Hose-Free Metal-Connector Nailer

by Mike Guertin

The fastest way to install metal connectors is with a pneumatic nailer, but DeWalt's new 20-volt DCN693 metal-connector nailer is the next best thing, especially if you don't want to be tethered to a hose and compressor. The nailer has a brushless motor powered by DeWalt's 20V MAX lithium-ion battery platform and takes standard 30- to 35-degree paper-collated 1½-inch or 2½-inch connector nails. You change nail sizes by flipping a switch located just below the rear of the hand grip on the back of the battery mount, and adjust the depth of drive via a large, easy-to-twist thumbwheel at the front of the tool.

Operation

There are two firing modes—sequential fire and rapid cycle. A slide switch to toggle between modes is located on the magazine side of the tool just below the cap.

In sequential mode, when you position the probe-tip into a connector hole, the motor automatically winds up and is ready to fire. When you pull the trigger, the tool sinks the nail, and then the motor winds down when you remove the tool from the connector.

In rapid-cycle mode, the motor continues to spin for a few seconds after firing off a nail so you have time to place the tip for another shot without waiting for the motor to wind up again. In rapid cycle, you can fire off nails as fast as you can reposition the probe tip.

While it takes one or two seconds in sequential mode for the motor to reach full speed after the probe tip is pressed to a connector hole, it usually takes about a second to visually verify that the probe tip is accurately placed before you pull the trigger. So the difference between rapid-cycle and sequential modes is pretty small and not much slower than you'd experience with a pneumatic tool. But there is an energy penalty for this slight increase in production—DeWalt notes that the battery won't drive as many nails before needing a recharge in rapid-cycle mode as it will when operated in sequential mode.

We tried the nailer out while building a 53-foot-long deck. We didn't test to find out the maximum number of nails a charged battery would drive in either mode, but on this deck, we were able to nail off 48 2x6 joist hangers and 18 2x12 joist hangers in sequential mode, and the battery still had plenty of life left. The nailer had no trouble sinking nails flush with the hangers in dense PSL rim joists, and did equally well on the SYP ledger after we dialed back the drive depth.

We had one nail jam, which we quickly fixed by unscrewing two hex bolts at the front of the magazine and swinging it down to expose the nail channel. Unlike with a pneumatic tool, which can't be fired when the air is disconnected, you have to remove the battery before working on this tool, to be safe. And when it's not in use, it's a good idea to activate the trigger lock button just above the trigger.

The only design feature I can fault is the nail pusher. The button is clunky and has some friction when retracting. And the pusher doesn't engage the retainer hook easily—it's something you have to focus on to lock back before letting go.

Ergonomics

As with any battery-operated tool, the trade-off with going hoseless is weight. While the specs say that the DeWalt nailer weighs 8 pounds, we found that it came in at just over 9 pounds with the battery and no nails.

In practice, it fit fine between 16-inch-o.c. joists when shooting shear/diagonal nails. If you're working with 12-inch-o.c. framing, though, I'm not sure if it will be as easy to position the nailer.

Online, the kit—which includes the nailer, a charger, one 4.0-Ah battery, and case—costs about $450. ❖

Mike Guertin is a custom home builder and remodeler in East Greenwich, R.I., and a regular presenter at Deck Expo.