Milwaukee M18 Track Saw

BY IAN SCHWANDT

The Milwaukee M18 Fuel track saw is powered by a single 6.0-Ah battery, which mounts in a convenient and easily accessible location **(1)**. Compatible with tracks from Festool and Makita **(2)**, the saw has the finesse to trim doors and the power and cutting capacity to slice through framing stock and engineered lumber **(3)**.

Photos: 1, Ian Schwandt; 2, 3, Martin Gutierrez

Few tools have garnered as much anticipation among our crew in recent years as the Milwaukee M18 track saw did when the company announced it was rolling out the saw to compete with several other new entries in this growing category. We're several years into the switch over to cordless tools, and many tradespeople have found themselves—by choice as well as inadvertently—in a committed relationship with a single battery platform. And rightfully so; batteries are expensive, and if you are all in on cordless tools, you no doubt have developed work habits that are more efficient and much easier to follow if you are on a single platform. I have met and worked with many carpenters who were hesitant to step outside the Milwaukee M18 battery family and introduce a whole new set of batteries and chargers to their kit for a high-dollar purchase like a track saw. These holdouts for the M18 track saw have finally had their patience rewarded.

Earlier this year, the team at TDS Custom Construction got our hands on a new Milwaukee M18 Fuel 6 1/2-inch 2831-21 track saw kit, which included one XC6.0-Ah battery pack, an M18 and M12 rapid charger, and a 24T framing blade, all inside a Packout XL Tool Box. This kit retails for $640, while the bare tool can be had for $400.

I suspect that the bare tool will be the preferred purchase for M18 platform users unless they put a high value on the Packout XL Tool Box. My carpentry crew at TDS found the Packout XL box overly bulky when compared with cases for our Makita, DeWalt, and Festool track saws. Currently, Milwaukee does not offer the 2831-21 kit with the track included, unlike its competitors in this space, which offer kits either with or without track. The track is available separately in 31-inch, 55-inch, and 106-inch lengths ($80, $130, and $250, respectively); we tested the saw with two lengths of 55-inch track joined together with a set of Guide Rail Connectors ($30). Guide Rail clamps with standard screw handles are also available, for $40. The Milwaukee track is nearly identical to the tracks offered by Festool, Makita, and Triton, which means that the Milwaukee M18 track saw will work interchangeably with track from these manufacturers.

Features. One of the first things we noticed about the saw is its light weight; at 9.13 pounds (without battery), the saw weighs less than the other three saws in our shop. There was some concern that this would cause the saw to have stability issues, but so far that has not been the case. Even when ripping a 1 3/4-inch LVL to fit into an existing floor system as a flush beam, the saw showed plenty of power and stability.

The depth stop is easy to set, with 1/8-inch graduations, and the saw can bevel from -1 to 48 degrees, with a stop at 22.5 degrees. It

has a 2 1/4-inch depth of cut at 0 degrees and a 1 5/8-inch depth of cut at 45 degrees, enough to rip a 45-degree bevel in 2-by lumber.

The plunge action of the saw is a hinged, tipping-forward motion, which is something that I greatly prefer over a straight-down plunge motion. The plunging motion is controlled by a simple thumb switch and a locking tab that is fully visible to the user, a feature that many people may not quite realize the importance of until they have tried to address a cut with a track saw only to have the saw refuse to plunge due to buildup of sawdust at a hidden locking tab.

Speaking of sawdust, Milwaukee claims 90% dust recovery when the matching dust bag or a dust extractor is used. In practice, we found this claim seemed about right, though—as with most track saws—the large hole in the side shroud of the saw that is necessary for the removal of the blade allows some dust to escape and has a dulling effect on the strength of a dust extractor.

But thanks to that large access hole and a positive spindle stop level that holds the saw in the right place for a blade change, switching out a saw blade is simple. Currently available through Milwaukee are a 24-tooth framing blade (the one we used for all of our testing), 40-tooth finish and 52-tooth fine-finish blades, and fiber-cement and laminate blades to fit the saw's 20mm arbor.

One additional feature of the saw is a splinter guard that can be installed in place of the blade-viewing window at the toe of the saw. This guard can be used to prevent splinter damage to the sawn-off workpiece that is not protected by the track's splinter guard strip.

Performance. Cutting with the Milwaukee M18 track saw, as with most of the track saws on the market, is a joy. The brushless motor on the saw has plenty of power cutting and ripping all framing materials and doing light surgical demo work—one of our carpenters used the saw to make a straight line cut in a roof deck that allowed us to tie a new addition roof in while giving the roofer a clean line to patch to. Using a wheel-style speed selector, the brushless motor can be set to produce 2,500 to 5,800 rpm with a max of 6,300 rpm under load. The saw has shown it has plenty of power for all the framing applications that we've put it through and plenty of finesse for the standard track-saw application of cutting finish-grade sheet goods and trimming interior doors.

