

Metalwork and Metalworking Machines for Motorcyclists Gunner Part 2

Ron Covell of Covell Creative Metalworking in Freedom, Calif., also had a good year and says the metalworking business is booming. "Sales of metal-fabrication tools are escalating," according to Covell. "I think TV shows on motorcycle building have opened the eyes of many people. They are beginning to understand that metal fabrication is something they can learn to do - and learn to do well with a little persistence."

Of the tools that Ron sells, rounding-over dies that form a constant-radius curve on the edge of a metal panel are his best seller. His costlier English wheels lead in dollar sales. "Tool sales are an important part of our business, but our metal-fabrication workshops and DVDs are our primary focus," Ron noted.

"Metal fabrication has been around for a very long time," noted Peter Kosciwicz, Eastwood's director of marketing. "It grew quickly with the advent of reality TV shows that focused on building motorcycles. The fad has slowed and some of the novelty has worn off. Hand tools and metal fabrication machinery is more apt to be handed down between hobbyist generations, then to wear out. The professional, however, is constantly striving to find the best tool for the job."

Bill Politsch, of Mittler Bros. Machine & Tool says, "For hobbyists, these are their dream bikes and they need our tools to restore them." Bill noted the English wheel - especially a new air-operated model - is the preferred tool for forming curved parts like fenders and tanks. Bike builders also like the company's new powered bead roller, which has an aluminum frame. In unit sales, it is Bill's hottest-selling metalworking tool, although tubing benders that cost up to \$4,000 (and are great for building bike frames) pull in more revenue.

John Yeruski and Carolyn Bindenagel, inside sales reps for Roper Whitney, of Rockford, Ill., agreed that business is good, especially in small tool sales. Carolyn said that hand punches and jump shears sell extremely well. According to John, the No. 5 Jr. punch and die is the company's top seller in units, while the larger, higher-priced bending brakes bring in the top revenue.

John and Carolyn also credit television for the increasing popularity of fabrication tools and equipment. "Since I've been in the sales department, TV shows like 'Orange County Choppers' and 'Bike Build-off' have widened their appeal to more people and given custom motorcycles more exposure," Yeruski said. "It is not reaching just a particular age group either, because kids are checking out custom bikes as much as older guys who can afford to build them."

Eddie Paul, author of the Custom Chopper Handbook, sees a problem. "I think the rat rod bike trend has hurt (sales of) metal-finishing tools a bit, but need and skill for metal finishing is now coming back." Paul has sold over 1,000 English wheels and about the same number of planishing hammers, plus some 800 tubing rollers. "Lately, Harbor Freight knock-offs have hurt a bit," he admits.

Bob Lorkowski, of L'Cars restoration shop, in Cameron, Wis., builds custom motorcycle tanks. His staff includes a metal fabricator and metal-fabrication tools in his shop include a Magee wire edger, Pullmaxs, Pexto's and various wheels and shrinking-stretching equipment. Lorkowski's Website www.LCARS.COM even has a metalworking video on it.

Dagger Tools, of Wixom, Mich., does training classes. Ron Covell has been giving workshops for 14 years. Ken Sakamoto of Sunchaser Tools says he can "teach a stone beginner to straighten metal, without using bondo" in a three-day course. Metalcraft Tools of Crossville, Tenn., is another company offering both videos and books to motorcycle restorers, as well as hands-on training.

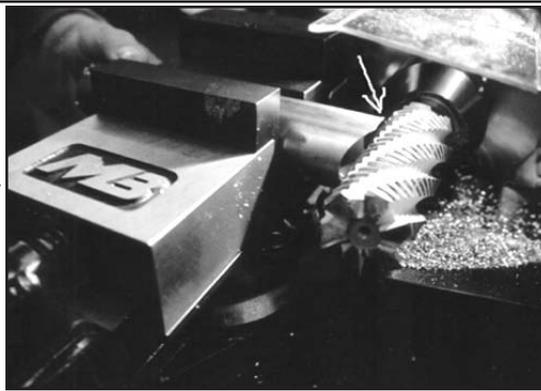
"Metal fabrication equipment is 'old school' in the true sense of the term," says Ron Covell. "There's not a lot of new tools, but there's a lot of people getting re-acquainted with old tools that weren't around 10-20 years ago. That's why our biggest deal is training people to use tools that date back before they were born."

