Karl Borree on Making Sports Floors Smarter, Safer, and More Sustainable | Transcript

00:02
Speaker 1
Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cicchetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a lead fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why green Building matters.

00:33
Speaker 2
Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. You know, every week I get an interview, you know, someone that's in and around the built environment and I love talking also to, on the manufacturing side, the installation side, talking materials. It's obviously a huge part of this movement. So I've got Carl on today from Action Floors. Carl, how you doing, man?

00:56
Speaker 1
Well, Charlie, how are you?

00:58
Speaker 2
Yeah, pretty good. Well traveled of late. It's kind of conference season, it seems like, so I've been on the road a little bit, but excited be back for the. For the podcast here. And you know, I love to just ask my podcast guests, take us back. Where'd you grow up and tell us about in any schooling there and just early career.

01:15
Speaker 1
Cool. Yeah, I. I grew up just about 20 minutes out of Green Bay, Wisconsin in farmlands and. And I ended up, grew up there and went to high school and such. And then I went up to Northern Michigan up in Marquette, Michigan and went to college up there and then, you know, traveled around on a few different jobs and lived over in England in different places and kind of worked my way back to the UP in a roundabout way, working. Started working in the. In this industry

with Horner flooring right around 2000. And as that continued on, I now work for Action Floors. Both of the mills are members of what's called the mfma, the Maple Flooring Manufacturers Association. So we specialize now in actual floors here.

02:03
Speaker 1
We specialize in making basketball floors cradle to grave, from the forest to the, you know, to the gym, to the elementary school to the college facility.

02:14
Speaker 2
Wow, thanks for that connecting all the dots there. And what brought you back to the. To that region now you know a little bit about sustainability, though. I mean, when did it first kind of show up in your life or maybe in your career?

02:27
Speaker 1
Well, I would say that career wise, you know, it was early 2000 when I say when I started working for Horner Flooring and being located up in the UP Of Michigan, you know, there's a lot More trees than. Than a lot of people really realize that are out there. And working with Horner, the green build and the green movement was just beginning. And as a customer service rep, it was an opportunity for me to, you know, to broaden my skill set. So I had the opportunity and talked to my boss and said, can I sit the lead AP exam? And I, you know, took that exam. And that honestly opened up my eyes to the whole. The whole green build movement. It's much more than just the trees, which, you know, which is really what I thought it was all about.

03:15
Speaker 1
But that's just one facet of all the different things that are in. Encapsulated in the green build movement. Everything from air quality to lighting to product development. And, you know, there was just. And actually, you know, the colors on roofs from, you know, parking lots, how it all is intertwined anytime you really are involved with nature. Yeah, thanks for connecting that.

03:41
Speaker 2
And you're right. This green building movement, it's hard to believe. And just a reminder for our listeners, the first LEED projects were certified in the year 2000. So we got 25 years of LEED, and there's other programs, but, you know, lead's just been a great mechanism to bring awareness that, hey, here's some

things you could do, you should do. And I'm sure you've supplied into, you know, a lot of green building projects over at the time. Let's do a little look back, though. I also like to ask Carl about mentors. Sometimes a mentor somebody, you just read their material, see them on stage, they kind of influence you. Sometimes it's someone that you have coffee with and they challenge you or open the door. Have you any mentors along the way?

04:17
Speaker 1
You know, I mean, my father probably was the closest one too. You know that, because he was a worker with his hands and. And were outside a lot and. And I always grew up outside, so real appreciation for the. For being in nature. And so I'd say he's listening outside of. A really good friend of mine still is Eddie Doucet, who. Who was a. He's actually in a basketball hall. Announcers hall of fame. He announced for the Milwaukee Bucks when they won the National World Basketball Championship with Kareem Jabar and formerly Lu Al Sunder. And. But. But I became friends with him working at Horner. And then he really challenged me many times to broaden my skill set. Broaden my skill set. And then when I got a little too, you know, too broad, they say, focus, Carl, focus. So.

05:04
Speaker 1
So he really helped Me a lot along with many, many people that sometimes, you know, I'm sure, Charlie, sometimes the smallest statement made by a person in happenstance on a chance meeting can have a big effect. And then so I've had a lot of that probably where you think you're doing the right thing, but you don't really know. And then through a process of synchronicity, something else happens and you realize, oh no, this is pat, this is what I should be doing.

