



Taking Removable Forms to a Higher Level

by Jeff McClellan

Many people go to Florida to escape the cold, but Vince Heuser wasn't looking to retire. The former Kentucky basement contractor just wanted to put an end to his forced winter vacations and begin working year-round.

In the Sunshine State, however, high water tables are the rule, and there isn't a lot of basement work. Heuser is still using removable forms and pouring concrete, but what he's pouring now are above-grade homes.

Heuser, who runs a crew of 50 pouring four houses a day for Solid Wall Systems, a subsidiary of Mercedes Homes, has joined the ranks of basement contractors who are raising their sights, peering out of basements, and pulling removable forms to a higher level.

"The interest level is increasing every year," says Ed Sauter, executive director of the Concrete Foundations Association and the Concrete Homes Council, "and the number of people taking the plunge is increasing—but at a slow pace."

Ball Brothers Foundations in Ohio has gotten its feet wet in concrete

homes and is considering a deeper plunge. "We think above-grade concrete homes are the wave of the future, and we want to be on the front of the wave," says Dan Carpenter, a partner manager with the company. Carpenter emphasizes that the transition is a natural one for any basement contractor: "We know how to pour concrete."

Moving above ground creates more business for a trained crew, says David R. Pfanmiller, with Security Building Group in Raleigh, N.C., and doing an entire house is more lucrative than "just plunkin' in a basement." Plus, he says the risks are minimal.

"The equipment is the same, so you're not investing in anything new," says Pfanmiller, who, with his partner, Curt Fields, began pouring above-grade homes a few years ago. If it doesn't work, he says, you can always take your forms back below ground.

Of course, there is a learning curve. A full house takes more forms and more coordination with subcontractors than a basement. Heuser pours 6-inch walls, which require more steel, and there are



A basement contractor turned above-grade home builder, Vince Heuser has found the ideal situation for pouring concrete homes. His company is a subsidiary of Mercedes Homes, a large builder in Florida, which keeps Heuser's crew busy pouring four homes a day.

more door and window openings above ground as well. Also, says Heuser, "Your tolerances are so much tighter with walls being, number one, perfectly smooth and, number two, perfectly plumb. You can see everything. Whereas in the basement, it's going to be covered with waterproofing and dirt in a couple of days."

The biggest challenge faced by builders of cast-in-place homes is marketing. "The people who market your product have to be in the right frame of mind because it is a little different, and right now it costs a little bit more," says Pfanmiller, chairman of the Concrete Homes Council.

Florida, however, offers a ripe market, says Sauter, because the government is