



Top-Handle Jigsaws

**Tool
Test**

The best of these pro-level tools should be equally suited to heavy, aggressive cuts and delicate, detailed curves

BY PAUL JOHNSON

The jigsaw has come a long way since Albert Kaufmann first strapped a sawblade onto his wife's sewing machine back in 1946. From humble beginnings, it has become an indispensable tool for all manner of curved and straight cutting, especially on the job site.

The two main styles of jigsaw are barrel grip and top handle. Ask a room full of carpenters which is better, and you're bound to get an earful. According to the manufacturers included in this group, though, the top-handle jigsaw is the more popular, so I chose to focus on pro-level tools in that style here.

My goal was to find out the basic differences among these models—speed, control, size, weight, and power—as well as the amenities that set them apart: LED lights, vacuum ports, dust blowers, and carrying cases. I tested the saws on softwoods, hardwoods, plywood, metal, and porcelain tile to determine how each saw performed with different materials.

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BOSCH JS470E

Price: \$140 **Power:** 7.0 amps **Weight:** 5.9 lb.

FEATURES Bosch has had arguably the best jigsaws around since the company brought them to market in 1946. This new jigsaw is no exception. It has power to spare, smooth operation, a good line of sight, a great trigger-lock lever, and a 13-ft. cord to boot. The case is sturdy and well made with plenty of room for the saw, the cord, the blades, and any of the standard Bosch accessories. The blade is perfectly square with the base and stays fairly rigid through cuts in all different materials. The blower works well, and ramping up the orbital action to the top level lets this saw take off down the track. Bosch pioneered toolless blade changes, and the company's newer line of jigsaws actually ejects the blade from the armature even when held upside down, eliminating the chance of burnt fingers. While the Makita jigsaw fared slightly better at sawing through the solid 4x4 ipé, the Bosch was easily as powerful in every other test.

FLAWS Like the Makita saw, the only real flaws of the Bosch are in what it is lacking. An LED and toolless base adjustment would make this saw absolutely perfect. The only other flaw I can find is the size. Even though at 5.9 lb. it's only slightly heavier than the Makita, it is both longer and taller. Still, it's well balanced and weighted for its size.

BOTTOM LINE The Bosch line of jigsaws continues to perform, although now it must share the throne with Makita. Even with this tool's larger size, its quality craftsmanship, power, and dreamy handling make it a pleasure to use. Because it's a top-notch choice at a slightly lower price, it earns best value.



FOUR STANDOUT FEATURES

Each of the jigsaws tested has some standard features: a variable-speed dial for controlling blade-stroke speed, an adjustable tilting baseplate for beveled cuts from 0° to 45°, a trigger lock-on button, toolless blade-change and T-shank blade compatibility, a guard to protect against accidentally touching the moving blade, and a nonmarring cover for the metal baseplate. These tools also have four features more crucial to their success, and they vary widely in performance.



1 BLADE RELEASE You never want to grab a blazing-hot blade to remove it from the tool. Ideally, the blade can be ejected with some force or, at a minimum, can drop out easily at the push of a button.



2 ACCURATE TRACKING If a jigsaw can't maintain a straight, square cut, it's not worth your money. The best models are manufactured to tight tolerances, are able to keep the blade from wandering out of tight curves, and can handle even the deepest cuts.



MAKITA 4350FCT

Price: \$155 **Power:** 6.3 amps
Weight: 5.7 lb.

FEATURES At a still-svelte 5.7 lb., the Makita is compact, well balanced, and easy to maneuver. It has a small but bright LED that illuminates the cutline even when working in dark spaces. This is the quietest of all the saws tested, and it tied with the Bosch for the most overall power throughout all the tests. It has a soft-start feature to help it ease into the cut, rather than a variable-speed trigger. The trigger-lock button is well placed and easy to depress. The line of sight to the cutline is just right: There's no need to crane your neck to see where you're cutting. The handle is thinner than on most of the other saws and is wrapped with a rubber grip, making it one of the most comfortable saws to use, especially for extended periods of time. In test after test, the Makita performed with top honors, slicing through all the materials with ease, even working through the 4x4 ipé posts better than any other saw. When switched to the highest orbital action, the saw carried itself along with barely any push from me. Even when switched to nonorbital mode, the speed of cut barely decreased, yet the quality of the cut increased.

FLAWS The only things I wished for on this saw were a variable-speed trigger and toolless base adjustment. The case fit the saw with cord and blades, but it could have been a bit bigger. That's about as close as this saw came to having any flaws.

