On Thursday, March 30, 2000, at approximately 1 p.m., representatives from the Columbus Blue Jackets, a new National Hockey League franchise, announced that the Ohio team had sold 12,000 season tickets. Number 12,000 came just in time to beat an NHL-imposed, March 31 deadline required to validate the franchise. And so, the city’s newest professional sports team and the key driver of downtown business development officially began its existence in the eyes of the NHL. The Blue Jackets would begin playing games this fall.

But would the team’s awesome, steel-and-glass Nationwide Arena be ready by September? Would its innovative architecture and use of state-of-the-art building systems hinder a timely grand opening? Would 12,000 season ticket holders have seats?

“One of the concerns we had was the fast-track, design-build nature of the project,” says Brent Allen, sales director for South Texas & Lone Star Drywall in Columbus. The company had the metal stud and gypsum drywall contract for the $150-million, 685,000-square-foot arena.

“The job required us to begin hanging wallboard before the building was completely closed in and conditioned,” Allen continues. “We held...
off on the application until the last possible minute. We didn’t want any problems with moisture.”

On site, Jeff Rawson, South Texas & Lone Star Drywall’s site superintendent, was responsible for overseeing about 120 workers as they installed 1.2 million square feet of gypsum drywall and 75,000 square feet of FIBEROCK® Brand Abuse-Resistant Panels from USG Corporation.

Abuse-Resistant Walls

The 18,500-seat Nationwide Arena was financed privately and developed by Nationwide Insurance, the Dispatch Printing Company and Pizzuti Development, all of Columbus. The architectural firms of NBBJ, Columbus and Heinlein + Schrock, Kansas City, and Blue Jackets owner Worthington Industries, hope to set a precedent in arena design. The arena’s liberal use of glass provides an open, accessible atmosphere. Unique seating provides superior sight lines throughout the 26 loge boxes and 50 luxury suites (with 22 additional suites planned for the future). An adjoining practice rink, office building, restaurant and retail space are a first among NHL arenas. A 135-foot-high light tower will crown Columbus’ night skyline.

South Texas & Lone Star Drywall, a company formed in 1952 when founder C.A. LaFon migrated to Ohio from Texas, got involved.
Standing before Nationwide Arena are (from left) Chris King, NBBJ Architects; Rick Lombardi, Turner/Barton Mallow; Jeff Beitel, Turner/Barton Mallow; and Jack Gordon, South Texas & Lone Star Drywall.

early in the project. Allen says his firm had installed abuse-resistant wall systems on another fast-track project—a facility for Roxanne Labs, Columbus, which was completed in 1997. Allen says his firm converted the majority of the masonry walls to the abuse-resistant panel system. The job was successful, and the project engineer was impressed.

The project engineer, Andy Patterson of Turner/Barton Mallow Sports Construction, also happened to be involved in early planning and pre-construction meetings for Nationwide Arena. Most arenas call for extensive use of masonry construction. Patterson, however, suggested that USG’s abuse-resistant panels be used in Nationwide Arena.

These fiber-reinforced panels are engineered for durability, even in high-traffic areas. Their construction gives them the toughness required for situations where ordinary wallboard just isn’t up to the job—while retaining many of the features and bene-
fits offered by regular drywall. The panels score and snap to size, install over conventional framing.

In 1998, Turner/Barton Mallow approached South Texas & Lone Star Drywall’s Allen for help in compiling a budget for Nationwide Arena. Allen developed the budget based on some of the arena walls using standard block masonry, but with most using the USG product.

“They ended up deleting a lot of masonry because of budget concerns,” Allen

The panels from USG finish just like regular drywall.

Left: South Texas & Lone Star Drywall carpenters Michael Ross (left) and Jason Hamilton hang the wall panels along the arena’s concourses and vomitories.
says. “The project cost slightly less with Fiberock panels.”

**Easy Application**

The wall application was straightforward. The abuse-resistant panels were installed along the first 8 feet in high-traffic areas, including the main concourse walls, vomitory (the entrance area leading to tiered seating) walls, elevator lobbies and 3- by 3-foot structural column covers. Rawson says regular drywall was used in the concourses above the 8-foot mark—in most cases up to the 15-foot level. The finished results are excellent.

“You can’t even tell where the butt joints are; you can’t tell which are Fiberock panels and which are drywall,” Rawson says. “The feedback I got from the owner and architects is the job looks great.”

There are a few curved wall applications, but these cover broad, 130- to 140-foot radiiuses and were not difficult to construct. In some instances, Fiberock panels meet at corners that exceed 90 degrees. But here, Rawson’s crews used a flexible corner bead with a 3-inch paper edge, wide enough to cover the corner joints, which were pre-filled with joint compound.

South Texas & Lone Star Drywall was awarded the project in April 1999. Wall crews were on site by May of that year, and wall construction proceeded along briskly, with the firm completing most of its work by June.

“The only time we made the architect’s punch list was when someone ran into the walls with their scissorlift,” Rawson says. “We’ve had a lot of success, and I feel confident we’ve left a high-quality product on the jobsite.”

**About the Author**

Mark L. Johnson is a free-lance writer based in Urbana, Ill. He writes frequently on interior and exterior wall construction and finishing systems.