

TOOLS

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TOOL TEST

STRAIGHT SHOOTERS

BOSTITCH FN16250K-2 THE CLEAR WINNER!



By Rick Arnold

STRAIGHT SHOOTERS

Features drive the differences between these 10 straight-magazine pneumatic finish nailers.

In the old days it was easy to pick out the better finish nailer because cool features like depth adjustment, no-mar caps, and swing-out noses for clearing jambs were few and far between. Now these features—and more—are pretty much standard on most pro-grade nailers, and the definition of a “good” tool has narrowed to designs that best combine these features with nail-driving

dependability and jobsite toughness.

TEST CRITERIA

I like straight-magazine finish nailers for interior trim in large part because I can switch out nails quickly between applications—or even during the same one. I did a full-on test of 10 pneumatic tools: Bostitch FN16250K-2, Craftsman 18175, Hitachi NT65M, ITW

Paslode T250-F16, Max NF352, Maxus MXN064, Porter-Cable FN250B, Ridgid R250SFA, Senco FinishPro 32, and Spotnails XB1564.

Separately, I did a thorough but less comprehensive evaluation of the two 16-gauge straight-magazine hoseless tools currently in production in this category: DeWalt’s DC616KA and Paslode’s 16-gauge straight finish nailer. This

category is too small for a full-throttle Tool Test, but it's growing fast and new models from different manufacturers look like they'll be ready to launch throughout the year.

To get a real feel for both tool types all over a trim site, I installed pre-hung doors, trimmed windows and doors, and set base, crown, wainscoting, chair rail, and shelving. Because most of that millwork was pine and poplar, I also set up a power test back in the shop driving nails into 1-by oak stock. I also looked carefully at nail change-out and size identification, depth adjustment, lockout, jam clearing, ergonomics, triggering, and any other advanced features the tools had.

POWER

A nailer isn't much good if it can only sink 2½-inch nails into softwood. To test power and dependability in hardwood, I used ¾-inch oak stock to form long corners, then shot hundreds of nails along the corners using the longest nails that the nailers would accept. My compressor was set to kick on at 80 psi and I set the regulator at 100 psi. All of the nailers are rated to operate at that range. While some can operate at a little lower and some a little higher, all of them successfully and regularly set the nails.

WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT Nail Changing and Size Identification.

Other than the nailer being able to drive the fastener correctly, the most important thing to me is being able to easily identify and switch fasteners. When I hang and trim a door I'll switch fastener sizes three times—2½-inch nails through the jambs, 1¼-inch through the casing into the jamb, and 2-inch through the casing into the wall. This may seem like a lot of work, but using the



Maxus' semi-open magazine design enables you to see what size nails are in the tool without having to take them out to look.

best nail for each location really prevents blowouts and damaged trim.

Trimming a window, I use two sizes: 1¼-inch through the casing into the window jamb and 2-inch through the casing into the wall. I often use two nailers when I'm alone, but with a few carpenters on the job that quickly adds up to a lot of extra equipment and hoses all over the place.

The side-load magazines on the Max and Bostitch are nice because they not only let me switch sizes easily and quickly, but I could also keep different sizes at the ready—inside the magazine. Bostitch took their design a step further by incorporating a magnetic strip inside the track to help prevent nails from spilling out during changes. Max's track is only tall enough to take up to 2-inch nails; since I really want 2½-inch nails for door jambs, that's a problem for me.

The Craftsman, Maxus, and Paslode tools have tracks that also make it easy to identify fastener size. Craftsman and Maxus tracks have nice windows that let you see what size nails are in there. It's a little tougher to make out sizes on the



Bostitch's superbly designed side-load magazine not only makes it easy to know which length of fasteners are in the tool, but a magnet in the track enables you to keep each size in the tool and at the ready for quick change-outs.

Paslode because only the bottoms of the nails are exposed in the track.

The Porter-Cable, Ridgid, and Spotnails models have locking catches and relatively loose tracks that enabled the nails to slide back and out easily for quick changes. Unfortunately, none of these have easy size identification markings, so I had to take the nails out to identify their lengths.

Switching nails in the Senco was difficult. The puller didn't latch back and the nails didn't slide out easily. Spotnails' puller is better suited for lefties, and I found it awkward. It was also difficult to change nails quickly

and easily with the Hitachi.