BOTTOM LINE If this saw had a variable-speed trigger and toolless base adjustment, it would be unstoppable. As it is, its power, quiet operation, compact design, and comfort edged out the Bosch for best overall.



3 GOOD SIGHTLINES Balancing compact design, blade-guard placement, and chip clearing is a major challenge. Keeping your eye on the cutline is also crucial, ideally without having to crane your neck to unreasonable angles. If done properly, lights, blowers, and vacuums help.



4 ORBITAL ACTION By moving the blade in an elliptical pattern instead of just straight up and down, the cut speed increases. As speed increases, however, cut quality decreases, so this feature must be adjustable.



DEWALT DW331

Price: \$140
Power: 6.5 amps
Weight: 6.4 lb.

FEATURES The DeWalt feels well built, with enough exposed metal to give it a tough-looking exterior. In tests, it held its own, powering solidly through each of the projects I used it on as well as the shop testing, with nary a complaint. The toolless base adjustment worked great, and it was easy to lock it in at one of the detents or anywhere in between. The case was roomy and also came with a handy flush-cut blade, which allows the tool to cut right up to a perpendicular surface. The body and blade guards were well proportioned and positioned, allowing an unobstructed view of the cutline.

FLAWS The blades sometimes had a tendency not to lock in place and would fall out when I started a cut. Even after I thought I'd mastered the art of inserting the blades, they would still come out every once in a while. A hump at the top of the handle became slightly fatiguing on my hand after extended use and seemed more for show than for ergonomics. The trigger lock was easy to depress, but once the lock was engaged and the trigger released, the speed reduced slightly. There was no way to keep the trigger locked at the highest speed.

BOTTOM LINE The DeWalt earns a solid B. If the blade-locking mechanism were more dependable, the saw would have higher marks because it performed well in all the tests and its only other flaws were minor. However, that one fault renders the saw less useful and would make for awkward, if not potentially damaging, situations if the blade fell out upon starting a cut.



FESTOOL PSB 300

Price: \$250 **Power:** 6 amps
Weight: 5.3 lb.

FEATURES The Festool is compact, powerful, well balanced, and solidly built. The lightest jigsaw, it is small like the Makita and is able to fit into tighter spaces than the others. The included zero-clearance splinter guard works well without completely blocking the sightline. The trigger-lock button is easy to use with one hand—almost too easy, in fact. I kept accidentally pushing it in during normal use. This tool has the longest cord—more than 13 ft.—and comes in a beefy case with molded storage for the saw and a range of blades and accessories. The saw's vacuum capabilities are extraordinary. The suction ports are at the inside front corners of the baseplate, so dust is picked up in front of the blade, where it counts the most.

FLAWS Like the Makita, this saw has a soft-start trigger, but I would have much preferred a variable-speed trigger. The wire blade guard is positioned so that it partially blocks the normal line of sight. I found myself angled a few degrees past where I normally stand to see the cutline. The supplied hex wrench is shaped like an "S" rather than the standard "L," and it has a different bit on each end of the short legs: one for the nonmarring base shoe, the other for adjusting the angle of the base itself. Because there is no long leg of the wrench to use, it's impossible to turn it more than 180° unless the base is at steeper angles. Also, the bottom plate is part of the vacuum assembly, which means that it's not easily sacrificed like other plastic base shoes and, like most Festool parts and accessories, will be expensive to replace.

BOTTOM LINE The Festool saw had plenty of power for all the tests I put it through, but it didn't necessarily distinguish itself in any way other than dust collection. While it transitions seamlessly into the rest of the Festool system, none of its features would sway me to pick it over the other top contenders, especially with its hefty price tag.

METABO STEB 135 PLUS

Price: \$180 **Power:** 6.1 amps **Weight:** 6.2 lb.

FEATURES This jigsaw has only one thing on its mind: power. It rivals, if not surpasses, the higher-amp Bosch and Milwaukee models for sheer aggressiveness of cut. When orbital action was off, cuts were still clean and quick, and each of the four levels of orbital action increased its speed and vigor. The blade-guide roller is low on the body, making the Metabo a champ at straight cuts and tight circles. The blade is close to the front of the saw, which, in addition to allowing the saw to get close into corners, gives a clear, unobstructed view of the cutline. Moreover, the foot plate can be adjusted backward so that the blade is flush with the front of the plate, giving the saw better maneuverability in restricted spaces.

FLAWS When I was trying to cut with more finesse, the pronounced lag time of the soft-start trigger didn't have the responsiveness I wanted. The thin metal blade-clamping lever wasn't especially comfortable, and although it makes the blade feel well secured, the lever's tight spring makes it harder to open. The blade guard must be flipped up out of the way to access the lever for blade changes, and unless the blade has been removed or the blade arm is at the highest part of its stroke, the tool won't fit into the carrying case.



