Solo Drywall Hanging

Get help when you can, but if you have to install these unwieldy sheets by yourself, it pays to rent a lift

BY PAT CARRASCO

As someone who hangs drywall for a living, I can say without a doubt that the first rule of solo drywall hanging is to get a good partner. Two people working together can get a lot more done, and with a lot less strain, than one poor slob stumbling around by himself. Having said that, I have to admit that even the best partners don't always show up for work. No matter how good the excuse—the first day of deer season, 2 ft. of fresh powder at Big Sky, "I woke up and felt so bad I figured it had to be Saturday"—for me, it's just another day spent holding my own. After 20 years of working in this trade, I've learned that many drywall projects can be done solo if I use the right tools and apply leverage rather than brute strength.

Real men can use a lift

In addition to the standard drywall tools that everyone uses—screw gun, router, utility knife, keyhole saw, 4-ft. square—a pair of step-up benches, a drywall foot pedal and a soft hat are particularly useful when I'm forced to fly solo. I'll explain more about these tools, but first I need to mention the one tool that's indispensable for hanging solo: a drywall lift. Basically a winch designed to raise and position large sheets of drywall safely, the drywall lift is available in most supply houses and rental shops. A few companies have made this tool, but the best one I've found is the PanelLift (Telpro Inc.; 800-448-0822).

I'm too cheap to purchase a drywall lift (they cost about $600), so when I need one, I rent (rental cost is about $20 a day). Tools like this take a lot of abuse, so when I stop at the local rental shop, I pick out the newest model in stock. I make sure the cable isn't frayed, and I give the wheels a good spin to see if the rubber and the bearings are in good condition. If the tool passes inspection, I pack it in my rig, and off I go. A drywall lift is a bulky, 100-lb. monster, but it's easy to transport because it breaks down into three compact sections that are easily reassembled on the job site.

Proper preparation keeps the surgeon away

Moving material from room to room is particularly difficult to do by myself, so if I know that I'll be working alone, I take special care to make sure the drywall is stocked exactly where I want it. If the room is large enough for me to maneuver a full sheet—say at least 13 ft. by 13 ft.—I have the stockers put the board right in the room where I'll be working. Otherwise, the ideal location is in the hallway or a nearby room from which the board can easily be transported. When the delivery arrives, I ask the stockers to separate the sheets and stand them on edge against a wall with their white sides facing out (photo right). I make sure that the drywall is placed against the wall with enough of a tilt to prevent the pile from tipping over and injuring someone working on the job site. I feel safe if the bottom of the first sheet is 8 in. from the base of the wall.

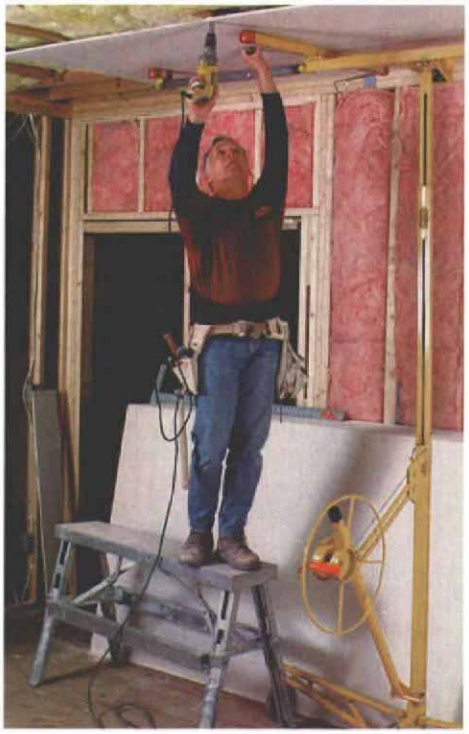
I prep a room the same as I would for any drywall job, only more so: I check that all the framing surfaces are in the same plane and that all the nails are driven flush. I make sure that all the blocking is in place and that each corner has backing. I use a router to cut out for electrical boxes, so I tuck all the wires deep into their respective boxes. When I'm using a drywall lift, I sweep the floor thoroughly to make sure the wheels don't become caught on a stray screw as I'm trying to wrestle a 12-ft. sheet into position.