For M18 battery platform users who have been waiting years for this saw, I suspect that you will not be disappointed. At $400, the bare tool is economical, and the money saved over the kit could allow you to purchase the 106-inch track in addition to the versatile 55-inch track. milwaukeetool.com

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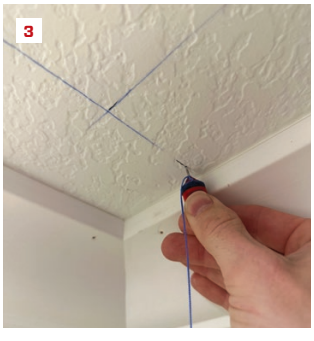

The Shinwa Neo chalk box has a rugged ABS case and a thin braided line for snapping fine chalk lines **(1, 2)**. It comes with both a regular hook and a pin receiver with a thin needle that can be inserted into drywall or wood trim for solo work **(3, 4)**.

A Fine Chalk Line

BY TOMMIE MULLANEY

I've used a lot of different chalk boxes over the course of my carpentry career, but when it comes to snapping clean and consistent lines for interior carpentry, there's only one that I carry with me in my toolbelt. The Shinwa Neo from Japan is my "go-to" chalk box, and has been for many years.

Line. The Shinwa Neo has a much thinner line than other brands do, measuring only 0.020 inch thick. Even so, it can span distances up to 50 feet, suitable for even my longest length projects. The thin line is great for trim projects with tight tolerances, such as coffered ceilings, compared with the thicker lines left by most other chalk boxes. Those bold lines can measure up to 1/8 inch thick, more suitable for framing carpenters who need to mark rough surfaces.

While the special woven threaded line is fine, it has proven to be durable and can handle daily jobsite use. It also accepts chalk easily, with an internal felt pad in the chalk box to ensure good chalk-powder distribution. The pad also helps to eliminate chalk from spilling out of the top.

For consistent lines and full functionality of the chalk box, I use Tajima's micro powder chalk. It comes in a variety of colors, such as blue and red, which is useful for projects that need multiple lines of reference.

With a low gear ratio and folding crank handle, manually

Photos: Tommie Mullaney

Makita 18V LXT ½-Inch Hammer Drill/Driver

BY ANDREW WORMER

If you're an old-timer like me, you probably remember the iconic Makita 6093D cordless drill, which was powered by the company's 9.6-volt stick-style NiCad battery. I purchased mine well over 30 years ago and still have it, along with one or two other more recent (but still "antique") Makita drills with NiMH batteries. All of them would probably still run if I could find replacement batteries, but I'm not even tempted to look, because I have Makita's XPH14 18V LXT hammer drill/driver, which is better in every way than its well-regarded predecessors.

I've been using this drill for over a year now and have really come to appreciate its high-torque, 1,250 inch-pound motor. In low-speed mode (0–550 rpm) and fitted with a mixing paddle, the drill is great for mixing up batches of mortar for tile. I've even chucked in a special bit that fits into a sailboat winch, attached myself to a halyard, and had my son use the drill to safely and smoothly power me up to the top of a 50-foot mast. That's not something that any of my other cordless drills would have been capable of, and it brings that same kind of power to situations where you might need to drive a big auger bit through studs for tasks such as running electrical cable. To handle all this power, it comes with a secondary handle.

With a high-speed range up to 2,100 rpm, an adjustable clutch, and compact size, it functions well as an everyday drill/driver. It weighs 5 pounds 2 ounces with the 4.0-Ah battery I typically use, and measures only 7 inches in length, still leaving plenty of room for a big, 6-inch-long bit to fit between 16-inch-on-center studs. And if you need to install some anchors into masonry, it functions as a hammer drill too, with a rate of 0–8,250 bpm in low and 0–31,500 bpm in high. Currently available for $111 as a bare tool on Amazon, it's a steal. makitatools.com

The Makita XPH14 18V LXT hammer drill/driver has a powerful, high-torque motor.

retrieving the line is simple and fast. Once the line is secured, the quick flip handle sits flush inside of the body to ensure zero interference when you're slipping the chalk box back into your tool pouch.

Body. Weighing in at 5.3 ounces, the body is made from a tough ABS resin that has held up to numerous typical falls off scaffolding and ladders, so durability has not been a concern. The transparent body offers quick viewing of the amount of chalk left inside, with an easily operated access door for quick refills. I especially like the way that this design doesn't interfere with the line like typical top-threaded chalk boxes. Once the door is closed, the body is sealed to prevent powder from leaking and humidity from entering.

