

SNEAK PREVIEW:

NEW TOOLS FOR '99

In the U.S. tool market, the National Hardware Show (NHS), held each August in Chicago, holds pre-eminence. This is the place toolmakers have traditionally

by Pete Young and Clayton DeKorne

unveiled new products, and the time reserved for the release of each year's latest models. It has always been a show for distributors—not just any distributors, but specifically mass-market retailers. These days, more and more mom-and-pop hardware stores, lumberyards, and contractor suppliers are leaving the industry, squeezed out by bigger buyers whose concern for product packaging and sales positioning often supersedes interest in product performance.

Shifting Ground

Walking the aisles of the NHS, you can't ignore the signs of a shifting market. In every category, consumer products — from bargain faucets to Leatherman knock-offs — far outnumber trade products. Displays for gilded mirrors and better mousetraps (literally) overshadow booths showing concrete anchors and scaffolding. It doesn't take much squinting to see that the future distribution of tools and building products will increasingly be controlled by big box retailers, where the difference between consumer and professional grades has become more and more obscured.

To keep professional and consumer markets separate, we may see more introductions of professional-grade tools reserved for other trade shows, such as the International Builders Show (by the National Association of Home Builders) and the STAFDA



A report from the
nation's biggest
tool show

Convention (an industrial distributors' show by the Specialty Tools and Fasteners Distributors Association). But it is unlikely that such attempts to distinguish markets can stave off the big boxes from monopolizing sales of tools and building products.

Cordless Upgrades

Nowhere has the selling of tools become more frenzied than in the cordless category. Advances in cordless tools have increasingly been marketed more like computer software than traditional construction hardware. Every player in the cordless market feels obliged to offer newer and newer technology upgrades, continuously fueling consumer expectations. While this muscling for market share helps keep prices low, it encourages companies to release technology before its time. In this way, too, cordless toolmakers begin to resemble software companies, which have somehow made it okay to release half-baked versions, leaving consumers to discover the final bugs.

The sizzle in this year's cordless upgrade is coming from nickel metal hydride (NiMH) batteries. Since Makita's introduction of NiMH batteries last year, other manufacturers have followed suit. Bosch, DeWalt, Hitachi, and Makita have all introduced the NiMH battery as an upgrade option for existing models and a standard feature for some new models. These new batteries promise longer run times between charges, with most players boasting 3-amp-hour ratings. But this increased performance comes at a higher cost, and with *half* as many charge cycles before they wear out. While battery makers say they can improve the charge life of these new batteries, toolmakers have been reluctant to admit this limitation.

The other clear trend is toward 18-volt systems. Following DeWalt's early lead, Bosch, Hitachi, Makita, Milwaukee, and Ryobi have all introduced new 18-volt drills, and several companies have used these more powerful (and heavier) batteries to power new cordless categories.

Cordless circ saws. Hitachi and Makita both introduced an 18-volt circular saw. Both models have a 6½-inch



Hitachi C6DC



Makita 5620 DWA



Makita 4330 DWA



DeWalt DW933K

blade and the capacity to cut through 2-by-lumber at a 45-degree bevel (DeWalt's cordless trim saws have a 5⅜-inch-diameter blade that can only cut through 5/4 at a 45-degree bevel). We got a chance to try both saws, but only very quickly, and not side by side. At first blush, the Hitachi seemed better balanced and a bit more powerful, but we'll have to decide this for certain in future testing.

Contact: Hitachi Power Tools, 3950 Steve Reynolds Blvd., Norcross, GA 30093; 800/546-1666.

Makita USA, 14930 Northam St., La Mirada, CA 90638; 714/522-8088.

Cordless jigsaws. Makita and DeWalt both introduced cordless jigsaws. DeWalt has used its 18-volt platform for this tool. The new DW933K offers three orbital settings, a smooth variable-speed switch, and a full 1-inch blade stroke — all of which add up to remarkably aggressive action. This jigsaw accepts both universal and Bosch-style T-shank blades, and features keyless blade changing, a dust blower, a scratchless plastic shoe cover, a keyless adjustable base, and a comfortable soft-grip handle.

