

Toolbox

Something to Get on Your Chest

by Gary Audet

I like tools and I carry a lot of them in my tool bag. This is not only because I hate time-wasting trips to the truck, but also because, as a general remodeler, I use more tools than new-house carpenters do. As a result, my heavy toolbelt has increasingly put a strain on my lower back. Obviously, the toolbelt problem isn't a new one for carpenters, and like many of my peers I've searched for a better arrangement for years. Nothing worked the way I wanted it to until I discovered the Tool Chest (Occidental Leather, 707/522-2500, www.bestbelt.com).

The Tool Chest isn't a toolbelt; it's a nylon vest that transfers the weight of your tools from your lower back to your upper body. Plenty of pouches, pockets, and sleeves provide space for just about anything you need to carry. Additional storage is available in a more conventional set of divided fastener pockets that hang from the vest's bottom. The sturdy rig is thoughtfully designed and allows me to have everything I need within easy reach.

The Vest

Both sides of the vest feature combination square holders, speed-square pockets, and tape-measure pockets, making the Tool Chest suitable for both right- and left-handed carpenters. Being right handed, I slide my combo square into the left-side holder, where it inserts and removes easily in almost any position. I use the other combo square holder for a small cat's-paw. I also keep my speed square on the left side, and the well-designed pocket makes it easy to grab. Both sides include many other pockets for various other hand tools, and little pouches around the waist are perfect for easy-to-lose stuff like nail sets and driver bits.

The Lower Bags

The lower bags, which are removable, include wide-mouth nail and tool pouches. The pouches hold their shape, allowing you to grab a nail or two even with gloves on, and the finished edges don't scrape against your skin. The divided bags also act as drill holsters, and they're roomy enough for the biggest battery packs, even my 24-volt Bosch. Unlike a conventional holster that supports only the drill body, these carriers support the battery pack, too, preventing your



The Tool Chest hangs on your shoulders instead of your waist, putting less strain on your lower back. Wide, padded shoulder straps prevent chafing, and a quick-adjusting elastic closure keeps them from falling off your shoulders.



The adjustable vest features pockets for the most commonly used hand tools and large side pockets for stashing a pair of gloves or warming your hands. It also includes nice touches like a removable plastic sleeve for chisels and other sharp tools and a tape pocket big enough for 30- and 35-foot tapes.

drill-driver from flopping around while you're climbing a ladder or bending over.

The Verdict

The suspension system alone is a godsend. After first making adjustments for my height and shoulders, I haven't needed to change a thing. The wide shoulder straps not only support the weight of the bag but also include little pockets that are perfect for small tools and pencils that otherwise sink to the bottom of most tool pouches. Unlike traditional suspenders that slip off your shoulders, these straps include an adjustable closure (like on a backpack) that keeps the straps from spreading. No matter what coat or clothing I have on, I can adjust for fit and comfort in a couple of seconds. And it goes on and off so easily that I don't hesitate to take it off when sneaking through tight spaces. A handy D-ring allows me to hang it up, preventing stuff from falling out during breaks or on the drive home. Even with everything I carry on a daily basis, there's still enough room to carry special purpose tools when I need them.

When I first saw the bag, I could tell why it costs \$220. The quality is evident, and, although many carpenters would



The lower bags are removable and hang from the vest with well-made, spring-steel clips that allow them to flex without falling off. Divided pockets hold their shape and provide plenty of room for collated and loose fasteners.

balk at the price, I think it's fair. It's the tool I use more than any other, and my back hurts less.

Gary Audet is a remodeler in Brandon, Vt.

TOOL CLINIC

Table Saw Tuneup

by Larry Mott

As the owner of a tool repair shop, I see many tools that have been abused or gone without maintenance. Professionals tend to take their tools for granted, expecting them to work whenever they flick a switch. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen.

Cleaning and lubrication may seem to take valuable time out of the workday, but following manufacturers' advice about care will help to keep your tools on the job instead of in the shop. In this column, we'll look at basic upkeep tips for a portable table saw.

