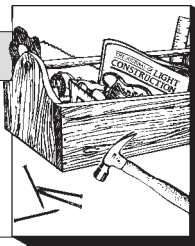


A Tool Vest for The Trade

by Clayton DeKorne



Until recently, I've always wrestled with my tool belt. For example, I never found a good place for my tape measure. It either ended up in the nail pouch, cluttering access to the nails, or if I used the separate little tape pouch, my tape jumped out whenever I bent over. And I would inevitably spill the contents of the other pouches whenever I lifted my leg higher than my waist. This usually happened at the most inopportune times, such as when I was climbing onto a ridge. The weight of the belt always put a strain on my lower back. And worst of all, a loaded belt tends to push my pants down. Suspenders have helped to distribute the weight, but I still find myself continually hitching up my pants in order to keep from offending clients.

A new line of Swedish-made work wear promises to solve such everyday problems with conventional tool belts.

Conventional Belt Design

Tool belts — also known as nail aprons, tool pouches, nail bags, and work belts — have seen some improvements over the last few years. First, came the ultimate leather belts from Occidental Leather and McRose Leathers. These are true works of art, featuring fleece linings and a wealth of pockets. If you can afford one of these luxury models, you probably don't need to keep reading this column.

Then came Cordura nylon, which took the industry by storm. Cordura is an exceptionally tough material. So tough, in fact, it always feels new and stiff. It never breaks in or softens the way leather does.

With the advent of these modern belts came a few sensible design changes. Special pouches for the Speed Square and a calculator are marked improvements. And I'll admit I've added a few incidentals to my old belt — including a Fastex clip, so I don't have to fight to get my belt off after a long day, and a set of high-tech suspenders with shoulder pads. With these additions my old bags are better. They're certainly affordable and by now supple and familiar. But they're still just nail bags with all the problems inherent in their design.

Put on the Vest

TNT WorkWear (411 Washington Ave. No., Minneapolis, MN 55401; 800/325-8707) offers a tool vest that replaces conventional nail aprons and tool belts. The *Skillers* work vest is reportedly the standard uniform for Swedish tradespeople. With its numerous pockets, the work vest resembles a fishing vest, but includes four hanging pouches — two in front and two in back — and a nylon belt with a Fastex clip on the inside to distribute some of the weight onto the hips. This design succeeds in distributing the weight across the entire upper body much better than a conventional belt with suspenders. The cloth across the upper back and over the entire width of the shoulders supports weight exceptionally well. In fact, I don't feel the familiar ache in my lower back after a full day's work in the field. I also feel much more graceful than I ever did saddled up with nail bags.

There are enough pockets in the vest so that I can keep a lot of tools at hand that I would otherwise keep in my toolbox. For

example, I can keep my safety glasses, a calculator, and my eye glasses (which I only need for long distance inspections) safely in the layered breast pockets without worrying about pulverizing them with other tools. I can also keep numerous pencils and a note pad in these breast pockets. The pencils stay long and sharp because they don't get broken in a cluttered pouch, and the paper stays white and crisp. And there is a convenient deep tape pouch suspended at bellybutton-height that keeps the tape from falling out even when I bend over.

The vest is made of a sturdy blend of cotton and nylon, and the stress points are reinforced with bar stitching. This material is soft, flexible, and machine washable. It's slightly water repellent but still breathes well. Nevertheless, the *Skillers* vest is hot to wear on a muggy day, so for these days I've kept my old bags around. In cold weather, however, you can add zip-in expanders to enlarge the vest, allowing it to fit over added layers of clothing.

Other additions are available to customize the work vest to your trade. Four different leather "cassettes" fit in any of the four pouches to organize tools. A stiff Cordura liner is available to protect the pouches from nail and screw punctures. A plastic-coated wire hammer loop can be suspended from either side of the vest, and right- and left-handed drill holsters are available.

The vest alone, which in itself would suffice, is fairly priced at \$45. But they get you on the accessories, which range from about \$4 for the hammer loop to \$30 for the biggest leather tool pouch. A standard carpenter's set-up including hammer loop, the medium-size tool pouch, and one Cordura pouch liner sells for about \$80.

Knee Pad Pants

Also worth mentioning are *Skillers* knee pad pants. The pads are made of a high-density foam that makes kneeling on a concrete slab possible even with a set of racked and knobby knees like mine. The pads slip into outside pockets made of Cordura nylon. These pads are a noticeable improvement over strap-on knee pads that bind your legs and pull your pants over your boots.

The pants themselves are exceptionally good work pants. They are made of a cotton/nylon mix impregnated with silicone, which makes the material durable and wind- and water-resistant. The cut is loose and the pockets are more like pouches than mere change holders. And at \$35 a pair, the price is competitive with jeans. ■



Sensible workwear. The *Skiller's* work vest evenly distributes the weight of a carpenter's tools across shoulders, back, and hips. The pants have foam inserts that fit in Cordura pockets to protect knees.