05:35
Speaker 2
Well said. That's good stuff. You know, as you look back, one more thing, just, you know, what are some of your proudest accomplishments so far?

05:42
Speaker 1
Well, I have to say, honestly, my, I did not. I grew up as I have a degree in economics and sport coaching. And I'd have to say my biggest accomplishments in my mind were probably things that happened with players and in affecting people's. People's mindset on how they view the things, how they view things so that they're. That try to open up the mind that, you know, you need to be aware of everything and that doesn't mean you agree with everything, but you need to

be aware of it and you need to be, you know, expanding all the time and challenging your own mentality.

06:20
Speaker 1
So I would say like those kind of things, when I bump into a former player of mine or someone that I know that now said and they had that aha moment, that's probably, you know, what were the endorphins and the dopam get fired up for me. So more so than a particular project or a physical thing.

06:43
Speaker 2
Thank you, thank you for that look back. Okay, so let's start present day, you know, tell us a little more about your business, you know, where you all serve and you know a little bit about your role.

06:54
Speaker 1
Right. So we as members of the mfma, we specialize in making basketball sports floors, maple sports flooring systems. And so right now it's all about building systems that effectively help the athlete perform better, are safer, are more uniform, but at the same time are more sustainable. How they're structured, how they're built, how they fit long term. At Action Floors here we're based in Mercer, Wisconsin. We're right in the middle of two national forests. So we literally are in the middle of our product, the maple. And so we're the only mill in the mfma but more so I think in the flooring, maple flooring business who we have our own EPD that went and spent the money and you Know, made the investment to analyze our company to see where do we fit in the green building process.

07:58
Speaker 1
And we're actually, you know, you hear about the carbon footprint all the time and. But you know, our EPD basically certifies from the SGS Global service that we're carbon negative. Whereas, because in that. And it was very in depth where they measured, you know, the material going from here, going to the. Going to. We, you know, sorry, I'll step back a second. We put in about 500 basketball floors around the world every year. We service customers from the Philippines, Australia to New Jersey, California, Puerto Rico, Colombia, all over the world. And we ship our maple from there, from here, all over the world because of numerous factors, but mostly because we get anywhere from 200 to 300 inches of snow a year in this region. So the growing season is very slow.

08:55
Speaker 1
So the maple rings are really hard and there's nutrients in the ground here with copper and iron remnants that make our maple the best maple for sports flooring anywhere in the world. So we ship all over the world, everyone has maple, but no one has the kind of maple we have. And then, and then below the maple, like I say, the magic happens underneath the maple. When you look at a basketball floral, when you walk into an elementary school, high school, college, doesn't really matter. All the real magic is underneath the maple. That's where we design the area deflection, the shock absorption, the things that the athlete feels and how you design that properly so that spans the correct amount of time for the building it's going to go in.

09:44
Speaker 1
But also when you look at each and every product, is it a plastic off gassing product that's resilient but over time will stiffen and harden and change the athletes. The performance of the floor and off gas into the athlete, air quality or using all natural or pads or you know, these kind of things. So it's all about sustainable build now, I think, you know, for us.

10:09
Speaker 2
Well, I love that. Not just the growing and the raw materials. And don't forget about the air quality. We'll have to talk about that. More educators. I don't know a lot about sports flooring and it's exciting. Has it always been maple or if you go way back, I mean on, you know.

10:24
Speaker 1
Yeah, I think he's probably playing on dirt in the barn, but. But yeah, that is the concept that there was on maple. It wasn't a barn, it was on, you know, wood. But over time, the MFMA. The MFMA was founded in 1891. So we've been around a long time and we, you know, through the air, basically through time there's a, you know, it's kind of hard to say exactly, but in the 40s, more maple was going into homes. And you know, while went into homes, basically you would nail the maple onto a sheet of plywood or a version of that. And that's basically how the initial basketball floors were made. The same way nailing maple into a sheet of plywood.

11:08
Speaker 1

But then over the years, in the last, I'll say the last 20 years now with technology, like everything else now, we dialed into more of the scientific testing of ball bounce, shock absorption, wear and tear on athletes knees, Uniformity of floor, uniformity of the experience. Because if your body doesn't feel comfortable in the experience, then you set yourself up for two things. A change which could cause an injury, you know, or lack of confidence which would check performance. So really that's what, you know, that's where it's all really come to now. And we progressed from where it was a piece of plywood, you know, and then it went on to sleepers because at homes back in the day people had trusses.

