

# VICTORY ... for Both David and Goliath

*An East Coast Drywall Contractor Keeps  
Pace with Technology and Keeps Busy*



*James Swift fastens wall hatt channel to concrete block.*

**I**t's David vs. Goliath—construction-style.

“David” is Robert West, boss of the five-man crew that comprises West Construction, a 20-year-old company specializing in drywall installation that is based in Richmond, Va.

“Goliath” is a variety of strip malls that dot the East Coast—giant stores that are popping up like mushrooms as companies strive to give value-conscious shoppers the convenience they crave.

And the sling that enables David to take on—and keep up with—the East Coast Goliaths, is TrakFast, an automatic drywall track fastening tool manufactured by ITW Ramset/Red Head of Wood Dale, Ill.

## **PRODUCTIVITY IS KEY TO WINNING**

The battle stage was set 17 years ago when one of West's employees went to work for an East Coast general contractor. A few months later that GC was looking for a drywall subcontractor, and the new guy recommended his former employer.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Today that GC is a major force in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware, constructing about 100 strip malls each year, most with a large grocery store as its anchor. And West is one of that GC's main drywall installers, handling 40 strip malls in the past eight years. As much as 70 percent of West's work comes through that general contractor.

Many of these Goliaths that West works with survive and thrive by undercutting their competitors' prices. One way companies guarantee those low prices is by cutting operating costs as much as possible.

“Most of these companies allocate a certain

amount of money for each new store,” West explains. “After I put up my first strip mall in 1986, I thought to myself, ‘If they have a limited amount of money they’re going to spend, I need to increase my crew’s productivity to make some money.’”

That’s a challenging task for any contractor. But it was made even more challenging by the size—or lack thereof—of each new store.

“Each strip mall has one anchor store—usually a grocery store—that’s about 35,000 square feet,” West says.

“Those only take about 200 boards of Sheetrock and 12,000 linear feet of metal. Then eight or 10 smaller stores fill up the rest of the strip mall.”

Now, many contractors might look at the small size of each individual job and decide that investing in productivity-boosting tools might not be worthwhile. But not West.

“He’s one of the few small contractors I work with who realizes that you don’t need large jobs to justify new technology,” says Sal Zaccagnino, branch manager of the Richmond



*Rodney Bledsoe fastens wall hatt channel to concrete block.*

branch of Marco Supply Company Inc. The company carries more than 60 lines of tools and fasteners for the dry-wall and concrete industries.

“What Robert knows is that the faster you can finish a small job, the more small jobs you can do and the more money you can make,” he said.

Expanding on Zaccagnino’s thought, West says: “I know many contractors who would cut the quality of materials to make more money, but not me. I look for ways to increase my crew’s productivity.”

#### **KEEPING PACE WITH GOLIATH**

To keep up with his customers, West bought an electric lift, which one man can control, to replace his old scaffolding, which took two men to maneuver.

“That was one good purchase,” West says.

His other good purchase was TrakFast, which Zaccagnino introduced to him.

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*Sal Zaccagnino, branch manager with Marco Supply, and Robert West of West Construction discuss their current project.*

house and expect contractors to come to them,” says Chris Van Syckle, a sales representative for ITW Ramset/Red Head.

“But Barco Supply actually goes out to job sites to see what their customers and prospects are working on. They take new tools with them and ask the contractors to try them out.”

So when Zaccagnino asked West to try out a new drywall track fastening tool, West jumped at the chance.

“Two days later Sal came back to pick up the tool,” West says. “But I told him that he wasn’t getting that gun back—it was staying with me. That tool alone makes us five times faster

than we are with a powder-actuated tool. With TrakFast, one guy can fasten at least 2,000 feet of track in a day. We used to use another company’s powder tool, and with that two men, each with his own gun, could maybe do 800 feet. That would be a real good day.”

In addition to using TrakFast to secure drywall track to barjoists and concrete flooring, West’s crew also uses it to fasten wall hatt channel to brickwork, masonry, concrete and steel.

“On the first store we did, it took us two days to do all the wall hatt channel,” West says. “That was with two guys, two powder tools and push scaffolding. Now with TrakFast and electric lifts, it take us eight hours to do the same job.

The product is powered by a liquid hydrocarbon fuel cell and a six-volt, rechargeable nickel-cadmium battery. This means that users don’t have to trip over electric cords or take time to load powder. The lightweight tool holds 30 3/4-inch pins, so users don’t have to re-load after every shot.

“With other tools, you shoot, then stand up, re-load the powder, re-cock, bend down, shoot and start all over again,” says James Swift, who joined West’s crew two years ago. “With this, you load it once and you’re good for 30 shots.”

To clean it, laborers just dust it off at

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the end of the day and deep clean it once a week.

This all saves time. In fact, when all is said and done, West's crew can finish a store in three weeks, shaving a week of the GC's estimated drywall installation time.

That's why this particular general contractor keeps using Robert. Zaccagnino says, "To keep getting business, it needs to have subcontractors who will get their jobs done well and on time. Robert does that." □

*(Editor's Note: It was the author's preference to intentionally omit the names of the stores and general contractor involved in this article.)*

*Kenny Myers fastens drywall track to concrete flooring.*