Large sheets go up first

Professional drywallers usually hang the ceilings before the walls because we get extra wiggle room along the edges. To minimize the number of butt seams, we like to use large sheets wherever possible. Working with a partner, I may use sheets as long as 16 ft. When working alone, I limit myself to 12-ft.

USE THE RIGHT TOOLS

A drywall lift makes it possible for one person to place large panels high up on walls and ceilings. An adjustable step-up bench is a more effective platform than a ladder for fastening the panels.



Look, Ma! No hands! With the drywall lift doing the heavy work, eight 1¼-in. drywall screws are easily driven around the perimeter to tack the sheet.

Breaking between the joists. Rather than cut a factory edge to break on a joist, the author uses scrap sheathing material as a backer to create floating butt seams.

sheets. For efficient use of time and material, I put up all the large sheets first, then fill in the smaller pieces afterward.

My first ceiling piece will be hung along one wall and perpendicular to the ceiling joists (photo above). If necessary, I adjust the height of my walk-up benches so that I can easily touch the ceiling while standing on the top step (top inset photo); then I place one or two benches alongside the wall and check the measurement for the first sheet. If I have to cut the sheet to make the seam break on a joist, I make the cut on the outside end, saving the factory edge for the butt seam. If I encounter an unusual framing configuration, I could also let the sheet break between the joists and use a backer to join the seams (bottom inset photo).

'Tilt and lift' to load large panels

The hardest part of solo drywall hanging is loading the board onto the lift without

LEVERAGE MAKES LARGE SHEETS MANAGEABLE

To load a 12-ft. long sheet onto a drywall lift, the author bends his knees, places a hand under the corner and straightens up, all the time keeping his back straight (photo above). With the sheet balanced between his hands and leaning against his shoulder, he carries it to the lift and deposits it in the support hooks (photo below).

stress and strain. To give myself plenty of room to maneuver, I wheel the lift to the center of the room and lock the foot brake. Then I tilt the cradle body forward and unfold the support clips. Now all I have to do is persuade a 100-lb. slab of gypsum to get off the floor and set itself in the hooks.

The key to lifting a large sheet of drywall is a leveraging maneuver that I call the "tilt and lift." To make sure the board rests on the lift with the white (finish) side facing the frame, I pick up the sheet from the dark side. Standing at the end of the board, I squat down and reach a hand underneath the bottom corner. Without bending my back, I straighten up and raise the corner to waist height (top photo). Ensuring that the sheet leans in toward my body, I reach the other hand down to the bottom edge and walk toward the middle of the sheet. The sheet will automatically tilt up to a horizontal position when my hands are centered. With the bottom edge balanced between my hands and the top leaning backward and resting against my shoulder, I walk over to the lift, center my hands between the clips and set the bottom edge on the clips (bottom photo). I then gently push the top of the sheet away from my body onto the cradle.

Once the board is settled in the cradle, the rest is easy. After tilting the cradle body

backward so that the sheet lies flat, I fold the clips back and out of the way. Then I roll the lift to its approximate position in relation to the ceiling and crank the board up to within an inch of the ceiling (photo p. 89). After fine-tuning the position, I crank the board up tight, reach for my screw gun and drive enough fasteners to hold it in place (top inset photo, p. 89); a minimum of eight evenly distributed and correctly set screws is usually enough to support a 12-ft. sheet. Holding the crank with one hand, I release the crank brake with the other hand, ease the lift down and out of the way, then securely fasten the drywall with 1¼-in. type W screws, placed 7 in. o. c. along the butt seams and 12 in. o. c. everywhere else.