Most of the tracks completely cover and protect the nails, except for the Porter-Cable and the Paslode, which leave the bottom 1/2 inch or so of the 2 1/2-inch nails exposed. I'd rather see the nails protected, because the exposed points on the nails can catch clothing or get damaged, which can cause jams.

MUST-HAVES

Depth Adjustment. As most manufacturers thankfully figured out, a good depth-of-drive adjustment is a key feature for a finish nailer. All of the tools in the group, except for the Max, have depth adjustment. They've almost universally settled on a thumbwheel design usually located beneath the trigger (Hitachi's thumbwheel adjustment is to the side of the nose while Bostitch's is on the front of the nose). The depth adjustments on all of the tools worked well except for the Spotnails, which was difficult to adjust and took two fingers to turn.

Lockout. High on my list of important features is dry-fire lockout. I really hate when I put two or three extra holes in stain-grade trim before I realize I'm out of nails. Bostitch is the only tool in the pneumatic group that refuses to let the tool fire when the magazine is empty.

No-Mar Tips. All but two nailers have removable rubber or plastic tips to keep the metal parts of the nose from marring delicate trim. Spotnails and Max only have a metal tip, so you have to be extremely careful when pushing against softwood, especially when you really have to get the nose of the tool in there, like an inside corner.

This is an area where all of the manufacturers could improve. The first one to come up with an unobtrusive safety with a good work protector



For working on ladders or wherever you need a third hand, a belt hook like Senco's is very helpful.

and a clear line of sight will jump a notch above the others.

Jam Clearing. Although I had practically no problems with jamming during the test, nails do jam on the jobsite so you need a good way to get them out. All but two of the nailers had a pop-up nosepiece held in place by a tool-free latch. The Ridgid latch was a little tough to pop by hand, but nothing that leverage from a hammer claw couldn't take care of. Since Max and Bostitch have side-loading magazines, the inside of their nosepieces is exposed when the magazine is opened, which negates the need for an opening nose and makes it easier to clear jams.

ERGONOMICS

Given that most of these nailers weigh less than 4 pounds (only the Paslode and Spotnails are 4 pounds-plus), weight isn't as important to me as it used to be. However, balance and the overall feel of the grip are. For straight-up comfort during use, I found myself reaching for the Hitachi, Max, Ridgid, and Bostitch the most. And because of its small body, Max was particularly adept at getting into enclosed places and small inside corners. The Spotnails, Senco, and Porter-Cable have handle/trigger arrangements that don't leave much room for your knuckles, especially



The Bostitch tool exhausts from the bottom of the handle, which eliminates the need to adjust the exhaust.

if you have large hands.

Triggers. Even though I've never needed a bump-firing finish nailer, some of these nailers can bump-fire. The Craftsman, Hitachi, and Ridgid nailers have onboard tool-free switches that allow the trigger to operate in sequential or bump-fire mode. The rest come with sequential triggers, except for the Senco, which can be fired in either mode depending on operator trigger/safety sequence. The Paslode, Porter-Cable, Spotnails, and Bostitch allow the sequential triggers to be exchanged for bump-fire triggers.

STANDOUT FEATURES

There are some nice ancillary features on a few of the nailers that should be included on all nailers, just to make life a little easier. Ridgid has an adjustable belt hook that can be clicked into nearly any position around the handle. It also has a quick-connect swivel connector that helps to keep the hoses straight. Paslode and Senco also come with a nice belt hook.

Hitachi's exhaust doubles as an air gun by pressing a button just above the handle—a smart feature.

The Bostitch exhausts out of the back of the handle so you don't have to remember to turn an

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exhaust port. This is cool. The Craftsman and Bostitch also have nice tight clips on board to firmly hold their Allen wrenches in place. And, the Bostitch is oil-free. This should prevent the work from getting sprayed with a spattering of dirty oil, which is sometimes the case with my very old nailer. You'll never have to remember to oil it, either.

WINNERS

Bostitch is the clear winner—nail changing is terrific, the tool has great balance, it has dry-fire lockout, and there's no oil to fiddle with. Next comes the Ridgid. Nice balance and easy nail exchange put this near the top of the list; if they put windows in the tracks and added a dry-fire lockout, it would be a dead heat with the

Bostitch. Hitachi would have ranked up there with the Bostitch and Ridgid if the nail-changing had been easier, but the balance is great and the onboard blow gun is handy. The rest all functioned dependably and I could work with any of them.

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