Hooks. The Shinwa Neo offers two attachment options. There is a standard hook—the type that is commonly seen on most chalk boxes—that can be used for metal and concrete parts. There is also a pin receiver (a sharp needle with plastic housing for easy insertion) that solves one of my biggest gripes about snapping lines: having to place a nail or screw into the wall to attach the chalk line. The pin receiver, which works well on both wood and drywall, makes my life easier and is the feature that makes this chalk box stand out from other ultra-thin-line chalk boxes. Once the line is snapped, only a pin-sized hole is left, making this the least intrusive option when snapping lines by yourself on those types of surfaces.

Tool dealers such as Taylor Toolworks (taytools.com, a favorite with woodworkers) sell the Shinwa Neo chalk box, but you can also venture over to Amazon and find it for around $21 to $25. The chalk box does not come with any chalk powder, so don't forget to pick up the color of your choice.

Tommie Mullaney owns Black Label Carpentry in central Florida. You can visit his web page at blacklabelcarpentry.com or follow him on Instagram @BlackLabelCarpentryCo.

The author uses Tajima's micro powder chalk, which is specially formulated to produce fine lines, to fill his Shinwa Neo chalk box.

Photos: top, Andrew Wormer; bottom, Tommie Mullaney

Festool RSC 18 Cordless Reciprocating Saw

BY CLAYTON DEKORNE

Festool's new RSC 18 cordless recip saw seems to be an especially nice version of this tool of all trades. Though we haven't put it through its paces, the tool that we inspected in the Festool booth at JLC Live in Providence, R.I., exuded power on a well-charged battery. Like many powerful reciprocating saws, it includes an adjustable power stroke (Festool calls it the "pendulum stroke," similar to Bosch's orbital, or elliptical, action) that kicks the blade back and forth as it saws up and down, helping to clear the kerf of dust and speed the cutting action. Yet, with all this power, what's happily missing is vibration; it's not hard to imagine this would result in much less fatigue through long and grueling cuts.

A few exceptional features on the RSC 18 make it a standout tool in the field of cordless recip saws. Chief among those is an adapter that allows you to position the end of a vacuum hose on the shoe to collect dust coming off the blade. Another feature we liked is the blade collar, which seems especially well thought out for quick blade changes. The blade can be ejected by simply rotating the collar, so there's no danger of burning your fingers when removing a saw blade. The clamped blade can also be rotated by 180 degrees, so you don't have to take it out and reinstall it when you need to cut in the opposite direction. This saw also comes with a ladder hook. The RSC 18 is due in the U.S. this month; the expected price is around $600 with two 5.0-Ah batteries, charger, Systainer box, and vacuum attachment. festool.com

Festool's new RSC 18 cordless recip saw promises smooth power and has a mounting system for dust collection.

A Safe and Powerful Cordless Coring Drill

BY TIM HEALEY

Plumbers and electricians will be interested in Milwaukee Tool's new MX Fuel hand-held core drill, which is able to core holes up to 6 inches in diameter in reinforced concrete. The drill can be powered by either its XC lithium-ion battery pack (reportedly capable of fully charging in 90 minutes) or its more compact CP battery pack (fully charging in as few as 45 minutes). We checked out the tool at JLC Live, where Milwaukee's Christopher Losch told us, "If you're coring 3- to 6-inch-diameter holes, you'd probably want to use it in tandem with our compact core drill stand for added drilling confidence. For holes 3 inches or less, you can usually core concrete or block while holding it in your hands."

Runtimes vary depending on the hole diameter and the material being cored into. For example, with the CP battery, you can core nine 3-inch holes in concrete block or five 3-inch holes in 6-inch-thick concrete, and with the XC battery, 18 3-inch holes in concrete block.

Regarding safety, Losch said, "The MX is the safest hand-held core rig available. It has our patented Autostop technology, which cuts the drill off automatically when you feel it torquing. This is particularly important if you happen to be working above your head or on a ladder." Other features include a better clutch, a self-leveling function, and a performance meter to tell you if you need to apply more or less pressure to extend the life of the tool and the bit.

The drill can be run wet or dry. For coring concrete dry, the manufacturer recommends using its dry coring dust extraction attachment, which allows you to be OSHA-compliant when drilling. Losch also told us that Milwaukee plans to release a new drill capable of coring 14-inch-diameter holes in concrete later this fall (2023). Estimated cost with stand is $4,000. milwaukeetool.com

Milwaukee's MX Fuel core drill can be hand-held (left) or mounted in a drill stand for holes larger than 3 inches (right).

Photos: top, Clayton DeKorne; left, Tim Healey; right, courtesy Milwaukee Tool