Dust Devils

Portable table saws are the workhorses of the construction site. Most of the top brands are well-made tools and

will run reliably for years with only a few minutes of attention every couple of weeks. One of the most important maintenance steps is to periodically blast the sawdust and debris from underneath the saw. This alone would cut down on the flow of preventable repair traffic coming into my shop. Unplug the tool, turn it over, and use a blowgun to clean out the underside of the tool. Be sure to wear safety glasses during cleaning to prevent the sawdust from resettling in your eyes.

Pivot stops. If you're having difficulty setting the bevel at 45 degrees, you've probably got a sawdust buildup on the two pivot stops located on the underside of the carriage. This is especially important on the latest Makita 8¹/₄- and 10-inch saw models, whose blade-tilting mechanism consists of a plastic gear and a gear rack. As the

accumulation of sawdust increases, the operator is often inclined to apply more force to the tilt mechanism, eventually stripping the gears.

Sap-laden sawdust can develop into a hard, gummy mass, but it can be softened with a solvent like turpentine, mineral spirits, or a dedicated product like aerosol Pitch & Gum Remover (Woodworker's Warehouse, 800/877-7899, www.woodworkerswarehouse.com; \$5).

Beware of Weird Noises

An unusual noise is often a sign of a tool problem in the making, but many times the operator doesn't hear it over the noise of operation. A coworker standing away from the tool may be the one to notice a change in sound. If something sounds weird, it's a good idea to have it checked out immedi-

TOOL CLINIC (continued)

ately. You may prevent an injury or save yourself from a more expensive repair.

We recently worked on a portable table saw that had clearly seen little maintenance; it was packed with wood slivers and sawdust and was probably overworked at least once in its life. The owner said the saw was a little noisy. But when we plugged it in and flipped the switch, we didn't hear anything — no noise, nothing at all. Somehow, the power wasn't getting to the motor. Removing the brush caps to perform a continuity test uncovered the first clue. One of the brushes was discolored, showing evidence of overheating. The other brush was stuck inside its brass holder, with its spring and copper connection burned off. We had to use a chisel to remove that brush in pieces.

When we removed the motor housing from the frame, aided by a pair of pry bars, we detected the unmistakable smell of burnt electronics. The field windings had become so overheated that the brush holder housing had melted and the garter spring that provided the electrical contact had burned through. That tool must have made some bad noises before it quit, but they were probably ignored. Replacement parts had to be ordered, putting the tool out of commission for more than a week. Adding insult to injury, the repair bill came in at \$215.

Sharpen the Blade

How many times have you heard that advice? I'm frequently astounded at how many people disregard that important recommendation. Using sharp blades of the appropriate type puts less strain on your saw, improves your quality of work, and makes using the saw safer and more efficient. Although it may seem obvious, always double-check that blades are installed correctly. Teeth should point in the



Many saws include a blade shroud with a port for dust collection. Little slivers of wood can become trapped in the port, leading to a rapid sawdust buildup. Unplug the tool, remove the shroud's access panel, and clean out the debris.



Slowed by the friction of accumulated debris and a less than sharp blade, this saw was forced into an early decline by inattention. Replacement parts and service cost \$215, plus over a week of downtime for the tool.

right direction, and arbor bolts should be adequately tightened.

Check Cord Safety

You should check the saw cord regularly for cuts or damage to the insulation. If you see exposed wire, don't tape the cord — get it replaced. Simply taping up the bad spot and continuing to work is a stopgap measure, likely to put a hazardous situation on

the back burner. And never remove the grounding terminal of a three-prong plug. Instead, keep a two-prong adapter in your tool kit and use it when necessary. Any unsafe tool should be tagged as such and removed from service until repaired. The alternatives just aren't worth it.

Larry Mott owns *Mott's Tool Repair* in Orleans, Mass.

LEVELS

Waterway. Long before lasers, the water level helped build the pyramids — the low-tech tool has some definite advantages over expensive laser levels. Besides saving you \$200 or more, water levels work around corners and never need recalibration. Electronic models like Zircon's *WL 25 Pro* sound a tone to indicate level, so you can use it by yourself, even when you can't see the other end of the tube. The WL 25 has some improvements over previous models, including an adjustable wall bracket that holds everything stationary while you tug at its 25 feet of tubing, and better feedback that indicates when you're higher than the reference point. For larger projects, you can use it with up to 150 feet of garden hose. It costs about \$40.

