

Weigh In!

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Max 500 PSI AKHL1260EX Compressor

BY TIM UHLER

One of my first reviews for *JLC*, in 2004, was of the Max PowerLite HN90 coil framing nailer and AKHL1050E PowerLite compressor (now discontinued). The Max compressor stores air at 500 psi, which allows for smaller, more-powerful nail guns (including guns that can shoot into concrete and steel, eliminating the need for powder-actuated tools). At the time, I had to pass because we had a large crew that ran four nailers continuously off a wheelbarrow compressor. The high-pressure Max compressor couldn't possibly keep up with our pace, and the system was expensive—the compressor alone was \$1,200 and each coil framing nailer was about \$650.

In 2008, however, our crew dropped down to just two guys and we had too much income that year, so for tax purposes we decided to buy into the system, with one compressor and two framing coil nailers that can also shoot siding nails.

PROS AND CONS OF HIGH-PRESSURE

The benefit to a high-pressure system is the lighter weight of the guns. We have run coil nailers for 15 years and love them. We find that it is easier to clear jams, and there's less reloading due to the higher capacity. Though more nails means more weight, the high-pressure guns are smaller and lighter to begin with.

The downside is that everything is expensive. The hoses cost more and need to be professionally repaired, due to the high pressure. The compressor is slow but quiet. It will keep up with two people, but not if we are nailing off shear panel, which means a tighter nailing pattern.

NEW, LARGER-CAPACITY COMPRESSOR

Max now has available the AKHL1260E compressor, which has been around for quite a while, and the new AKHL1260EX, which I'm reviewing here. The 1260EX is

almost identical to the 1260E, but it has a 5.7-gallon capacity versus 2.3 gallons for the 1260E. The compressors both feature two high-pressure and two regular-pressure outputs. We run one regular pressure for a Hitachi positive placement nailer and the two high-pressure for the HN90 coil framers we love so much.

At 50 pounds, the AKHL1260EX compressor is light. In addition, it is quiet, at 67.5 dB in regular mode and 66.4 dB in quiet mode (which runs the compressor at a lower speed). We leave the compressor in our van to keep it out of the weather, and run the hoses from there.

This compressor has a brushless motor on an inverter circuit. The inverter steps down to 70 volts. We can run it off a 100-foot 10/3 extension cord without tripping the breaker. It also works well in the cold.

As mentioned, we run out of air with this larger-capacity compressor only when we are shear-nailing large walls. But I don't care too much about this, because it only comes into play on larger walls, like rake walls. In those cases, the person framing (the other person is cutting) has been bent over continuously for a few hours; taking a break to let the compressor catch up is welcome, especially in the heat.

SHOULD I BUY?

We bought into this system 10 years ago and have no regrets. The system has been fabulously reliable and has delivered superb power. We can nail LVL together as easily as nailing off sheathing. One of the reasons we bought in was that the lighter-weight tools would put less wear-and-tear on our bodies. We want to keep building houses and keep the framing in-house for as long as possible.

The initial cost is a consideration. I would say that it is about double what a regular-pressure system would cost. It is

harder to get the gear worked on as well. For a two- to three-man framing and siding crew, it is worth the investment. For larger crews, though, it isn't the best option. When we were a five-man crew, we needed to run a wheelbarrow compressor to keep up.

Online, the AKHL1260EX runs about \$2,000 and the HN90 about \$600.

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The AKHL1260EX (top) has a brushless motor that runs on 70 volts and has a 5.7-gallon capacity. A high-pressure nailer (above, at right) is smaller and lighter than a traditional nailer (above, at left).

Photo of nailers by Tim Uhler; photo on facing page by Mark Luzzio

Tuning and Sharpening Block Planes

BY MARK LUZIO

In 1973, at age 17, I signed on to help a local roofer in central Ohio. The job was a two-and-a-half-story Victorian with a carriage house, and by the time we finished the job, I was sure that ripping off shingles would *not* be my life's work. One day at coffee time, I was feeling thankful to be walking on level ground but dreading having to carry two more squares up a 30-foot extension ladder, so I decided to look through the carriage barn of the newly purchased property instead.

In a box of junk in the barn, I found a small block plane with no iron. It was a low-angle Stanley 60-1/2, and I asked the new owner if I could have it. No problem; all the boxes were headed to the dump. At the hardware store in town, they even had one replacement iron left. I was set. I didn't know then that I would be tuning up, resharpening, and using that same plane for the next 45 years.

Acquiring block planes. I have a number of block planes that I purchased at a large antique market held three times a year in Brimfield, Mass. I have never paid more than \$25 for one. I recently checked E-Bay; at this moment there are more than 100 block planes of similar quality to mine for \$25 to \$50.

