

Man caves' give guys a place to hide away

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The beer is always cold and the television is mostly tuned to football or hockey in the basement of Tom Hambrose's Haddon Heights home. After work, Hambrose retreats to his basement hideaway. Often, neighbors stop by. "This is a place where a guy can be a guy," said Dan Sabathe, who lives two doors away. "There are no kids. You're not being pulled in 100 different directions."

With colder weather on the way and prime sports seasons all around us, men across South Jersey are sharing the same dream. They disappear on hockey nights and football weekends to a place reserved for testosterone-driven pursuits. Call it the "man cave." It's a hideaway where the television screen can never be too big, the beverages can never be too cold and the home team can never score too many points. Some man caves have high-tech electronics and rare sports memorabilia. Others are simply odd collections of manly items picked up over the years. They all are designed with the express purpose of creating a comfort zone for their owners.

The basement cave idea for Hambrose started out upstairs, where he wanted to add an addition to the kitchen. "When the estimates came in, I went into shock," he said. "This isn't a big house and I need usable space." Friends suggested he should finish the basement, which was being used as storage. "It was absolutely a disaster," he said. "There were just piles of stuff." Planning started in late spring and construction was under way by last August. A contractor was hired to do the tile, granite bartop and electrical work, but Hambrose did as much work as possible on his own, including painting the walls a cozy green, which nicely matches the bar and tile. "I did as much work as I felt comfortable doing," said Hambrose, 43, who is single.

Amenities include a 22-inch Sony flat-screen television above the bar, a powder room (but no urinal) and a wetbar. Sports memorabilia -- the Olympic torch Hambrose carried leading up to the Salt Lake City winter games as well as photos of Lance Armstrong -- hang on the walls. Custom-built shelves hold pictures of his family and mementos gathered during trips. A surround-sound system soon will be installed. "I wanted to do it right the first time," he said. Top-of-the-line plasma television sets, surround-sound theater systems and DVD players are just some of items guys have been purchasing, said Ken Gray, a supervisor in the video department at Circuit City in Deptford. In recent years, men are largely the ones picking out television sets and have become well-versed on what to look for when it comes to a good picture. One of the most popular sets is a Hitachi 55-incher that sells for about \$5,000, said Gray, adding about eight of every 10 television sales are made to guys. "We've been selling a lot of the LCD projection screens and a lot of the plasma," said Gray, "and they're usually going big." Many of the customers are shopping for their home retreats. They're looking for television sets that can be hung above a pool table or near a basement bar. "If they like it, money is not much of an issue," said Gray. "If we sell a new television, they're updating everything else."

Sandra Cook, of Voorhees-based Home-Stylist LLC, is working on remaking a bachelor pad apartment for a client. He wants a place for a pool table, bar, stools and shelves for drinks. He's also looking for a plasma television. "It's not leftover furniture from the basement," Cook said. There's not a lot of room, so planning ahead on where to put everything is important, she said. A good paint choice for a getaway spot could be the colors of the fellow's favorite sports team, such as midnight green for the Eagles or red for the Phillies. The colors of their favorite college also would be a prime choice. There are also loads of sport accessories, such as rugs. A black-and-white color scheme would also be good, opening room for chrome. Leather is the fabric of choice, since it's durable and easily handles spills. If cigar smoking is a past time, an air purification system might be in order, she said.

Hambrose finds friends and relatives want to spend time in the basement. A few years ago at a wine and cheese party, people hung out in his small kitchen. This time, they stayed in the basement -- even though the food was upstairs -- and the party went until 4 a.m. For the record, women and children are allowed in the basement. There's a comfy seating area near the bar as well as video games for the youngsters. Recently, several bowl games were on TV and friends gathered in the basement for cold Yuengling beer and companionship. There also are plans for the Super Bowl, even though the Eagles won't be playing.