells and whistles. He understood the performance differences, and he wanted absolutely top-caliber sound quality.”

While Michael and Dave quickly agreed on the Sony VPL-VW100 SXR front projector, the 140-inch Screen Research ClearPix 2 screen was a late addition. “We’d originally spec’d a smaller screen,” Dave says, “but when build-out was done, we were surprised by the size of the room. Michael said the original screen was going to look too small, and he recommended the larger one. I’m certainly happy with that decision.”

Michael is a fan of Screen Research’s acoustically transparent screens, which use woven fabric rather than tiny perforations to al-

THE SAMSUNG LCD TVs EACH HAVE HEADPHONES, SO THE HOMEOWNER'S FRIENDS CAN MONITOR OTHER GAMES WHILE A DIFFERENT GAME IS SHOWN ON THE BIG SCREEN.



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EQUIPMENT LIST

- Sony VPL-VW100 SXRD 1080p front projector
- Screen Research ClearPix2 THX-certified 140-inch screen
- (2) Samsung LN-T4081 1080p 40-inch LCD HDTVs
- (2) James Baby Grand Concerto SDX in-wall left/right speakers
- James 83-SDX in-wall center speaker
- (4) James 82-SDX in-wall surround speakers (side and rear)
- (2) James EMB-1000 10-inch subwoofers
- James 1000PPT 10-inch in-wall subwoofer
- Parasound Halo D 3 THX Ultra2-certified universal DVD player
- Parasound Halo C 1 THX Ultra2-certified surround controller
- Parasound Halo A 51 THX Ultra2-certified 400-watt 5-channel amplifier
- Parasound Halo A 21 THX Ultra2-certified 400-watt 2-channel amplifier
- (2) James Model 6 600-watt subwoofer amplifiers
- Panamax MAX 5400-PM power conditioner/surge protector
- Philips Pronto TSU9600 touchscreen universal remote control
- Ethereal audio and video cables

low sound from the speakers placed behind them to pass through. "With a lot of perf screens, if you sit too close, you'll see artifacts," Michael says. "With the SR screen, you can have people sitting 7 feet away, and the image is still absolutely stunning."

The screen has a custom-built 5-inch wooden frame with an aluminum-alloy tube running down the center for strength and rigidity. "We upholstered the frame in black theatrical velour," Michael says, "and it really looks much more substantial than the powder-coated aluminum frame that everyone else uses."

The Samsung LCD TVs that flank the screen were chosen for their high contrast ratios and deep black levels. The TVs and the projector each have their own DirecTV HD receiver, so that up to three games can be viewed at a time. And the LCDs each have Sennheiser headphones, so that Dave's friends can monitor other games while a different game is being shown on the big screen.

Michael chose a Philips Pronto TSU9600 touchscreen universal remote control to handle the system. "I like the Philips remotes," he says. "If you really learn the product, they're considerably more robust than most people realize." Michael created macros for the Johnsons, so watching TV or a movie is as simple as pressing a button. And he added a special feature for Dave: When the Pronto turns on, he's greeted by the Vikings' logo.

What seemed like one of Michael's biggest challenges — coordinating his activities with those of the other contractors — turned out to be a non-issue. "They all communicated a lot more than usual," he says, "letting each other know when and where they were going to be working."

What *did* turn out to be a challenge was pinning the peripatetic Dave down for a chat. "He's on the road a lot, doing million-dollar deals," Michael says. "And I finally had to stomp my feet like a kid and say, 'You have to give me the time to do my speech, because it's the only way you're going to know what's going to happen at the end of this and understand why this is a better fit than that.'"

Michael calls Stacey a very key player in the room's design, and Dave concurs: "I worked with Michael on the gear, but Stacey coordinated everything. She dealt with Michael more than I did, because she was home." Michael adds: "She was one of the best clients we've worked with. We'd make suggestions, and she asked the right questions, did some research on her own, and made decisions quickly."

Both Dave and Stacey are blown away by the result. Not only is Dave now enjoying football games with his buddies, but the room has become a popular hangout for the Johnson daughters' friends.

"I'm ecstatic with how things turned out," Dave says. "The great thing about Michael is that he gets as excited as you do. The guys who play in my fantasy-football leagues came over the second week of the season. Michael showed up an hour beforehand and stayed the entire afternoon just to make sure everything was working the way it should. He appreciated the fact that if something went wrong in the heat of the game with all my buddies there, it would have made for a really bad day. That blew me away. It's not just a job to him." **S&V**