

Don't be Pushed to Purchase!



Photo courtesy of Husqvarna Viking

By Martyn Smith

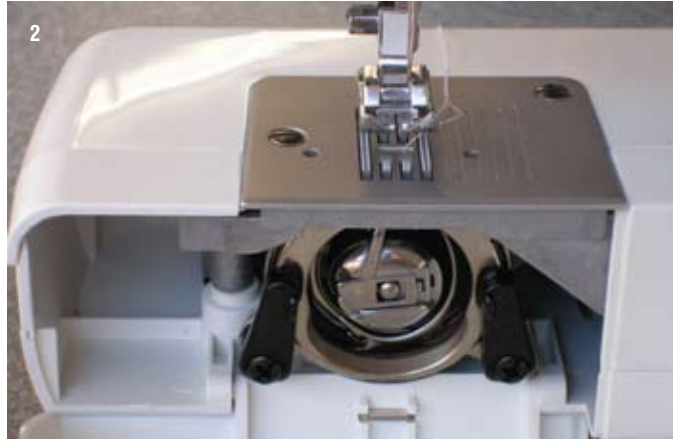
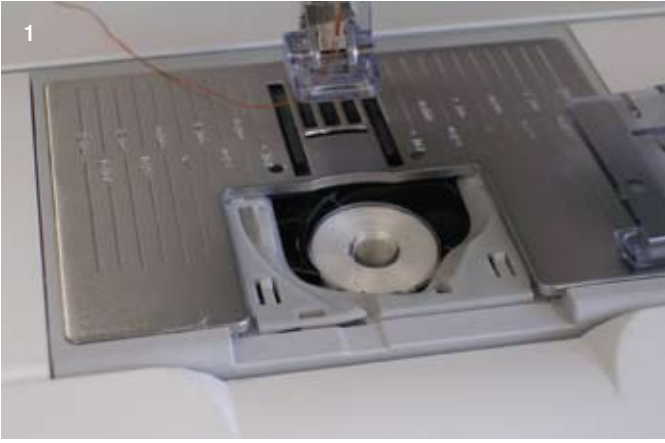
Martyn has been involved in sewing machine retail for over 20 years. Whether through a class, a retail outlet or on a show stand, the perfect match of machine to sewer is important to him. He tells us what to look for when making a machine purchase in the 'entry to mid-range' purchaser category.

Shopping for a machine is not the same as buying any other appliance, as the selection of the retailer should be almost as important as the machine itself. The shop you buy the machine from should be giving you on-going advice, support, training and service to enable you to grow into your machine and maybe at a later date, move up to a TOTL (top of the line) product. Sewing machines are not a 'cash and wrap' purchase and the sales people need to be qualified in not only the demonstration of the machinery, but in the knowledge of a variety of sewing and crafting areas as well. Make sure your sales people have the time to serve you well. Booking an appointment to ensure that you have an uninterrupted demonstration time with the demonstrator is a great idea in a busy shop. Check to see if the shop has classes that you can join to learn more about your machine and your craft interest; learning with other people at the same level is very encouraging and ensures you get the most out of your purchase. Some shops have monthly club nights where you can see new products and techniques and there is often a chance

to purchase with a discount at the end of the evening. This is often the best way to mix with 'like-minded' people of all different ages and degrees of skill.

At the end of the day, a sewing machine is a most personal purchase, not to be rushed or influenced by anyone. Shop around, sew on as many potential models as necessary and compare the results. Supplying your own variety of fabrics for testing is a very good way of seeing if the machines you are looking at will fulfil your requirements. Everyone has a different choice in fabrics they like to wear, so testing a potential purchase on starched 'in store' demonstration fabrics will not replicate actual garments you may wish to construct. Special stitches are easy to create on demonstration poplin but on your own choice of fashion fabrics, it may be a very different story. However, if you're not an experienced sewer, try to take someone who is so they can help explain some of the terms and difference, and act as a sounding board during the purchasing patter of the demonstrator.

An enthusiastic machine demonstrator will ask you what you like to sew, what sort of machine you are presently sewing on, and if you have any future projects or areas of interest you would like to move into in the near future. Don't be put off by this as it's essential for the salesperson to build a picture of what your immediate and future needs may be. There is nothing worse than buying a machine that you will grow out of within a year or 18 months, but on the flip side, most people who buy TOTL machines only use a fraction of the stitches or feet that come with the machine! Make sure your needs are





well covered! Having a budget that you wish to spend is also essential but it's hardly ever the main reason for purchasing a particular model. Special features and ease of use usually dictate the sale in 80% of machine purchases.

