

Mini Skid-Steer Loaders

by John Wilder

At age 54 and a couple of years after heart surgery, I appreciate less physically demanding labor. I also appreciate equipment that increases the profitability of my small contracting business, which specializes in building and repairing wooden fences. So, recently I field-tested four different models of mini skid steers — the Toro Dingo TX 420, the PowerHouse Pro, the Bobcat MT52, and the Ditch Witch SK500 — to find out how well they perform in the kind of work that I do.

A mini skid steer is basically a self-propelled hydraulic power plant, a walk-behind version of the larger skid steers you see people driving around construction sites.

Depending on the make and model, mini skid steers are available with rubber wheels or rubber tracks. As with the larger “riding” models, the skid steer and its attachments are driven by a small diesel or gasoline engine. The machines I tested have the power to lift more than 500 pounds or to run a 30-inch-diameter auger up to 4 feet deep. Attachments include a traditional bucket, pallet forks for material handling, a snow thrower, dozer and grader blades, a power broom, and a backhoe. With the right attachments, you can grind stumps and shred limbs, mix cement and break up concrete, or till and trench soil. Best of all, a mini skid steer is less than 3 feet wide, so you can take it through narrow openings and use it where larger machines won't go.

At a base price of \$15,000 to \$20,000, a mini skid steer is a sizable investment. Nonpowered attachments cost around \$500, while hydraulically powered ones start at \$1,800 and can cost more than \$7,000. Renting a machine is an option, but for my kind of work, labor

savings would more than offset the \$400 to \$500 monthly payment required to finance one. For example, the average fence requires about 30 heavy, pressure-treated 4x4 posts, a load I can carry in one trip with one of these machines. I also use about 500 pickets for a fence, which, with my mini skid steer, I can carry into the backyard in two trips.

Toro Dingo TX 420

Toro started the revolution in mini skid steers with its Dingo series of compact utility loaders (estimated list price \$17,500, The Toro Co., 800/348-2424, www.toro.com). Other manufacturers have since jumped on the bandwagon, and in fact most of the available attachments are now interchangeable among these machines. Powered by an air-cooled, 20-hp industrial Kohler gasoline engine, the Dingo has a unique controller that struck me as intuitive and ultrasimple to use, even for a novice.

However, a quick look under the hood revealed a couple of potential

problems. One is the hydraulic fluid overflow, which is aimed directly at the drive belt, an arrangement that could easily render the whole machine inoperable. Also, the oil-drain plug looks to be rather inaccessible.

A more serious flaw in the Dingo's design is that it can tip backward if you attempt to drive up too steep a grade. During my initial demonstration, the salesman who was showing me how to use the machine was very careful to load it onto the trailer by backing up the drive ramp.

The Dingo TX 420 has a track drive, but Toro also makes wheeled versions. While I didn't test them, I suspect that stability would be even more of a problem with those models.

PowerHouse Pro

The PowerHouse Pro (\$16,945, Compact Power Inc., 800/476-9673, www.powerhouseequipment.com), which is available for rent at Home Depot, was the only rubber-tired model I tested. Though the 24-hp gas motor gives it



The **Toro Dingo** features intuitive, easy-to-use controls and is available in both wheeled and tracked versions.



Although the **PowerHouse Pro's** rubber tires are gentle on grass, its short and narrow wheelbase makes it tippy and potentially dangerous on uneven or hilly terrain.

plenty of power, it has a short and narrow wheelbase — like all wheeled mini skid steers — that makes it very unstable on hills.

Compounding the problem, the controls of the PowerHouse Pro seemed to be very jumpy. In fact, I rented it twice and tipped it over twice, both times on a slope. (In defense of PowerHouse, the company also makes a tracked unit called the Prowler, which I didn't test.)

If you're doing any work at all on a hilly site, I wouldn't recommend the PowerHouse Pro or any other wheeled machine.

Bobcat MT52

Whether you opt for a wheeled or a tracked unit depends on the kind of work you'll be doing and the kind of terrain you'll be working on. While the Bobcat MT52 (estimated list price \$17,500, Bobcat Co., 701/241-8700, www.bobcat.com) feels stable, its tracks were hard on turf grass and the lugs on the semiflotation tracks vibrated unpleasantly on paved surfaces, as if riding on a flat tire.



The **Bobcat MT52's** 18.8-hp diesel engine generates enough low-rpm power to drive this hydraulic breaker. Here, the machine is equipped with an optional ride-on platform.

The MT52 is a vast improvement over Bobcat's first mini skid-steer design, the MT50, which was controlled by tricky joysticks similar to those found on the company's full-sized skid steers. Also, the MT50's hydraulics caused the machine to lurch suddenly, like revving an engine and popping the clutch. Because the Dingo was so much easier to use, Bobcat totally redesigned its machine, changing the drive system to a hydrostatic drive, simplifying the controller, and renaming it the MT52. (Incidentally, don't buy a used MT50 no matter how good the deal sounds: The machine is definitely inferior.)

Today, the primary difference between the Toro and the Bobcat is in the two machines' power plants. The MT52 has Kubota's 18.8-hp liquid-cooled diesel engine, which is well-suited for low-rpm work and should have a long service life. The downside is that you have to breathe unpleasant diesel fumes. Also, the Bobcat's engine compartment is crowded, which might make engine servicing difficult.

