

Metal Connector Nailers

by Don Jackson

If you install lots of joist hangers and hurricane ties and are tired of pinching your fingers driving those short nails, you should take a look at the new metal connector guns on the market. Right now there are three — Paslode's Positive Placement nailer, Senco's SN60MC, and Max's CN601J (see Figure 1). Three carpenters and I had a chance to use all three recently.

These guns have one purpose — to position and drive collated hanger nails through the holes in metal connectors. All of these guns shoot 1½- and 2½-inch nails, and they all get the job done, but there are some key differences.

Max CN601J

This gun is nicely engineered and well built. At 7 pounds 3 ounces, it's the

lightest of the bunch. Although the gun has a nice overall feel, it's a bit top-heavy and tends to rotate forward when you pick it up. This is probably because, being a coil nailer, there's no magazine to counterbalance the drive head.

When it comes to getting the nail in the hole, the CN601J does a good job. As soon as the gun is pressurized, the first nail extends from the nose and is held rigidly by metal jaws as you locate the point in the hole (Figure 2, page 2). When the gun is fired, the jaws open as the nail is driven. The sequential trip trigger (which all three guns have) allows you to move the gun quickly to the next hole without fear of an accidental fire and ricochet.

For me, the weakest design link in this gun is the location of the safety release

arm, which must be depressed before the nailer fires. Because the safety arm is directly beside the nail on the right side of the gun, it's difficult for a left-handed user to view the nail for placement. We noticed this immediately, because one of the carpenters helping test the nailers is a lefty. But it's a consideration for anyone nailing off hangers, because working in joist and rafter bays always requires both right-handed and left-handed work.

The Max measures 13 inches across the top, and fits nicely into a 16-inch-center joist bay. It holds plastic-collated coils of 100 electroplated nails in two sizes: 1½ inches and 2½ inches by .162 inch. Switching between nail lengths is a simple matter of moving a sliding adjustment along the piston cylinder, and removing or installing a plastic spacer inside the coil magazine. (The plastic spacer becomes a loose part when not in use.)

I'm not wild about plastic parts on framing tools, but the translucent plastic magazine did hold up well to several intentional drops from the top of a 7-foot ladder onto a wood subfloor. And the plastic no doubt helps reduce the gun's weight. Suggested retail price for the CN601J is \$1184, but a discount to below \$1000 is realistic, according to one distributor.

Paslode Positive Placement Nailer

This gun lives up to its name. Placing the nail is made easy by an ingenious indexing tip, called the probe (Figure 3). It's made of bright brass-plated titanium, so it's easy to see, and its pointed tip lets you feel when it engages the hole in the metal. Press the nailer to the work, fire the trigger, and the probe pivots out of the way as the nail sinks home. Of the three guns, this one performed best at the all important task of



Figure 1. There are now three nailers available designed specifically for installing joist hangers, hurricane ties, and other metal hangers.



Figure 2. The Max CN601J coil nailer holds 100 hanger nails at a time. The location of the safety release arm alongside the nail (left) makes it tricky to see and place the nail when working lefthanded.



getting the nail in the hole, moving on quickly, and doing it again.

The magazine holds two strips of about 40 nails each. The paper-collated nails are available in three diameters — .131, .148, and .162 inch — in both mechanically galvanized and bright steel. Changing from 1½-inch to 2½-inch nails requires simply swiveling a lever on the side of the nose. A sticker on the nailer cautions the user to check that the magazine is free of nails before switching the lever's position. I learned this the hard way, and created a nasty jam that could only be cleared by removing the nosepiece with an Allen wrench. But other than that, the gun proved to be reliable, with few misfires and no jams during several hours of nailing off hurricane straps and joist hangers.

The Positive Placement nailer weighs 9 pounds 2 ounces — almost 2 pounds heavier than the Max. Still, the gun has a nice feel, good balance, and rugged construction. Suggested retail is \$998, but street price should be below \$600.

Senco SN60MC

Like most Senco nailers I've used, this one has a nice feel and good balance. The removable magazine makes it easy to clear loose or jammed nails. Changing nail lengths is also easy with this gun — just remove and reposition the hard plastic guide that slides into the end of the magazine.

However, by comparison with the other guns, the Senco gun did not perform quite as well at getting the nail in the hole. The nail to be fired dangles somewhat loosely from the nose, making it a little tricky to position. If too much forward pressure is put on the gun while positioning the nail, the nail tends to pivot out of alignment with the drive pin, sometimes resulting in a misfire (Figure 4, next page). A sticker on top of the magazine reads, "Do not push tool forward when positioning nail in connector hole," but this is a little unrealistic given the pace of the typical framing site.

The Senco weighs in at 7 pounds 14 ounces, and holds one full strip of 30 paper-collated nails at a time. Nails are



Figure 3. The brass-coated titanium probe at the tip of the Paslode Positive Placement nailer makes it easy to locate the nail holes in metal hangers. The probe pivots out of the way as the nail is driven.





Figure 4. When using the Senco nailer, it's important not to push the gun forward or else the nail will not fire straight.

available in two lengths and three diameters (.131, .148, and .162 inch) in bright and dipped galvanized. With a suggested retail of \$689, the gun should be available for around \$550.

Eye Safety

Though carpenters young and old will resist wearing them, safety glasses are an absolute must with pneumatic nailers. And they're even more of an absolute must — if that's possible — with these metal connector nailers. Think about it: You're getting in close, straining to locate

the nail point in that little hole, and that nail is bound and determined to ricochet off the steel plate. You're flunking a very basic IQ test if you forego the glasses.

Any one of these nailers will make your life a lot easier, and will pay for itself over a few jobs, depending on the number of connectors you install. At this writing, I would choose the Paslode, for price, ease of use, and reliability. But it wouldn't surprise me to see choices from other manufacturers in the future, or improvements in the existing guns. 