There are also good-quality, new Stanley block planes for around \$45 each from catalogs like Woodworker's Supply, which also sells a nice Sweetheart Stanley reproduction for \$120. And Highland Hardware and other sites sell top-of-the-line block planes by Lie-Nielson for about \$175. The only problem with these big-dollar planes is that sinking feeling you get when one slips from your hand and falls onto the driveway below while you're planing a cedar shingle. I prefer an old plane in restorable condition. Call it my tip of the cap to the tradesman who came before me.

Only top-line planes are good to go right out of the box. All others, new or old, need a tune-up and sharpening first. The condition of the iron is the only deal breaker when I'm buying an old tool. If there's no pitting (deep rust) for the first half inch, I make the purchase.

Two types. A standard block plane (like a Stanley 9-1/2) has a 1 5/8-inch-wide iron and a bedding angle of about 20 degrees. (Note that the bedding angle—not to be confused with the bevel angle of the iron—is the angle at which the iron sits in the carriage of the plane.) A low-angle block plane (like the Stanley 60-1/2) has a bedding angle of around 12 or 13 degrees and a narrower, 1 3/8-inch-wide iron. I prefer the low-angle version for trimming end grain and for how it fits my hand. The best models have an adjustable throat plate, which helps as a chip breaker to control the depth of cut.

Tuning. Take the plane apart and clean and oil the depth adjusting screw. I then flatten and polish the sole of the plane on a sheet of sandpaper taped to the bed of my jointer. Roll or break all the edges of the plane body.

Start by flattening the back of the iron on a whetstone. I use an oil stone, but water or diamond stones are just as good. On a flat stone, it's easy to tell when the back of the plane iron is flat, because the polish from the stone will be uniform.

Sharpening. The next step is to create a new edge on the iron. I use a 10-inch Delta bench grinder. The more expensive, slow grinding systems are great but not critical. The important detail is having a quality wheel. I use a "friable" 100-grit aluminum-oxide wheel. The particles of a friable wheel break off easily and cut down on the chance of overheating the steel.

On a block-plane iron, the bevel (which faces up when the iron

The author has acquired a collection of used block planes over the course of his carpentry career. All required a tune-up and sharpening, but none cost more than \$25.



is in the carriage) should be 26 degrees to 30 degrees. Take your time and cool the iron frequently if you don't want it to overheat. Overheating is called "bluing," and it's unmistakable when it happens. I keep an old coffee cup filled with water by the grinder to dunk the iron in and cool it down.

Remember: The more precision you have at the grinding wheel, the less time you'll have at the whetstone. Remember, too, that a good grinding wheel is useless without a diamond dressing tool for flattening the wheel and creating a new, clean surface.

Next, hone the cutting edge. While larger bench planes have a super-shallow arch profile across their cutting edge, block planes are ground straight across with a tiny slope at each corner of the iron. Take the new edge to your whetstone. Remove the burr from the flat side of the iron. Flip to the other side, find the bevel angle, and then raise the iron slightly. When you begin honing, this slight raise will create a 4-degree micro-bevel. This is your actual cutting edge. Some people hone in a straight line; others use a figure-eight pattern. I use both. At this point, you are only trying to remove micro nicks in the edge.

The last step requires a leather strop. You can buy one or make one by gluing a piece of leather—rough side up—to a hardwood block. I load the leather with a fine coating of Herb's Yellow Stone compound (available on Amazon for \$10). With the compound, the strop will give an old-school barber's edge.

It's now time to put your new-old plane back together. Setting the depth of cut is first done by eye. Flip the plane upside down and the blade will appear as a fine line. Set it for a light cut and test it on a scrap of wood.

Paring chisels. Putting a new edge on a chisel is basically the same process. I prefer old pattern-maker (longer) paring chisels. A good set of plastic-handle short carpenter's chisels are fine for rough work and I always keep one in my roll. But paring chisels cut the same way as a block plane and should be sharpened to the same edge.

If you do a lot of paring of wood plugs or finishing door-hinge mortises, a back-bent paring chisel is a great tool. (By the way, another nice tool if you do lot of wood plugs is a Veritas flush-cut mini saw—a real time saver.) Old back-bent chisels are hard to find, but Woodcraft sells nice ones under its Wood River label. I think 1½ inch wide is the best size; there's no need for an entire set. I have a 3⁄8-inch Buck Brothers back-bent chisel that I have sharpened so many times that it is now too short for my grinder. I guess it's one of the signs I'm getting old.

Mark Luzio owns Post Pattern Woodworking, in Brooklyn, Conn.



To tune a plane, the author starts by flattening and polishing the sole on a sheet of sandpaper taped to the bed of his jointer. Roll or break all the edges of the plane body (1). After grinding a 26° to 30° bevel on the iron, the author hones the edge on a whetstone to the same angle (2). The last step is stropping on a piece of leather (rough side up) tacked to a block and loaded with Herb's Yellow Stone compound (3).

Photos by Mark Luzio