Props for Stabila's Cross-Line Laser

BY SCOTT JACOBSON

I've worked as a carpenter and foreman for Pinsonneault Builders over the past 12 years. Based in Mashpee, Mass., the versatile contractor has a crew of about 30 men and builds custom homes and commercial buildings while also specializing in remodeling and historic preservation. When Stabila introduced the LAX300 compact laser in 2013, we were about to build a 120,000-square-foot hotel. I thought the LAX300 might be the ideal toolbelt laser for the job, so I placed an order with the boss. The laser worked so well and was so popular with the crew that we recently bought two more.

LINES AND DOTS

The LAX300 projects a horizontal line and an intersecting vertical line, plus up and down points that serve as a virtual plumb bob. Both lines fan out 130 degrees from the laser. The vertical line continues out onto ceilings, where it passes through the top plumb point and stops slightly behind the laser. This placement ensures that the line reaches the tops of walls even when the laser is positioned close to them, and it's especially useful for aligning interior wall framing and long runs of suspended-ceiling grid.

According to the specs, the laser has a visible range of up to 60 feet. We can easily see the lines and plumb points in most interiors. Outdoors, the concentrated plumb points are bright enough for most of our plumb-bob applications, but the two lines can be difficult or impossible to find at a reasonable distance or in bright light. You can use laser-enhancement eyeglasses or the included target plate to extend the visible range. The pulsed laser lines also allow you to use a receiver to detect the beam, extending the working range to about 300 feet. Stabila's compatible REC 210 receiver costs about $175. So far, though, we've only used the LAX300 as a simple standalone portable, and have yet to try any accessories. If Stabila would add a bright point where the two lines cross so we could, say, easily check a ridge for level with the naked eye, the visible range of the lines would seldom be an issue for us.

Like most competing lasers, the LAX300 uses a pendulum to self-level. The base of the laser must be within about 4 ½ degrees of level for the pendulum to work. If the inclination is greater, the lines, points, and LED warning light flash to indicate that you're outside the self-leveling range.

The pendulum automatically locks when you switch off the tool, which helps prevent shock damage. To project a sloped line or the two perpendicular lines in any direction, simply leave the slide switch in the off position so the pendulum remains locked, and press the function button on the opposite side of the laser for about two seconds. In this mode, the lines, points, and LED blink rapidly so you don't forget that the pendulum is locked.

According to Stabila, the three AA batteries deliver up to about 20 hours of runtime, which sounds about right. A separate LED on the laser starts to glow amber when about four hours of runtime remain—plenty of time to buy more batteries.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

The main body of the LAX300 rotates 360 degrees on its vertical axis within a C-shaped, rubberized outer housing, which can be very helpful for aiming layout lines. This housing has a ¼-20 socket on the bottom for tripods and laser poles, and two powerful V-grooved rare-earth magnets on the back that stick the laser to the included wall bracket or other ferrous objects. We use the magnetic attachment a lot when setting windows.

The bottom of the outer housing is a height-adjustable foot that releases and

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When you install the sturdy black plastic framing base (left) and push the laser squarely against the bottom plate, the down plumb point will graze the plate's edge. If the laser's top plumb point hits the corresponding edge of the top plate above, the wall is plumb. The author appreciates the padded case (right).

locks at the flip of a lever. The foot lets you fine-tune the elevation of the horizontal laser line, and extending it gives a clear view of the downward plumb point. The foot also makes it easy to plumb wall framing: Just push the notched tip of the fully extended foot against your metal track or 2-by bottom plate, and the downward plumb point will sideswipe the edge. When the upward point hits the corresponding edge of the top track or plate, the wall is plumb.

Framing contractors bump track or plates with the LAX300 all day, which can punish the adjustable foot. The laser includes a sturdy plastic "framing base" that screws to the ¼-20 socket so you can plumb walls without extending the foot.

The outer housing serves one more important purpose. In the closed position, it shields all the lenses to help prevent breakage and keep them clean. Stabila says it tested the shock-resistance of the LAX300 by dropping it onto concrete from a height of one meter with the pendulum locked, so the laser appears to be internally rugged, too. The laser also has an IP54 rating, indicating that water splashes and dust won't hurt it.

THE BOTTOM LINE

When I plan to use one of our LAX300 lasers, I just slip its padded carrying case onto my toolbelt to keep it safe and accessible, and I'm ready to go. Our crew has used these lasers on residential and commercial jobsites for plumbing walls, gables, and trusses; setting windows and doors; leveling ceilings; and more. They've been rained on, banged up, and exposed to dust, and have fared very well. We wish they had one bright dot on the horizontal line, and we would appreciate a rechargeable version, but I highly recommend this excellent tool.