Small sheets go up by hand

Wherever I encounter a recessed light or an electrical box, I avoid the hassle of measuring and fitting by using a router to make the cut after the sheet is tacked in place (for more on cutting drywall, see *FHB* #134, pp. 70-75). Before I install the sheet, I put a mark on the wall, or on an adjacent sheet, to remind me where that box is. When I tack this board in place, I make sure to keep the fasteners at least 2 ft. away from the box. Then I remove the lift, cut out for the box and finish fastening the sheet.

Unless the room's width is a perfect multiple of 4 ft., the last row of drywall has to be ripped to size. This problem is not a concern when I'm working with a partner, but it's something I have to think about when I'm going solo. Because it's designed to handle large panels, the drywall lift doesn't work well if the sheets are narrower than 21 in.—or shorter than 50 in. I can avoid this problem by ripping a foot or so off the first row of drywall, or I can cut the last row into shorter lengths that I can manage by hand.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Lightweight sheets are supported with one hand and fastened with a screw gun (photo left). The author supports heavier sheets with his head and fastens them with a hammer to extend his reach (photo below).

After all the full-length sheets are up, I go back and fill in the gaps. Boards that are too small for the lift are installed one of two ways, depending on size. For small sheets, I climb up on the bench, support the board with one hand and drive a few screws using the screw gun in my other hand (photo top left). When I have to install larger sheets that are too heavy to support with one hand, I use my head (photo top right). (That's where a soft hat can be handy.) I adjust one of the step-up benches so that the top of my head just touches the joists while I'm standing on the top step. After I've wrestled the board into position, I use my head and my left hand to clamp it while I spin around and drive a few nails home using a hammer in my right hand; in this instance, I use nails rather than screws because the hammer enables me to extend my reach.

A drywall lift is not just for ceilings

When I turn to the walls, I have the option of placing the sheets vertically (standing them up) or horizontally (laying them down). Standing sheets up is easy to do (sidebar p. 93), but I generally prefer to lay them down. For residential projects, rooms tend to be small, so laying the sheets down usually results in fewer seams to tape.

Wherever a wall is longer than 12 ft., laying the sheet down means I have to deal with a butt joint. Butt joints are a lot harder for tapers to make disappear, so I try to minimize those joints by making them fall above doors and above or below windows. When I

New tools cut out the heavy lifting

A drywall lift makes it easy for one person to install 12-ft. panels of drywall, but getting the material from the pile to the lift is hard work. Fortunately, the company that makes the PanelLift (Telpro Inc.; 800-448-0822) also makes a couple of nifty devices to ease loading and transporting.

The PanelLift Loader is a simple attachment that mounts easily on any PanelLift drywall lift (photo top right). Lifting a corner of the sheet 2 in. off the ground is all it takes to load the loader; from there, turning a crank handle raises the sheet and sets it gently in the support hooks.

The Troll is simply an inexpensive ($30) dual-wheel roller with a handle (photo bottom right). I've seen other types of panel-moving dollies, but this design also makes it possible to carry a panel over obstacles or to raise it high enough to be placed onto the PanelLift Loader.
—P. C.

PLACING WALL PANELS

To hang the top panel on the wall, the author wheels the drywall lift up against the wall and sets the foot brake; while gently holding the sheet against the studs with one hand, he uses the other hand to crank the wheel until the top edge just touches the ceiling. After checking to make sure it's positioned correctly, he cranks the sheet tight (photo above).

Raising the bottom layer. Because a standard drywall lift is too high off the ground to hang the bottom panel, a specially designed drywall foot pedal provides the leverage to close the gap between sheets.

don't have a door or window to help me, I stagger the seams as far from the center of the wall as possible.

I hang the uppermost row of boards first. After cutting the first sheet to length, I get on the dark side of the board, set it in the clips and roll the lift alongside the wall. After setting the floor brake, I tilt the top of the sheet away from the lift and let it rest against the wall. Then I crank the wheel until the top edge of the sheet kisses the ceiling. After fine-tuning the position, I crank the sheet tight (top photo, facing page) and drive a handful of screws along the top edge to tack it in place. I then remove the lift and drive the rest of the screws.