Contact: DeWalt Industrial Tool Co., P.O. Box 158, Hampstead, MD 21074; 800/433-9258.

The Makita cordless jigsaw is available with a 12- or 14.4-volt battery system. Both models feature three orbital settings and a full 1-inch stroke for surprising power from these relatively lower power systems. These jigsaws also offer a keyless adjustable base, and add replaceable brushes and a convenient trigger lock that's accessible to left- and right-hand users. To be fair and accurate, we'll need to test both the DeWalt and Makita models side by side. But if ergonomics is any indication of design, we give the thumbs up to Makita. The low center of gravity on these saws makes for stable, user-friendly operation.

Contact: Makita USA, 14930 Northam St., La Mirada, CA 90638; 714/522-8088.

Right-angle cordless drill. One of the most practical new cordless introductions comes from DeWalt — a two-speed, right-angle drill. Available with a 9.6- or 12-volt battery system, these little drills offer a high-torque, low-speed range (0 to 400 rpm) for drilling larger diameter holes

and driving longer screws. According to the manufacturer, the 12-volt model delivers 180 inch-pounds of torque; the 9.6-volt model delivers 150 inch-pounds.

Contact: DeWalt Industrial Tool Co., P.O. Box 158, Hampstead, MD 21074; 800/433-9258.

Power Tools

For the trades, good old-fashioned electric and gas-powered tools still have a place.

Quiet cut-off saw. If lugging around a gas-powered cut-off saw is in your future, check out Makita's latest models. The first thing you'll notice is the weight. At just under 22 pounds, they aren't exactly light. What cut-off saw is? But compared to others, the new Makitas are exceptionally manageable.

The next thing you'll notice is the reduced noise level. With a redesigned filter cover and inlet ports, these saws run 40% quieter, according to the manufacturer. And if you look closer, you'll see a lot more: A five-stage filter ensures a clean air supply. A ducted cylinder delivers increased power. And the decompression valve, circuit-based ignition, and Tillson carb (designed to compensate as the filter loads up with dust) raises the chance these saws will always start and always run.

Contact: Makita USA, 14930 Northam St., La Mirada, CA 90638; 714/522-8088.

Raising standards. Now that everyone else has introduced a keyless blade change feature to their jigsaws, Bosch — long the industry standard in this category — has gone one step further by introducing the "ejector clic" blade-change system. Available on the new 1588EVSK (top-handle) and 1589EVS (barrel-grip) jigsaws, this new design does away with having to turn knobs. Just push the blade in to seat it. To remove it, a thumb-release actually ejects the blade out of the saw. No more burning your fingers trying to unseat a hot blade.



DeWalt DW965K



Makita DPC7301



Bosch 1589EVSK



Milwaukee 6537

Contact: S-B Power Tools, 4300 W. Peterson Ave., Chicago, IL 60646; 773/286-7330.

Improved Sawzall. If you've spent significant time behind a recip saw, chances are high you've torn out the front end on more than one.

This can happen any time the blade binds up (such as when a structural load falls on a stud you're cutting out). The lock-up puts a tremendous impact force on the saw's drive train, resulting in a fractured spindle, broken bevel gear, or jammed wobble mechanism.

Milwaukee has addressed this in its newest *Super Sawzall* by installing a clutch on the main gear. This clutch slips whenever a severe impact force strikes through it, preventing the force from destroying the nearest gear tooth or bearing.

Contact: Milwaukee Electric Tool Corp., 13135 W. Lisbon Rd., Brookfield, WI 53005; 414/783-3600.

Hand Tools

Although the glitz in the hand tool category was relatively dim compared to power tools, a few innovative newcomers stood out.

