New Clip-Head Nailers

by Felix Marti

A few months ago I had the opportunity to try out two of the newer framing nailers on the market, Paslode's PowerMaster 5350/S PM and a prototype of Senco's FramePro 600. These guns are light-years ahead of the ones I used 30 years ago, and in many ways are better than their recent predecessors.

Weight and Power

Both nail guns are very light. At 7.5 pounds, the PowerMaster is the lightest framing gun on the market; the FramePro 600 weighs 8 pounds. Most carpenters prefer light tools because they're easy to handle and cause less fatigue than heavy ones.

Neither gun had any trouble driving nails into framing lumber, but they tended to recoil when driving fasteners into harder materials. We first noticed this when we used the guns to double some LVL headers. The amount of recoil seemed to be related to the weight of the tool, because the Senco gun absorbed it better than the lighter Paslode. LVL's weren't the only engineered material we had trouble with, though. The project we tested the nailers on had Timberstrand studs in several walls. This material was so dense that neither gun would shoot a 16-penny nail flush when fastening a trimmer to a king stud.

To be certain this wasn't a fluke, I tried it again under more controlled circumstances. With the compressor delivering 108 pounds of pressure through 50 feet of 1/4-inch hose connected to 50 feet of 3/8-inch hose, I shot nails into doubled-up scraps of Timberstrand. The PowerMaster recoiled badly and left 3 1/2-inch nails about an inch proud of the surface. It didn't fare much better when I switched to 3-inch nails. The FramePro managed to drive fasteners flush in Timberstrand, but not every time.

The odd thing about this test was that my 20-year-old Paslode Skokie (8.5 pounds) passed with flying colors, even managing to countersink some of the nails. Although I didn't test it, Senco does make a heavier, more powerful version of the FramePro, the model 650. According to the manufacturer, it weighs 8.3 pounds and is about 10% more powerful than the 600.

Depth-of-drive control is standard on Paslode's PowerMaster (left) and an option on Senco's FramePro. Both tools also have built-in safeties to prevent damage from firing blanks.

Depth-of-Drive

Control for depth-of-drive is standard on the FramePro, and an option on the PowerMaster. To adjust Senco's gun, you loosen two crown nuts and fiddle with the gauge until the nails stop where you want them to. It seemed to us that this feature worked best with the no-mar tip clipped on. The PowerMaster has a three-step nosepiece similar to what's found on plunge routers. However, it didn't work very well: Some nails were driven flush, but others were above or below the surface. Nails seemed to jam more frequently after we installed the depth-adjusting nosepiece, and the nose made it harder to tip the gun forward for angled shots.

Handling

The PowerMaster is slightly shorter than the FramePro, so it's easier to maneuver in tight quarters, but it won't stand on its head when you put it down. This is frustrating when you're positioning a piece of material with one hand and reaching down for the gun with the other. Senco's gun will balance on its head, but just barely.

The tip shrouds on both guns do a good job grabbing onto wood while you're toe-nailing, but they hide the exit point of the nails. It's not a big deal, but it means you have to use the guns for a while before you can place fasteners accurately.

Loading and Unloading

To load the PowerMaster, you retract the follower, drop a couple clips of nails into the slot, and release the follower; unloading is a simple matter of reversing the procedure. Unfortunately, the PowerMaster gun has an annoying habit of firing a blank on the first shot after changing from one nail size to another.

The tool also has a small exposed spring at the tail of the magazines that looks like it would be easy to damage.

To load the FramePro, you put a clip of nails into the narrow slot at the rear of the magazine, then retract the follower with your finger (this maneuver can be awkward if you're wearing gloves). Removing nails is more complicated, because you have to depress two different retainers and shake the nails out through the slot. Clearing nail jams is easier — loosen a knurled knob and swing the magazine out of the way — but the knob tends to loosen during normal use.

Both tools have built-in safeties to protect them from damage caused by firing blank shots. It's a nice concept that Paslode executes better than Senco, but in both cases the safety is activated before the gun is completely empty. It's frustrating to look at the magazine and see it has a few nails left but not be able to fire any of them. This is less of a problem with the PowerMaster: Because the nails come in short clips, you can throw a fresh clip in when the magazine runs low without removing any nails from the previous clip. Senco's nails come in long clips, however, so we found ourselves breaking them in half for interim loading. Also, the long Senco clips break if you haul them around in your nail pouch.

Both the PowerMaster and FramePro drive 2-inch to 3 1/2-inch smooth and ring-shank clip-head nails. Both take .113-inch-, .120-inch-, and .131-inch-diameter fasteners; the FramePro will also take thicker .148-inch nails.

The PowerMaster I tested was a production model, but the FramePro I tried was a prototype. According to Senco, the production model FramePro will have a greater range of adjustment in its depth-of-drive mechanism, so it should work with or without the no-mar tip. Senco also plans to alter the knob for clearing jams so it won't loosen by itself, increase the size of the follower so you can grip it with a gloved hand, and add a reload indicator on the magazine.

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