11:58
Speaker 1
So then they went to a maple and realized that two pieces of plywood, although it's very uniform, with a pad per square foot, you could say that's a standard floor. The only concern with that is that, you know, especially in elementary schools, middle schools, when, when humans are that small, their heads are their biggest or their biggest object on their body. So when they fall and hit their head on something that's solid, that's so firm, that the balls might be good, but there's a pretty good chance that they might get a little concussed doing that. So, so head injury protocol is something that we look at now too. So each area, you know, our thing is, who's your athlete? You tell us who your athlete is and we'll tell you the floor you should have. Because that's really, it's all built around that.

12:45
Speaker 1
You know, in the beginning, the athlete needs, we'll say is elementary school. Well, performance is important, but utility of the space is more important, right to the school. They're looking at that space, the elementary gym that maybe is where they do their dance recitals, that's where they have their graduations, that's where they have their meals. So those floors need to be able to be very durable. They need to have high utility so that you can put a lot of weight on them. And what we'd say is they'll partially, they'll block self, block themselves so you won't lose the resilience. Then as you perform, you go up the scale and you're taught middle school, high school, especially middle school. Now you start the hormonal thing and the boys and girls are growing now and performance becomes more important.

13:35
Speaker 1
Utility is still important, but now it's more the knees and joints because that's when they're in puberty and that's when Oshkod, Slaters and different things come up physically. So you have to be really aware of the floor, then the

softness again, the utility of the space, the sport you're talking about. And then of course you go into college and pro where now it's highly focused on the performance of the athlete and their ability to perform on the floor, where that's, that is really what it is all about. So the floors and we have 14 different subfloors, you know, that span the width of that timeline depending on who your athlete is. What's the utility of the space?

14:18
Speaker 1
What do you really need to, you know, give the athlete and the owner the best experience in a sustainable design that's going to last the lifetime of the building, not beyond. We don't need the floor to be sitting there when the building falls down. We need it to have the timeline so it matches the sustainable design of the building.

14:41
Speaker 2
A lot of science behind it. You get me excited about sports flooring, man. That sounds like you're coming.

14:46
Speaker 1
Really.

14:47
Speaker 2
It's almost flooring as a service here. Hey, we've thought through all of it and it's a key partnership there. So with sustainability. I've been around green buildings a long time, Carl, and I would say your industry flooring was probably one of the first that really went all in on sustainability. Maybe thanks in part to some good folks, you know, like Ray Anderson and stuff, kind of laying down a challenge there. Maybe more on textile. But would you say your customers or they do they just expect it or how do those conversations even come up?

15:18
Speaker 1
I think, you know, a lot of it is driven by the, I think you know, a three part conversation where the owner and our owner varies, you know, in a public venue. Our owner is a school system where they institute a bond in the, you know, we'll say in the town and then the town says yes, we're going to build a new school. So then they put the money forth and then they go and get themselves. The school district generally goes and gets themselves an architect and I think when they shop for that architectural firm that has a lot to do with

even in that early stage into where are they really going to end up? You know you, there are more companies now that are helping schools do that.

16:07
Speaker 1
But from an early stage often the people that are the stakeholders in a sense will say the school board, sometimes they know, most of the time they don't know. So the architect that they go to is crucial as to what their end product will look like. And we all know that. But it's very important because some architects are more focused, as you know, on green build, sustainable design. Some are not as focused, they're all focused on it but there's a continuum. So depending on the architect you choose, I think that's very. Defines a lot about how they're going to look at the project and then maybe construction manager that's going to help them or general contractor that's going to do the final build. But that's just one scenario.

17:00
Speaker 1
The other scenario, another simple scenario is university where they have private money and they have no, I'm sure you've been around it where there's nothing that money can't do. When people step in with money now, it's that person's money as the stakeholder, are they focused on green design? Are they focused on sustainability or are they more focused on the team winning games? And that's their really focus. So it's very much, I think it's out there for everyone but again I think it's the concept of how broad are you thinking about things when you go into it and then what do the final stakeholders like? If we just go back to the school board concept. So then they bid those three public, they have to have the. In any public bid, as you know there has to be three like products.

17:50
Speaker 1
Three like or better products to bid that get put up for bid in a public setting. So then the school board generally they will take the lowest bid because their function is to try to get the best price. But sometimes by not knowing the best bid number is not the best green design or it's not the best sustainable design but they're forced to do that be due to financials. So it's a matter of each individual situation is different and there's loads of them. But I think the architect plays a major role, the construction manager. We as product presenters we present our product but ultimately we are going to present the product over time that particular stakeholder wants and needs.

