

Strapping on a New Toolbelt

by Tom Carty

Editor's note: Thanks to the manufacturers who sent belts for this review. There were too many to cover them all, so we've included only those belts which the author rated as Very Good or Excellent.

Tradespeople become attached to their personal tools, and of these tools, the most personal tool is the one attached to them. Choosing a toolbelt should be a well-considered decision since we spend as much, or more, time with it attached to us, like a beneficial parasite, as we spend in bed. In trying to picture the "perfect" toolbelt, I realize that it's different for the various trades. Although my experience in the other trades has had some influence, this evaluation primarily reflects my training as a framing carpenter.

For the type of construction I typically do, I have arrived at a few criteria. The belt must sit comfortably on or around the hips without pulling my pants down, and it must be able to adapt its girth to the clothing I wear. The belt should also be able to accept suspender connections for those of us that use them.

There need to be at least two nail pouches on each side, deep enough to keep things in without letting them fly out at inopportune times (like when I am climbing through trusses). The pouches need to maintain their shape over time and not "limp out," as many of mine have done. The pouches need to be big enough to carry an ample supply of nails without having to reload too often, and yet small enough not to overload the belt (and my back) with weight. I like having several interior closed- and open-bottomed sleeves; ditto for exterior sleeves for the several tools I carry. The closed sleeves should be of differing depths to accommodate different lengths of pencils, knives, punches, chisels, awls, and so forth.

I go nuts trying to withdraw a tool from a sleeve that has "swallowed" it. With the increasing popularity of the speed square, there should be a slot to carry one, preferably inside or between bags. I prefer a belt-hung hammer loop, on the back, with the option for loops on the nail pouches for those "extra" situations. I rarely carry my long-handled framing hammer in the bag loops for very long because of the irritating way the handle clips the back of my knee when I'm mov-

ing around. Finally, the belt, pouches, and sleeves also need to be durable enough to withstand the rigors a carpenter puts them through (weather, dirt, concrete, tearing, punctures, and so on). The belts I reviewed are presented in alphabetical order by manufacturer.

Tradesman Series Framer Set Model #93108

Manufacturer: Alta Industries

Material: Anso-Tex nylon

Overall Rating: Very Good

Suggested Retail: \$129

This toolbelt is available as a set, or you can buy individual components. The padded belt and over-belt with quick-connect buckle is thin enough for suspender connectors. Velcro attachment of bags to the padded belt keeps the bags from pulling the over-belt down off the padded belt, a nice feature. Bags adhere to velcro facing on the belt for positive positioning, repositioning, or switching. The rivets are closed-face, and the bags feel durable yet light.



This model doesn't come with a belt-style hammer loop, but a metal loop is available that will fit on the belt. Hammer loops on the bags are low enough that my framing hammer clipped the back of my leg when walking.

The nail pouches are deep enough and large enough for tools; and the exterior pockets for a knife, a keel holder, pencils, and punches are deep enough to hold tools without swallowing them.

The horizontal pockets are handy for small screwdrivers or a small bunch of unusual nails. The speed square pocket holds well but should be a little deeper.

Four interior pockets hold longer tools such as chisels and screwdrivers well, but swallow knives or keel holders. The exterior sleeves for a nail puller or squangle work well, and I like the two-pocket pouch in back for a chalk box and gloves.

Pro Level # 5605

Manufacturer: CLC

Material: Cordura Plus

Overall Rating: Very Good

Suggested Retail: \$79

I liked the easily adjusted double-tongue metal roller buckle on this one. The bags are adjustable on the belt, and they stay where you want them when you're bent over. The belt will accept suspender hooks. Heavy stitching, closed rivets, and added reinforcement to the top of the nail pockets stiffen them to maintain their shape and stay open — it's easy to get my hands in and out of even the small pouches.



This model has a good pouch depth for nails and tools, but the speed square pocket is slightly too small. The interior sleeves are good for chisels and longer tools but swallowed my knife and keel holder. I like the horizontal pouches for small screwdrivers. There isn't a really good place for pencils, the knife pocket was too tight for my knife, and I don't like the metal clip for accessory tool pouches. There are at least seven kinds of bags (left- and right-handed) to customize the whole system to your needs, and I like the option to have two pouches on the back of the belt.

Pro Level Plus

Manufacturer: CLC

Material: Double layer of Cordura

Overall Rating: Very Good

Suggested Retail: \$100

The padded under-belt, with velcro for closures and bag placement, is comfortable. It's combined with a nylon and leather over-belt with a double buckle; suspender attachment is also possible. All the nylon seams are rolled and stitched, and extra reinforcement at the top of the nail pouches maintains their shape. With closed rivets, the overall system seems very durable and able to withstand abrasions and tears.

The belt-mounted metal hammer loop has a gate-type mouth for easy hammer insertion, but this means moving



parts that could break. The metal hammer loop on back of the right bag is at the right height to let my framing hammer's handle clip the back of my knee.