Hand saws. Sandvik has designed a flexible line of saws with outstanding features. Sandvik *Superior* hand saws have a low-friction, anti-rust coating and come in two sizes, both with cross/rip teeth. The *Superior 2700* (\$28) has a 22-inch, 8-point blade while the *Superior 2600* (\$25) has a 16-inch, 10-point blade.

Contact: Sandvik Saws & Tools Company, Hardware Division, P.O. Box 2036, Scranton, PA 18501; 800/828-9893.

For those awkward one-handed clamping situations, Gross Stabil Corp. has come up with the *Quick-Star* clamp. This clamp uses automatic tension loading so that it can be set and tightened with one hand. Two sizes, spanning 200 or 300 mm, cost \$24 or \$27.50.

Contact: Gross Stabil Corp., P.O. Box 368, Coldwater, MI 49036; 800/671-0838.

Demolition. If you need new tools for tearing things apart, we found a few good choices. Norwolf's *Uni-Bar* (\$75 to \$81) is a high-tech crowbar with an



Sandvik 2700



**Norwolf
Uni-Bar**



**Quick-Star
Clamp**

adjustable head. The forged alloy steel head adjusts 180 degrees to provide a greater range of prying and lifting power. Handles made of aircraft quality aluminum are available in lengths of 15, 18, 24, and 30 inches.

Contact: Norwolf Tool Works, 6 Sullivan St., Westwood, NJ 07675; 888/667-9653.

The *Gorilla Bar* looks like a good choice for a low-tech crowbar. The 24-inch version retails for around \$15 and the 36-inch version for around \$25. Made by Olympia Tools, the Gorilla Bar is easier to grasp because the bar is made from a thicker oval-shaped stock as opposed to the more familiar octagonal stock. These bars also have wider chisel blades and wider, flatter claws than other crowbars.

Contact: Olympia, Inc., 505 S. Seventh Ave., City of Industry, CA 91746; 626/336-4999.

For breaking up concrete, Pace Machinery's *Buster Bar* may do the job when a jackhammer is not warranted. The manufacturer claims this sliding impact tool can demolish up to 4-inch concrete. The Buster Bar (\$145 to \$166) comes in three sizes: 24 in./9 lb.; 32 in./14 lb.; and 58 in./22 lb. Various blades for a variety of tasks are available — chisel bit, point blade, wide blade, blunt punch, rod driver, compaction pad, and wood splitter. All attachments (\$40 to \$50 each) can be resharpened.

Contact: Pace Machinery Group, P.O. Box 359, Wasco, IL 60183; 800/327-3552.

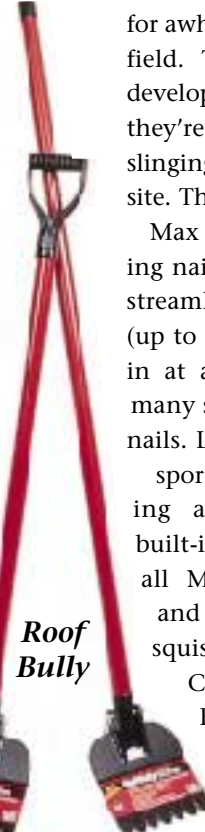
The *Roof Bully* is a new tool made by Queensbury Products that is used to efficiently remove roofing and flooring



**Olympia
Gorilla Bar**



**Pace
Buster Bar**



**Roof
Bully**

material. The tool has a durable steel head with sharpened saw tooth insets and a 1¹/₄-inch diameter fiberglass shaft. The head can be adjusted to four positions for comfortable use at various angles and heights. Available with either a shovel style, D-grip handle or with a longer straight shaft, the Roof Bully retails for between \$45 and \$50.

Contact: Queensbury Products, 2121 Noblestown Rd., Suite 202, Pittsburgh, PA 15205; 800/469-5522, www.burbnet.com/qpi.