18:40
Speaker 2

Thanks for Showing us all the different types of owners that buy from you and they, you're right, they have different needs and. But I know there's a lot of sustainability baked into your products. That's important. So let's talk about what's next in the green movement. Is there anything you're reading up on now you're excited about or are there any new trends even in sports flooring?

19:00
Speaker 1
Yeah, like I said, one of the things that, you know, in sports flooring will they say we're the only company that has a EPD on their products and really look at it holistically like that. The MFMA is, you know, they're very green in the sense they're trying to promote it. But it's, but it's having the real. The math behind you to say this is kind of how it works. The big, I would say one of the changes that we've really implemented is we've gone to all natural rubber pads. And I said that earlier because there's, there are pads that can be made out of PVC plastic, which has kind of been an industry standard for a long time. But those pads, they do off gas, meaning that they become less resilient as basically the biocarbons float into the air.

19:51
Speaker 1
And so we're really focusing on our all natural rubber pads that we have a partnership with a firm overseas where we can get all natural rubber pads and we can basically manipulate the amount of. Of without getting into the science, but the amount of rubber, the actual cellulose that we put into. That's probably not the term for basically. But to make, give each pad a different durometer level. So the pads are shaped how they're built, design wise, material science wise. That's a big change as far as like we have a dome circular dome pad that's all natural, that is, has different levels of durometer, meaning hardness and softness. So when the athlete, this pad will say, goes under a particular structure when the athlete jumps and lands on the pad.

20:48
Speaker 1
The all natural pad of course never will off gas and will always maintain its resilience throughout the life, you know, beyond our lives. But the design of the pad itself makes it so when the athlete weight comes down, that pad will actually give restitution to the athlete which will actually help the athlete get up higher again. So those kind of material science things are really where it's going. We just did a study at Northern Michigan University. We're the only MFMA that's ever done a public study at a university, self funded, just for that. Just for measuring the resilience and the restitution of the different pads and different pad designs to minimize the, you know, the product footprint but yet

give a better experience to the athlete and know that it will go on through perpetuity.

21:50
Speaker 2
Thanks for giving us not just the strategic guidance you're doing with your product, but just kind of what's happening industry. Industry that's helpful. Let's go to the rapid fire part of our podcast.

22:03
Speaker 1
You're here.

22:03
Speaker 2
What would you say is your specialty or gift?

22:06
Speaker 1
I like talking as you can tell.

22:08
Speaker 2
Have you always had that?

22:10
Speaker 1
Yeah, I have it. In my undergrad at college, you know, I had a degree in rhetorical theory and I always liked doing that. I like, you know, that sort of thing. That's how my career ended up kind of where it's at.

22:22
Speaker 2
What do you have any good habits or routines keep you on point?

22:26
Speaker 1
I'm big on that sort of stuff. I really like it.

22:28
Speaker 1
You know, it's not genius stuff but I think like you know, if you know, people call it journaling and such but I think if you can sit down in the morning and

come up with you know, half dozen dozen things about basically about why you're upright and what are you going to do about it and being, you know, basically just realizing that today is a pretty great day and it's just like every other day that where great things have happened and so I do that, I usually do that for about 10 times 10, you know, 10 or 15 things a day that I'm thankful for and I gratitude toward and kind of focus my long term thinking and then try to work off a to do list every day and carry the things that you don't do, carry them forward but to, you know, to crystallize your actions.

23:14
Speaker 1
I guess that's how I look at it. I try to do the writing, to focus my mind every day. Try to get your mind right before you turn on any news, before you go to any social media and all that. Just, just always. And then, and then work set a to do list up right away too because once you decide to start your day, you know you're going to get pulled in every direction. At least you know what you're doing.

23:35
Speaker 2
And in a way your subconscious keeps you on track a little bit even when stuff comes up because you really hope so.

23:41
Speaker 1
It does, you know, hard to train.

23:43
Speaker 2
Kind of programmed it A little bit. I love that. I'm a fan of a bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list. Some might even call it a life list now. But, you know, some people, it's travel or adventure, maybe write a book. I don't know. What are a couple of things, Carl, on your bucket list?

