

# New Chalklines for

A closer look at the standout



BY LARRY HAUN

The first chalkline I used, through the early 1950s, was a cotton string pulled through a solid piece of chalk shaped like half a lemon. After the string was pulled through the block of chalk a few times, the line was ready to be snapped. The setup was somewhat crude, but it worked.

Since that time, I've tried countless chalk boxes, all with different features and advantages. They are simply indispensable when it comes to laying out walls for framing, marking cutlines on sheathing, aligning courses of siding or shingles, and handling many other layout assignments.

I recently got the chance to try out more than a dozen different chalklines. My favorite models, shown here, have a range of innovative features that make them ideal for different layout tasks. Bet you can't buy just one. □

Larry Haun, the author of *The Very Efficient Carpenter* (The Taunton Press, 1999), lives and works in Coos Bay, Ore. Photos by Joseph Kugielsky.

## FASTEST REWINDS, LOWEST PRICE

● **Strait-Line SL6X**  
Manufactured by Irwin Industrial Tool Co.  
800-464-7946  
[www.irwin.com](http://www.irwin.com)  
Price: \$11



The new Irwin chalkline is an improvement over the old Strait-Line box that has been around for 50 years or so. The chalk reservoir opens wide, making refills easy, and the rewind handle retracts the line 6 times faster (a 6-to-1 gear ratio). A built-in clutch allows the 100-ft. braided line to be pulled out without spinning the handle, and a large pronged hook on the end does a great job of grabbing an edge, a big help when you're snapping lines at odd angles. A lock keeps the line tight during snapping and also comes in handy for using the box as a plumb bob.

At \$11, the SL6X is worth having in your tool kit, but I would like to see a better design to prevent chalk from spilling out of the nose of the box.

## BUILT TO GO THE DISTANCE

If you work solo and need to snap lots of really long lines, this tool is for you. Equipped with 150 ft. of heavy braided line, this chalk box is great for larger jobs like framing long outside walls. The standard hook is replaced with a 1-in.-dia. metal ring that

● **Pro 150**  
Manufactured by C.H. Hanson  
800-827-3398; [www.chhanson.com](http://www.chhanson.com)  
Price: \$20

slides easily over large bolts, nails, or even rebar. The chalk reservoir unscrews from the end of the box and holds more than a pound of chalk. The rewind handle is large and easy to use, but a rapid-rewind system would be a major

improvement on this tool. A large molded handle comes in handy for getting a solid grip on the box and tightening up the long line before snapping.



# an Age-Old Job

versions of this essential layout tool

## LONGER LINE, BUT LESS HASSLE

- **Little Giant G110** Manufactured by Keson Tool Co.  
800-345-3766; [www.keson.com](http://www.keson.com) Price: \$25



This tool saves time when installing shingles or siding over long distances. The system has 110 ft. of heavy poly-cotton line that runs between two separate boxes. The rewind handles are easy to use, but a 1-to-1 ratio makes rewinding tedious. Together, the two boxes hold nearly a pound of chalk, making refills few and far between. One of the nicest features of this product is that it has a rubber refill grommet: Just poke the chalk bottle through the grommet, and squeeze.

## A SMARTER LOCKING LEVER

The price of this box is a bit steep, but it's a well-built tool that should last a lifetime. Available in extra bold or ultra thin (shown here), each box has 100 ft. of tightly braided nylon-poly line that leaves a crisp mark and rewinds at a 3-to-1 ratio. The line also can be held taut with a locking lever that releases when you start to rewind, a nice feature. The rewind system felt a bit awkward to me, so I remodeled it with a file. Now the fold-out handle lies flatter, which makes rewinding the line easier. Unlike most chalklines, this box has only one piece of felt where the line exits, so less chalk is lost. The nose unscrews to make refills quick and easy.



- **Chalk-Rite**  
Manufactured by Tajima  
888-482-5462  
[www.tajimatool.com](http://www.tajimatool.com)  
Price: \$30



## PERMANENT INK GIVES A FINE LINE

To achieve accurate lines, traditional Japanese builders relied on a wooden tool that drew a string through

- **Ink-Rite**  
Manufactured by Tajima  
888-482-5462  
[www.tajimatool.com](http://www.tajimatool.com)  
Price: \$20

a pool of ink as it was unwound. Based on the same idea, this tool is much easier to use and should be appreciated by people doing finish work. The box has 65 ft. of braided nylon line, the first 25 ft. of which rewinds automatically. The line is strong and leaves a thin, precise mark perfect for tasks such as hanging cabinets or installing chair rail. Tajima's quick-drying inks are available in red, black, white, and blue, and they range in price from \$8 to \$11 for a 6-oz. container. All-weather ink, which leaves a permanent line, is available for \$11 to \$14.



## FEELS GREAT IN THE HAND

- **Proline Chalk Reel**  
Distributed by Blackline Manufacturing Ltd.  
604-626-0098  
[www.blacklinechalk.com](http://www.blacklinechalk.com)  
Price: \$20



As a framer, I often reach for this chalkline because it feels good in my hand. Although larger than some competitors, the Proline's cast-aluminum box and handle are well-built and rugged. The chalk is held in the box with a small plastic cap, but a separate 3½-oz. bottle (shown here) also can be attached to the box for snapping more lines with fewer refills. The box has 100 ft. of 1-mil braided poly-cotton line that is 6 times stronger than the standard cotton found in many cheaper boxes.