New Pneumatics

Coil framing nailers have been around for awhile, but have yet to catch on in the field. That's because these tools were developed for banging together pallets; they're heavy beasts that weren't made for slinging over your head or dragging across site. That is, until now.

Max introduced the CN890S coil framing nailer. Dubbed the *Super Framer*, this streamlined framer holds up to 300 nails (up to 3¹/₂ x .048-inch nails), yet weighs in at a scant 7.3 pounds — less than many stick nailers that hold a fourth the nails. Like other Max nailers, this model

sports many practical features, including an anti-double-fire mechanism, built-in swivel plug (now available on all Max nailers), adjustable exhaust, and rubber grips that don't get slick or squishy in hot weather.

Contact: Max Co., 585 Commercial Blvd., Garden City, NY 11530; 516/222-2184.

If you do opt for a coil nailer, you may be interested in a prac-



Max CN8905



Senco SHF50



**Hitachi
Plasti-Tacker**

tical way to carry the coils around. The *Prazi Coil Caddy* is a simple plastic “bucket” that attaches to your belt and holds up to five coils of 3 1/2-inch nails.

Contact: Prazi U.S.A., 118 Long Pond Rd., #6, Plymouth, MA 02360; 800/262-0211.

Flooring nailer. Bostitch finally has some competition in the floor nailing arena. The new “Hardwood Flooring Family” from Senco centers around the *SHF50* — a 12-pound mallet-triggered air gun. This gun features an optional double-length magazine (capacity: 200 L-cleats) and a safety that prevents firing until the nose is seated on the tongue of a floorboard. Other tools in the family include two mallet-operated (not air-powered) cleat machines. The *SHF10* requires about 7 1/4 pounds of mallet force; the *SHF50* needs just 4 pounds.

Contact: Senco Products, 8485 Broadwell Rd., Cincinnati, OH 45244; 513/388-2000.

Plasti-Tacker. Hitachi’s latest air nailer is designed to shoot cap nails — those with plastic washers for securing house-wrap, roofing felt, and insulated sheathing. Developed with National Nail Corp., the new Plasti-Tacker features a special basket that holds up to 350 collated plastic caps, and feeds them to the nose of the gun. A secondary cylinder advances the caps, so they line up with the nail as it’s fired home. Nail and cap sets will be sold in 2,800-count packages — estimated to be the number of fasteners needed to hold down the roofing felt on an average home.

Contact: Hitachi Power Tools, 3950 Steve Reynolds Blvd., Norcross, GA 30093; 800/546-1666.



Agatec A410



Laser Jamb

Laser Update

Lasers continue to hold the fascination of the industry — mostly for homeowners. The latest laser gadgets include Zircon’s *Laser Pyramid* and Momentum’s *AutoCross* — tiny self-leveling boxes that project a plumb line (Zircon) or a cross line (Momentum). These lasers are expected to retail for less than \$100, but we have to wonder if they’ll be good for anything more than hanging wallpaper.

The full monty. At the other end of the price spectrum, Agatec, a French technology company, introduced the full-featured *A410*. This self-leveling laser combines the features of several model types (see “Shedding Light on Lasers,” 8/98): It can function as a rotary machine, laser chalk line (dither or sweep mode), a single-dot point-and-shoot model, or a square-line (two beams at 90 degrees). It also offers remote control, similar to the RoboLaser. But all this functionality comes at a price — about \$2,000.

Contact: Agatec Construction Laser, N50 W13740 Overview Dr., Menomonee Falls, WI 53051; 414/781-4110.

Laser Jamb. Perhaps the most practical laser-related product comes as an accessory — the *Laser Jamb*. This spring-loaded pole can be set up quickly between floor and ceiling, providing an easily adjustable platform for siting multiple elevations. Made of hardened anodized aluminum, the Laser Jamb works with any laser model. The calibrated scale reads from 6 to 148 inches.

Contact: Laser Jamb, 1730 Squalicum Mtn. Rd., Bellingham, WA 98226; 888/443-3750.