I hang all the upper sheets in the room before I start on the lowers. I work my way around the room in a circular pattern, taking full advantage of the available tolerances. Whenever I reach a corner, I cut the board at least ¼ in. short, knowing that the adjoining board will cover the gap. The only sheet that must be cut tight is the last one.

When I have to hang a board that's too small for the lift (less than 50 in. long), I start a couple of nails in the top before I pick up the board. After it's in place, I steady the board with one hand and hammer home the nails with the other. Compared with screwdriving, the extra reach I get using hammer and nails allows me to tack the board without leaving the floor.

Foot pedal lifts the bottom sheet

Once the top row of sheets is installed, I'm finished with the drywall lift. I use a low-tech foot pedal to position the bottom row (photo bottom left, facing page). After the first sheet is cut to length, I check to see if there are any electrical outlets on the wall. If so, I put a mark on the floor directly beneath the outlet and measure the distance from the floor to the center of the box (electricians always place their boxes at a uniform height, so I jot down this measurement to use for future reference).

If I have to move a sheet a long distance, I use the "tilt and lift" method, carry it where it needs to go, then reverse the lifting procedure to set the sheet gently on the floor. If the distance is only a few yards, such as across the room, I use what I call the "armpit carry": I center myself on the sheet, bend my knees and tuck the edge under my armpit. I grip the sheet tightly using both hands as well as squeezing under my arm; then, keeping my back straight, I use my legs to lift the sheet off the ground. I could make things even easier on my back if I used a dolly to move the panels around (sidebar p. 91). But a dolly would slow me down, and in my world, production is always an issue.

When I've gotten the sheet roughly in position, I slide the foot pedal (Goldblatt Tools; 800-262-2161) under the center, and I raise the sheet until its tapered edge meets the one above it (photo bottom left, facing page). I drive a handful of screws along the top edge to tack the board in place; then I kick the foot pedal out of the way and mark the location of any electrical boxes. I rout out the boxes before I finish fastening the sheet.

As a rule, I prefer to hang all the drywall in one room before I move to the next room. When the clock is ticking on a rented drywall lift, however, I often first put up all the sheets that require the lift. Then I'll drive like a crazy man to get the lift back to the rental shop before closing time. On the way back, I stop at a nice restaurant and treat the entire crew to dinner. □

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Tilt backward and lift from waist height to position a large vertical sheet.

Steady the sheet with one hand until it's held tight to the ceiling with foot pressure.

Standing sheets up

In most cases, I prefer to hang the wall panels horizontally, but there are situations where vertical is better. For instance, on a wall less than 4 ft. wide, I can eliminate a horizontal joint by standing a full sheet straight up. Standing sheets up also enables me to eliminate troublesome butt seams. If I've got a long, highly visible wall that must finish perfectly flat, I stand the sheets vertically and leave the finisher to work with a bunch of recessed edges rather than protruding butt seams.

For ease of placement, I cut each sheet at least ½ in. shorter than the height of the wall. I use the "tilt and lift" procedure (described in the main text) to pick up and carry the sheet where it needs to go. When I reach my destination, I set down the corner about 6 in. in front of the wall, stand the sheet and leave the top edge of the sheet temporarily leaning against the wall.

After making sure that my foot pedal is within arm's reach, I grasp the sheet around waist height, lift it slightly off the floor and then push the bottom of the sheet against the bottom plate of the wall (top photo).

Holding the sheet against the wall with one hand, I reach for the foot pedal with the other hand, place the pedal under the center of the sheet and apply foot pressure until the top of the sheet meets the ceiling (bottom photo).

Gentle pressure on the pedal steadies the sheet while I center the tapered edge on the stud. I then drive a few screws to hold the sheet in place, remove the foot pedal, step back and drive the remaining screws.

—P. C.