Dave Comina, head fabricator at Bennett Coachworks Ltd, in Milwaukee, Wis., uses a big English wheel that once fabricated exhaust shields for Korean War era T-29 Trojan warbirds. Other fabrication tools in his shop include a Wel-Bilt 7-inch metal-cutting band saw, a Dayton 6 x 9 belt and disc sander, a Millermatic welder, a power shop shear, various rollers, an Rockwell, old drill press, a Delta 10-inch band saw, a 5-speed drill press, an old Smithy CB 1220 XL LTD lathe and a number of new Mittler Bros. tools including a planishing hammer, a louver press and a bead roller. "We use them all," says Comina.

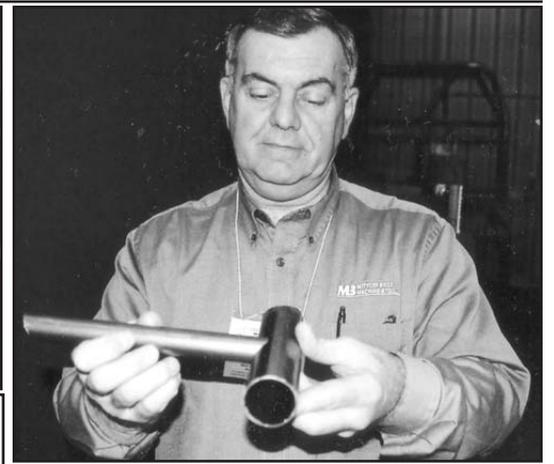
"The most important tools a pro metal shaper has are his hammers and dollies," says Steve Moal of Moal Coachbuilders in Oakland, Calif. "These simple tools are getting overshadowed by fancy power tools. The more experience a metal man has, the more he uses his hammers and dollies."

Those working on bikes at home will be happy to hear that good metalworkers can function well with simple, traditional tools. There's not a whole lot new in the trade. Metal-fabrication work, tool sales and metalworking training programs seem to be benefiting from the exposure of custom bike builders on TV, but the focus is still on age-old fundamentals that can be practiced at home.

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Our hand-drawn arrow (apologies to Picasso) points to a piece of tubing that Bill Politsch machined with a Mittler Bros. tubing notcher machine. This job can also be done with hand-operated tools the same company manufactures.



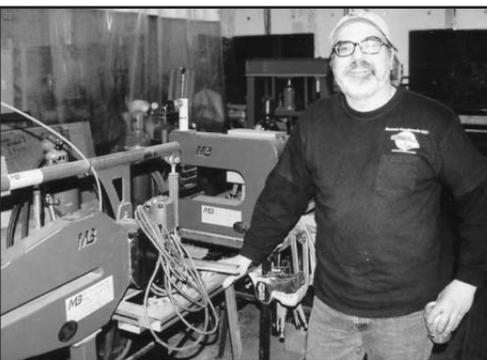
Bill Politsch shows how the notched piece of tubing fits perfectly up against a larger piece of tubing. This type of tool is great for fabricating or repairing motorcycle frames.



Carolyn Bindenagel and John Yeruski pose with the "Cadillac" of sheet metal fabrication machines, the PEXTO manufactured by Roper Whitney of Rockford, Ill.



The L'Cars restoration shop, in Cameron, Wis., sometimes uses these giant English wheels to build custom motorcycle tanks. This shop has a metal fabrication how-to video on its Website.



Dave Comina, the head fabricator at Bennett Coachworks Ltd, in Milwaukee, Wis., has a bevy of metal-fabbing equipment at his disposal. Comina is self-taught, but has taken seminars to build his skills.



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