Toolbox

Cordless Saw Trial

by David Frane

Not long ago, I was on a crew completing a house frame when the backhoe operator cut the power line. With no juice to run saws, everyone spent the next few hours pushing brooms and moving piles of stock. Everyone, that is, except the guy I was working with: He pulled out a cordless circular saw and kept on going.

Cordless drills are so common that a tradesperson who doesn't have one gets funny looks from his coworkers. But cordless circular saws are another story. They've been available for more than 10 years, but I haven't seen many on job sites.

Last spring, DeWalt unveiled a line of 18-volt cordless tools, including a circular saw — the *DW936K*. I had a chance to use it, and found that it's a big improvement over past models.

Way Back When

In the mid-'80s, Makita and Hitachi both sold 6 1/4-inch cordless saws. Hitachi's saw ran at an impressive 3,200 rpm, but in those days, cordless technology was still young: The saw weighed 8.6 pounds and had a lead battery. Makita's saw was nearly a pound lighter and had a ni-cad battery, but it ran at a slow 1,000 rpm. (By comparison, the average sidewinder weighs 11 pounds and spins at 5,500 rpm.)

Today, Skil, Makita, and Jepson all make cordless saws. They're mostly used for specialized applications like cutting tile and grout, or for making the odd cut during finish work. But they can't cut 2-by material in a single pass, so their usefulness for general carpentry is limited.

A few years ago, DeWalt introduced a 12-volt, 2,500-rpm cordless saw with a 5 3/8-inch blade, just big enough to cut a 2-by in one pass. My friend on the framing job had the next model, a 14.4-volt, 3,000-rpm unit. Both saws were okay, but they couldn't do very much work on a single charge.

Cordless Now

DeWalt's new 18-volt saw is a different matter. I was skeptical of the 18-volt tools at first, because past a certain point, dealing with a large, heavy battery is more trouble than dealing with a cord. I'm a carpenter, so an 18-volt drill is overkill for what I do. But an 18-volt saw isn't. The DeWalt saw is a lot smaller than a corded saw, and at 7.6 pounds, it's still 3 to 4 pounds lighter. The new saw also cuts faster (3,200 rpm) than earlier models and runs longer between charges.

DeWalt's new cordless circular saw runs at 3,200 rpm and has a 5 3/8-inch blade — just enough to cut 2-by stock in a single pass.

In the Field

I've been using the new DW936K cordless saw for the last few months. When I first got it, I was working on a

large three-story house. The foreman had me installing blocking and making framing changes to partition walls in every part of the building. The cordless saw came in handy because I didn't have to look for a new place to plug in every time I moved. And if you've ever been on a big crew, you know how hard it is to find open electrical receptacles and how often breakers trip when too many guys share the same circuit. The only time I had to deal with a cord was when I needed to use a reciprocal saw.

Punching out the frame involved making 10 or 15 cuts at each stop. The 18-volt saw was able to make it through a full day of this kind of work on a single charge. DeWalt says this cordless saw will cut 125 2x4s or 130 linear feet of 1/2-inch plywood on a single charge. I didn't have time to count cuts, but DeWalt's numbers seem about right. The saw had full power until just before its battery ran out of juice. Recharging took about an hour. (DeWalt offers an optional 15-minute charger, but it won't work on 18-volt batteries.) Continuous cutting will drain the batteries faster than the charger can replenish them, so it's a good idea to carry a spare. (You can get one for around $60.) However, heavy continuous cutting isn't what this or any other cordless saw is designed to do. But it's still plenty useful on site.

For example, when I need a few short pieces of trim, I usually take a handsaw to the lumber pile and rough them out there. That way, I don't have to maneuver long lengths of stock up stairs or around corners, and I don't have to return cutoffs to the stack. I used the cordless saw the same way with 2-bys and sheet goods. Why haul a full sheet of plywood through the building when all you need is half?

DeWalt's saw is light enough that I felt comfortable using it off a ladder — and there was no cord to trip on or accidentally cut. If you're one of those guys who runs his roof trim long and cuts it in place, this is the tool for you. It fits into tight spaces and is handy for making plunge cuts for things like hvac ducts and roof vents. Although it's more powerful than previous models, it will bog down if you try to cut too fast.

I lent this saw to a friend who has the 14.4-volt version. Overall, he thought the new saw was better. Bevel and depth adjustments were easy to make, but he complained that it was hard to get the battery out. I noticed the same thing. It's also a pain having to press a safety to activate the switch, but I understand the need for it, given that a cordless saw is always "plugged in." The housing and base seem tough enough to survive a number of falls, but the plastic blade guard doesn't look like it would fare as well.

Unplugged Future

Cordless technology has come a long way in recent years. It's not just batteries that have gotten better — motors and chargers are better, too. In the next few years we're going to see a lot more tools going cordless. But this doesn't mean it's time to retire your corded saw. Cordless saws have a long way to go before they're as fast or powerful as corded units.

DeWalt's 18-volt DW936K cordless circular saw retails for around $250. It's a useful, though expensive, addition to any carpenter's toolkit. Once I had this cordless saw, I found myself using it a lot more than I thought I would.

Come to think of it, that's the same thing that happened ten years ago when I got my first cordless drill. ■

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