BOTTOM LINE The Metabo is a big, powerful saw, but without finesse or features. If I had to tackle sink cutouts all day long or perform other tasks that require pure power, I might choose this tool, but for all-around versatility, I would probably look elsewhere.



HOW WE TESTED

I used new Bosch blades (my preferred brand) on each jigsaw to ensure that the test results weren't skewed by dull blades or different manufacturers.

I received the jigsaws right as I was framing a full first-

floor remodel and finishing up a switchback staircase, just in time to see how they worked on 2x Douglas-fir stair-stringer material. I typically use a jigsaw to finish each cut so that no structural stability is lost by overcutting in the corner.

Inset photo, this page: Rodney Diaz

MILWAUKEE 6268-21

Price: \$155 **Power:** 6.5 amps **Weight:** 6.4 lb.

FEATURES The thing I noticed right away when cutting with the Milwaukee jigsaw is that it felt really smooth. The variable-speed trigger allows for great control, and coupled with the smooth but aggressive cutting action, this tool is a force to be reckoned with for most cutting applications. The LED is bright and well placed. Although there are no detents, the base adjusts smoothly and locks into any angle easily. The included case is large and heavy duty, and it easily holds the tool with plenty of room for extras.

FLAWS The blade needs to be pushed into the clamp extra hard to get it to lock in place. If pushed in with a normal amount of force, it doesn't seat fully into the armature and won't lock in place correctly. It took several tries before I could feel when the blade was properly seated, but even then I wondered about the longevity of the blade mechanism. The saw is tied with the DeWalt as the heaviest of the group, and though it goes unnoticed for most conventional cuts, its lengthy 9½-in. body isn't ideal in tight spaces and is awkward when coping trim. Even with its size and weight, it feels a little flimsy around the handle and especially the trigger, and I wonder how it will hold up to use and abuse over time.

BOTTOM LINE This saw had almost as much power as the Bosch and Makita models, and it had a smooth feel to it under most conditions. However, it was slightly unwieldy, it didn't cut through thick materials as well as the other saws, and it felt like it might not survive being dropped a few times. Although it hovered as my top pick for a while, in the end, its slight weaknesses took it out of the top position.



PORTER-CABLE PC600JS

Price: \$70 **Power:** 6 amps **Weight:** 5.4 lb.

FEATURES This is a compact, no-nonsense, no-frills jigsaw. At just 5.4 lb., it is second only to the Festool as the lightest of the bunch. A small LED helps to keep sightlines illuminated, and the toolless base adjustment is a welcome addition.

FLAWS The Porter-Cable felt underpowered in all the tests and was the only saw that I was able to bog down to the point that the motor stopped. With the shortest stroke length, 1⅜ in., the Porter-Cable just didn't have the guts to make cuts with any sort of speed, and the different orbital settings weren't any help. The blade inserted easily, but it took some muscle to get it out. I made the mistake of grabbing the blazing-hot blade several times because it wouldn't eject easily. The blade was slightly out of square with the body, making for unintentionally angled cuts. The trigger-lock button was impossible to lock on without reaching across with my other hand and pushing in the tiny button with the tip of my index finger. Even the power cord was subpar; at only 6 ft., it was nearly useless without an extension cord.

BOTTOM LINE This tool had several flaws that kept it from being a serious contender. In addition to coming without a case, all the above-mentioned flaws made this jigsaw feel like it was an afterthought in Porter-Cable's tool lineup. I kept hoping I'd find a hidden strength that would redeem this saw, but I never did.



Doug fir is a good testing material for jigsaws because the alternating hard and soft rings make a blade wander.

After that, I cut templates for the three bottom curved stair treads out of both plywood and MDF, testing to see how well they could be controlled staying close to the waste line.

Next, I notched some ipé deck planks around 4x4 posts.

Back in the shop, I tested the saws to see how well they cut in straight lines, how square they cut in thick material, how well and square they cut large-diameter curves, and even how well they turned on a dime after I traced some loose

change I had in my pocket and cut along the inside of those lines. I tested the saws on various thicknesses of metal and on some porcelain and travertine tiles I had around the shop to see how well they behaved with different materials. To test their limits, I pushed them as hard as I could through some

4x4 solid ipé posts at slow and fast speeds, with both orbital and nonorbital action.

In the end, one saw proved that it didn't have what it takes to stand up to the weighty competition, and three jockeyed for the top position, with the remaining three not far behind.