23:58
Speaker 1
Well, I've got a book written. I just have to finish the last little bit. And I like to. I like, teach at college. Personal development. I think those two things are really kind of. I was very fortunate. I've had a lot of lucky things happen to me and I have a lot of things that I wanted to do. I did. But those would be a couple of things that I really would like to do in the future here too.

24:17

Speaker 2
And if you were to name one place you want to go back to or go to for the first time, is there somewhere you'd like to travel to one day?

24:23
Speaker 1
I don't know. I've. I've been very fortunate. Like I said, I've had. I've gone to China with my family. I've gone to Europe and different places through work and other events. Don't know if there's a place I would like to go back to as much as I think to see something that I've never seen. I just saw some video of a friend of mine that was in Cork in Ireland along the ocean, and it just looked fantastic. And I think that's the next place I'm going to.

24:51
Speaker 2
Thanks for sharing this. That sounds amazing. I like to ask my podcast guests, is there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't have to be about buildings or materials or if not a book, maybe a documentary or another podcast you've seen.

25:03
Speaker 1
Right. I think a book that. I think that is, you know, I think books are fantastic. I think, you know, he's the stop reading is, you know, you really learn when you get out of school that you need to keep learning all the time. So I love books. I would say Essence of Success by Earl Nightingale, that's a. That's a company compilation of all of his podcasts. They weren't podcasts in the 50s and 60s, but the essence of success that you can get on audio is just on audible. It's just fantastic. I mean, there's many other ones. There's, you know, infinite number of books in that regard. But then I would also say, like, I would think as far as if I was going to talk to someone off the street, I would say follow your passion, not your pension.

25:49
Speaker 1
That's the key, you know, because if you're. I tell everyone who listen, if you're in, if you follow your passion, you're going to get really into it. And if you get really into it, you're going to know a lot about it, and you're going to put all of your energy into it. You're going to have a really out of one, and then you're going to end up somehow in the top 10 or 15% of the people, because you'll care more than everyone else because you're really into it. And once you get into that stratosphere, you'll have plenty of money because there's always need for someone who's in the top 15% of whatever it is. It doesn't matter if you're studying bugs or the air or trees or medicine or. It doesn't matter.

26:27
Speaker 1
So I would suggest, and I've had friends of mine who's told me that in the past, too, that's, that's what I would say. Follow your passion, not your pension, because that'll bring you everything you. You really want.

26:38
Speaker 2
I love that line. And we will. We'll make sure everybody sees that. That's good stuff. Last couple things as we wrap up. As you look back on your career, is there anything you wish you'd have learned earlier? Any. Any career advice maybe you wish you learned earlier?

26:53
Speaker 1
Maybe I could take all the advice that you generally get. Be more organized, be this, be that. But I think really is trust your heart. Trust what you listen to when you sit down and you sit for five or 10 minutes, and it's not a big thing, but if you sit and just think for five minutes, what comes up is who you are, and trust that, because that's the direction you should go.

27:18
Speaker 2
That's good. Thank you for that. All right, so last question. Let's say listening is just jumping into this green building movement. Any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

27:29
Speaker 1
Well, I would say the green building movement, if you're. If you're focused on that and you. And you want to be involved, be very open to all the things that it encompasses. Because a building, like we'd said earlier. I'm sorry that I said that, you know, we think about the building in green building and you think, okay, the building, the structure. But nothing happens in a vacuum. So the parking lot around the building in the city of Chicago, how that good to get if the roof is black, that just because of the sun. So, like, just to really be aware, if you're jumping into the green build, I think is have an open mind to all the possibilities because it doesn't happen in a vacuum. And there are multiple facets that it's more than just the structure. It's the whole thing.

28:23
Speaker 1

It's the design, the swim fade, you know, the feel that, all of it. And so keep an open mind to all the things. There might be a lot of people piling into one area and if you don't want to go there, go where you want to go. There's a lot of different areas, a lot of ways for growth and a lot of things that we don't even know about that are that every day someone's inventing or realizing or, you know, so just be wide open to the topic.

28:50
Speaker 2
Thanks for that. So everybody listening, check out the show notes. We've referenced some really good things that we're going to put links to. And Carl, just thanks for being on and giving us a peek into your world and all best places on continued success and thanks for implementing all the sustainability you've done. Really appreciate being on the podcast today.

29:08
Speaker 1
Thank you, Charlie. I appreciate being honored.

29:11
Speaker 2
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