Ditch Witch SK500

Although I know I'd be happy with either the Bobcat or the Toro, my favorite skid steer is the Ditch Witch SK500 (\$17,995, The Charles Machine Works, 800/654-6481, www.ditchwitch.com). Its 24-hp Honda motor has 20 percent more horsepower than either the Bobcat or the Toro, and it's set lower in the engine compartment for much better balance.

The machine's longer tracks make it harder to tip than the Toro Dingo, and instead of a vulnerable drive belt, it features a more robust direct-drive connection to the drive shaft. This



The **Ditch Witch SK500's** long, width-adjustable tracks provide extra stability on uneven ground. It has a 24-hp gas-powered engine.

also creates more room in the engine compartment, which should make servicing easier.

The full metal hood feels more rugged than the plastic hoods I found on the other machines, and I like all of the tie-down points and the heavy D-rings. There's a fuel cutoff for safe traveling; a convenient power port with a cigarette-lighter socket; and lockable hood, gas, and hydraulic fluid covers, a clever feature in this day and age of equipment vandalism.

Perhaps best of all, you can adjust the width of the tracks, a feature unique to the SK500. By loosening and tightening four bolts, you can slide the tracks out for more stability in tough conditions, then slide them back in to fit through a narrow fence gate.

The SK500's one drawback is the engine noise; it's the loudest of the pack.

John Wilder is a fencing contractor near Daytona Beach, Fla.

HOME-INSPECTION TOOLS



Sewer Sleuth. Ten years ago, when I was rehabbing turn-of-the-century houses around Pittsburgh, I had several callbacks for problems with underground waste lines. The 100-year-old sewer pipes worked fine with occasional water use, but sometimes issues would surface once the house was occupied. I could have taken care of those problems before occupancy had I included a comprehensive check with a pipe-inspection camera as part of the plumbing contract. The *Compact SeeSnake* is a good example of just such a camera. It can travel up to 100 feet through 1 1/2- to 4-inch drain lines and it includes a transmitter for determining the exact location of underground breaks or obstructions. You can even connect the color monitor to a VCR so that you have a permanent record of the pipe's condition. The camera sells for about \$4,800.

Ridgid, 800/769-7743, www.ridgid.com.

Flow Chart. With the increasing popularity of multihead showers, lawn-irrigation systems, and even multiple dishwashers, modern homes can use a huge amount of water.

If you're wondering whether your customers will have adequate water volume or water pressure for their needs, you can use a *Volume and Pressure Gauge* (model 53351) from Toro to find out. Designed for irrigation-system installers, the gauge measures static pressure of up to 160 pounds and peak flow of up to 13 gallons per minute. It connects to any hose bib and sells for about \$100.

Toro Irrigation, 800/664-4740, www.toro.com.



X-Ray Vision. I don't know any remodeler who hasn't wished at least once that he or she had X-ray vision. After all, few of the surprises found inside the walls, floors, and ceilings of old houses are good ones. Luckily, you can minimize the unknown with a *ProVision Boroscope*. This tool uses 6,000 optical fibers and a .4-inch



flexible cable with a built-in light to enable you to see inside inaccessible spaces without destructive investigation. Models with inspection cables from 18 to 96 inches are available. Prices start around \$200.

CML Innovative Technologies,
888/398-1522,
www.provision100.com.



Crack Tracker. Need to determine whether a crack in masonry or concrete is spreading, shrinking, or signaling a more serious differential movement? There's really only one way to know conclusively: Use a *Crack Monitor*. Made from two overlapping acrylic plates — one with red cross hairs and one with a graduated scale — the monitor straddles the crack and quantifies any changes. Long-term monitoring can indicate whether environmental conditions such as freezing temperatures or expansive soils are at work. The device sells for \$16 on the company's Web site.

Avongard, 800/244-7241, www.avongard.com.

WORK WEAR

Formal Wear. For many builders and remodelers, a polo shirt is the standard summer uniform for client meetings and sales presentations. But there's a problem: Most of these shirts just aren't designed for people who work for a living. The *Top Shelf No-Polo* from Duluth Trading promises to be the polo shirt for people who don't play polo. Made from fabric that's 50 percent thicker than that of other polos, the No-Polo provides superior freedom of movement and has an extra three inches in the back to conceal your bottom line. The garment is available in sage green, navy, and yellow; it sells for about \$33.

Duluth Trading, 800/505-8888, www.duluthtrading.com.



Stink-Free Tee. Keeping comfortable and smelling sweet during the workday is easier with a *Performance Work Shirt* from Gorgonz. The manufacturer claims the new shirt breathes four times better and dries four times faster than a 100 percent cotton tee. It's designed to last longer than your average work shirt, too, with heavy-duty stitching and reinforcement in areas prone to wear. The fabric even boasts a built-in odor neutralizer, so you can meet with clients without them thinking you're stinking. Two breast pockets and a sleeve pocket hold small articles that might otherwise sink to the bottom of your toolbelt. The shirt sells for about \$30.

Gorgonz, 877/725-4386, www.gorgonz.com.



Nice Gloves. Many modern work gloves don't live up to their "high-performance" designation, but, based on my experience, I think the *Work Grip* and *Work Dexterity* gloves from Carhartt could be the exception. Gel-padded palms reduce fatigue from high-vibration equipment, and hook-and-loop closures ensure a snug fit. And, thankfully, the color scheme is free of Day-Glo colors. I found these gloves on the Web for \$20 a pair.

Carhartt, 800/833-3118, www.carhartt.com.