LAX300 Specs

Functions: crossing level and plumb lines, up and down plumb points
Range: 60 feet visual, 300 feet with receiver (not included)
Cross-line and up-point accuracy: ±3/8 inch at 100 feet
Down-point accuracy: ±1/2 inch at 100 feet
Self-leveling range: ±4.5 degrees
Batteries and runtime: 3 AA, about 20 hours
Weight: 1.3 pounds
Price: $350
Included in kit: batteries, framing base, target plate, wall bracket, pouch
Warranty: 2 years

Scott Jacobson is a residential and commercial carpenter in Mashpee, Mass. He invented the Pneuhook quick-change nailer hook reviewed in the June 2014 issue of JLC.

Photo: Top right, Joel Moore

COMPACT BLOWER

One benefit of buying into a cordless platform is that you can add bare tools at a minimal cost because you already own the batteries and charger. For instance, I recently bought a Makita 18V LXT blower. It can be powered by Makita's 18V 2-Ah, 3-Ah, 4-Ah, or 5-Ah batteries; has a variable-speed trigger along with a dial that sets the maximum air speed to low, medium, or high; and delivers a top speed of 179 miles per hour.

I had no idea how much I would grow to love this tool. Soon after buying it, I used it to clear sawdust from a roof. It worked better than I expected, especially for a compact tool. It isn't as powerful as a large leaf blower, but the nozzle and the variable-speed switch allow you to blow debris exactly where you want it without making a bigger mess. In fact, the trigger gives me so much control that I typically leave the speed dial on "high." I use this tool all the time for blowing off floors, roofs, workbenches, cutting stations, tools, and myself. You can also buy an optional dust bag and turn the blower into a small vacuum. The bare tool (DUB182Z) costs about $60. The kit (DUB182) includes a 3-Ah battery, a charger, and a tool bag and costs about $230.
—Paul Johnson is a remodeling contractor in Portland, Ore.

The Select Step ladder is a step up from a traditional stepladder, and from other transforming ladders. Its legs can be adjusted for use on stairs or other uneven surfaces (far left), and it comes with a versatile, multiposition tool tray (left). Locking handles make it easy to change and secure leg positions (above).

Transforming Ladder Is Tops

BY DOUG MAHONEY

A few years ago, Little Giant released the Select Step, bringing its extending, transforming ladder concept to the stepladder. I've owned one since it came out and have used it on a variety of jobsites where it has received unanimous praise from guys in just about every trade. Everyone loves it and there are a lot of reasons why.

At its most basic, the Select Step is an aluminum stepladder that can be adjusted to a height of approximately 5, 6, 7, or 8 feet. Unlike the awkward pin system on the traditional Little Giant Ladder, the locking mechanisms on the Select Step are simple and user-friendly. One side moves when two locking handles are pressed in and the other side unlocks with the twist of a large handle. The sliding motion is smooth, and it's easy to locate and lock in the different stops up and down the rungs.

The ladder legs can be adjusted to different lengths, which allows you to set the ladder up on stairs, on a ramp, or hard against a wall. One of my electricians really appreciated this feature when he was hanging lights—especially when he was hanging a large pendant in a stairwell.

The Select Step also comes with something called the AirDeck, a multiposition tool tray that can be attached to the ladder's top. In one position it sits horizontally, and in the other, it sticks up from the top of the ladder and acts as a handrail. Even in this vertical position, the platform can be pivoted to horizontal so you still have a place to put your tools. When not in use, the tray clicks into the ladder for easy storage. The great thing is that the AirDeck provides enough tool storage that once you go up the ladder, you may never need to come down. It has 14 different tool holes, a magnetized tray, a spot for a paint can, and two notches that are designed to secure extension cords or air hoses. This is in addition to the standard storage at the top of the ladder itself.

The trade-off of all this functionality is weight. The Little Giant is heavy compared with a 6-foot fiberglass ladder. Because there are four sets of rungs, even when it's compacted to its smallest size, I found it difficult and awkward to carry around on my shoulder. If you need to go up and down a set of stairs multiple times in a day, this ladder gets old pretty quickly.

So it's a great ladder, but not for everything. A regular fiberglass step is going to be better for quick trips to a site or for a fast-paced task such as putting in light bulbs at the end of a job. But if you're setting up to work in one spot for a while, this is the perfect ladder to use.

Select Step Specs

Load rating: IA; 300 pounds
Height: adjusts from 5 to 8 feet (large model available; 6 to 10 feet)
Material: aluminum (also available in fiberglass)
Country of origin: China
Price: $245

Doug Mahoney is a carpenter in Harvard, Mass., and a regular contributor to Tools of the Trade, *where this review originally appeared.*