The pouches are deep enough to carry and hold nails or tools and get hands in or out of easily. Larger nail pouches are padded (against your body) with doubled layers of Cordura. Inner pockets on the right-hand bag are great for chalk boxes or calculators. The nailset pockets are tight and a little shallow. There is a two-position clip for accessory bags, which is nice for times when you have to carry different nails, but the upper clip impedes access to the lower nail bag. Two exterior leather sleeves allow for a small nail puller and a squangle. If I had a larger nail puller, the squangle would have to be left in the toolbox.

The tape measure pocket holds a 25-foot or 30-foot tape readily, which is then easy to get out. A bag on back of the belt is big enough to accommodate larger tools like a stapler or rigging axe.

C-200 Set

Manufacturer: Diamond Back

Material: Cordura double layer, triple-layered at hemmed edges

Overall Rating: Very Good

Suggested Retail: Prices vary, \$129 to \$300

Diamond Back has a product line that covers all the bases, and these belts perform like someone really put some thought into their construction. Pocket layouts make sense, and bag styles are readily interchangeable with secure velcro "fold-over" belt loops. Bags hang on a secondary toolbelt which is secured to the padded belt, allowing bags to be moved around somewhat depending on your preference. All components seem to be double-tough. Extra belt clips are included "just in case." The ability to mix and match bags to your preferred belt makes it hard to pick a favorite but make easier to pick out your set.

Diamond Back has 25 models of tool bags available in both right- or left-handed versions, ten different accessories, seven belts, three colors, and two sizes of bags. All of these components are interchangeable, so there are thousands of choices available for you to build your own custom rig. Prices range from \$100 to \$350.

Diamond Back C-200 set. This is the newest version of a combination of belt and bags that will satisfy most framing



needs (see photo on previous page). The pockets will securely accommodate metal-connector nails, without letting them fly out everywhere, and still let you carry all the tools you need, with the added feature of one more pocket in the middle nail pouch. This set will accept clip-on suspenders. It costs \$210.

US301S Pro Triple, All Leather

Manufacturer: McRose Leathers

Material: Leather

Overall Rating: Very Good/Excellent

Suggested Retail: \$185

This set is so similar to what I'm used to that I found I could easily carry all my regular tools, plenty of nails, and still be comfortable. I would have to rate this a "classic" set of bags, lending themselves to a variety of uses. The all-leather set will stretch out and down over time, but that is what leather does. The 4-inch-wide leather belt with a roller buckle will accept clip-on suspenders, and sheepskin padding from hip-to-hip has a nice,



natural touch to help lessen the pull of the fully loaded bags. The pouches were deep enough to keep items in and still allow my hand in to "grab a few." Hems on all the pouches are double-rolled and stitched with heavy-duty thread for strength and stiffness; pressure points are riveted as well with smooth-faced rivets. An open sleeve on the left bag is angled slightly down from horizontal so a T-square or squangle doesn't slip out, and several pouches (in three sizes) allow me to carry enough nails and screws to be efficient.

8095 Stronghold Beltless System

Manufacturer: Occidental Leather

Material: Cordura

Overall Rating: Excellent

Suggested Retail: \$200

Just shoot me now so I can go to heaven! For those who wear suspended bags, this beltless system is the way to go. I've been wearing suspenders clipped to my belt for years and years to help me keep my back in shape. This scheme does it all without having to have a belt across my waist (which would put unwanted pressure on my hips and growing waistline). Because there's no belt, when you first see these bags you wonder if



they'll stay in position, and if they'll flop around. Once you set them up to fit you, there is no problem.

The comfortable, fully adjustable harness and yoke is a composite of leather and nylon with a buckle. Pouches are deep enough to carry plenty of nails and screws without falling out, and the large bags are padded to soften any bumping against the body. The nylon construction is well stitched and hemmed, and all of the rivets are smooth. Closed sleeves are included on the padded shoulder yoke for small clip-on pouches.

Interior and exterior sleeves allowed me to carry all the tools I normally do, with space to spare, and exterior clips allowed me to carry an optional case for my calculator and/or cell phone. I now carry more stuff than I have in years, and I'm still comfortable.



Tom Carty is a general contractor from Sacramento, Calif., with over 20 years of experience in residential construction.

Toolbelt Manufacturers

ALTA

P.O. Box 2764
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
800/788-0302
www.altaindustries.com

McRose Leathers

P.O. Box 3489
Truckee, CA 96160
800/866-5224
www.mcroseleathers.com

CLC (Custom LeatherCraft)

811 W. 58th St.
Los Angeles, CA 90037
800/325-0455

Occidental Leather

60 W. 6th St.
Santa Rosa, CA 95401
800/743-6914
www.bestbelt.com

Diamond Back USA

6295 Greeley Hill Rd.
Coulterville, CA 95311
800/899-2358
www.toolbelts.com