Zircon Corporation, 800/245-9265, www.zircon.com.



Expansion Pack. Levelution's *System Level* includes two 2-foot levels and a 4-foot level that can be combined to make a 6- or 8-foot level. Sections are joined with high-strength alignment plates and large easy-to-use knobs. The levels also feature "keyed inserts" that receive removable accessories like rafter hooks and magnets. WoodTacs are one of the coolest accessories. These little pins lock into the keyed inserts and can be driven into beams and headers for hands-free leveling or into sheet goods to create a saw guide or straightedge. The vials are adjustable. The 8-foot system level with a padded case goes for about \$275. The WoodTacs sell for \$32.

Levelution, 888/475-3835, www.levelution.com.



Wood Is Good. Hardwood levels have a beauty and impact resistance that's tough for an aluminum extrusion to match. Stanley's brassbound *FatMax* levels have reinforced rubber end caps and thicker glass covers on the vials for better impact resistance. Hermetically sealed bezels protect the vials from moisture and fogging. The 4-foot model has a foldout, flush-mounted rafter hook that keeps the level within arm's reach and prevents falls. The 2-foot FatMax sells for \$50; the 4-footer sells for \$70.

Stanley, 800/262-2161, www.stanleyworks.com.



Higher Level. The telescopic *Plate Level* from Stabila makes plumbing even the tallest walls easier. The level is now available in three sizes: 5 to 7 feet, 6 to 10 feet, and 7 to 12 feet. Stand-offs on the side and bottom prevent warped lumber or debris on the floor from producing a bad reading. As with other Stabila levels, the vials are set in acrylic blocks and epoxied into the housing, making adjustments unnecessary, according to the manufacturer. Prices start at \$210.

Stabila, 800/869-7460, www.stabila.com.



TRUCK GEAR

Tamper-Resistant Storage. With aluminum that's 40% thicker than what's used for most cross-over boxes, the *Seal-Tite Storage Box* from Deflecta Shield promises greater security. Two permanent aluminum trays and a removable tool tray keep little stuff from sinking to the bottom, and a



three-position lock resists prying and tampering. The self-opening lid has a high-dome shape for greater strength and weather resistance. Prices start at \$400.



Deflecta Shield, 800/334-4447, www.deflectashield.com.

Paper Organizer. For many builders and remodelers, the front seat of a pickup is the home office, and things can get a little disorganized. The *Cab Commander* from Duluth Trading is a heavy-duty nylon organizer that fits over the passenger seat's headrest and provides plenty of pockets for organizing papers and other office essentials. The bag is secured with 1 1/2-inch nylon webbing, which doubles as a shoulder strap. A side-squeeze buckle makes installation and removal easy. The bag sells for \$30.

Duluth Trading Company, 877/382-2345, www.duluthtrading.com.



Smooth Move. The secret to *Slide System's* line of toolboxes, racks, and truck accessories is a special aluminum channel mounted on the bed rail. The boxes and racks can then be positioned anywhere in the bed, and removal is much easier. After unloading the day's materials, the box can be slid to the tailgate for easy access during the rest of the workday. The drill-free system uses the stake pockets for mounting, and the low-profile design means that you can use the system with bed covers, racks, and toppers from other manufacturers. It sells for \$1,028.

Slide Systems, 888/917-5433, www.slidesystems.com.



Pull-Out Toolbox. Truck caps are great, but climbing inside one to retrieve tools or material every day is tough on the knees and back. A better way to get at your stuff is with an *Extendo-Bed System*. It operates something like a full-extension drawer slide and provides easy access to the farthest reaches of the bed. Latches prevent getting run over when you open the tailgate on a grade, and the design can be customized depending on your needs. The model shown costs about \$2,000, plus shipping.

Extendo Bed, 800/752-0706, www.extendobed.com.