Some pointers to look out for:

The way the bobbin runs in the machine is a much debated point of view between brands. Drop-in bobbins are the most popular across the board with new machines, [see photo 1](#), but front-loading bobbin cases are still very prevalent. [See photo 2](#). Some purists believe that front-loading bobbins create better stitches but this is really only a personal view. Having compared both I really don't see any major difference but the ability to be able to monitor the amount of thread left on the bobbin is a very handy feature for most sewers. It has been said that "top-loading bobbins are less likely to jam" but again this maybe a myth, as both bobbin systems work very well as long as they are loaded correctly by the operator. It all comes down to personal preference and what you feel you would like to use!

The operation and placement of the reverse lever or knob is a big issue for some people. If it is in a different place from your last machine it will feel really odd but in reality it will take no time to get used to one in a different area on the machine. The action of placing the hand on the lever or button becomes automatic after the first couple of hours of sewing. People with various levels of dexterity often find some levers better than others so this is essential to feel comfortable with. [See photo 3](#). Some machines have added features like an electronic reverse button that requires it to be held in for backward stitches and then released to move forward again. [See photo 4](#). Combine this with the added function of 'needle up/needle down' (the needle will either be inserted into the fabric or finish in the topmost position after the machine has come to a halt) will mean that turning the fly-wheel of the machine becomes a thing of the past and more attention can be devoted to creating a better quality product while sewing. Some machines also add an extra button that 'fixes' or 'locks' a stitch by stitching in what seems to be in the same hole for four stitches (the needle actually shifts minutely on each stitch to form a tiny square) to create a knot on the underside of the work rather than using a reverse or backstitch to either begin or end a seam or function. The only other feature for beginner sewers that could be a deal breaker would be a speed control button. This enables more

control over the speed that the machine works to comfort those who are concentrating on what is happening when stitching. Fast is not always best and it has been proven that a buttonhole created at a slower speed always looks better than one at a faster pace.

Auto tension is a comforting feature for those who have been plagued with tension problems on previous machines. [See photo 5](#). This setting is usually a mid-point setting on the tension dial that gives the best pre-set tension for stitching. Some TOTL machines have an advanced system of auto-tension that is supposed to check the thickness of the thread and adjust accordingly. More experienced sewers will often tweak the tension settings to get the most perfect stitch formation when sewing with a variety of threads and fabrics. Tension problems are most often due to incorrect or damaged machine needles and incorrect threading in either the bobbin case or the upper threading channels.

Clear stitch charts, dials or diagrams on the machine can be very helpful. [See photo 6](#). Lifting a lid or sliding out a stitch selection chart is much easier than having to refer to the manual. Some machines even have suggestions on what foot to use with each different stitch, what width to set and what length to be used with each particular stitch. [See photo 7](#). Machines with an LCD display give information on what particular activity the machine is going to perform. A lot of sewers are very wary of going to an electronic machine from their previous manual mechanical one, but this is usually eliminated when they see what it actually does. An LCD display selects a stitch at the touch of a button and sets it to a pre-selected setting ready to use without having to manually adjust the length and/or width dials. The operator can then easily over-ride the pre-selected settings to change the stitch to their own preference, if required.

Buttonholes are a very important part of garment making. Choose a machine that makes this exercise easy as once upon a time they were a chore - but not any longer. There is a large variety of different styles of buttonhole feet. [See photo 8](#). Some have measurement guides on them to guide for length and others allow a button to sit inside the foot and perform the perfect length buttonhole to match the button. An easy-to-use 'auto' buttonhole is essential for someone who has never done one. Manual buttonholes that require the operator to click through a series of events to create a buttonhole are almost a thing of the past and this is looked upon as being old technology these days.

The main reason for people giving up sewing even when they still enjoy it is due to not being able to thread the every decreasing eye of the needle! A built-in needle threader seems like such a gimmick, but it's not! Sewing with black thread on a black garment with poor night light is no joke. There are many varieties of this needle-threading system and each brand has its own ideas. [See photo 9](#). All needle threaders feel clumsy to start with but perseverance pays off and makes sewing a lot more enjoyable for much longer for many people that have poor eyesight or shaky hands. There is nothing more frustrating than spending five minutes trying to thread a machine, and more mature eyes need a little help sometimes.

It is very important to check what machine feet come

These machines range in price from \$400 - \$1000

with the machine. The most common are: universal sewing foot, satin-stitch foot, double-sided zip foot, blind-hem foot, buttonhole foot. Extras that may be needed could be an overlock foot, an invisible-zip foot, a straight-stitching foot, a darning foot or an open-toe appliqué foot. There are heaps more feet available but make sure that the first five in the list are included. Buying extras at a later date, only if needed, is better than buying them all at once. Presser feet can vary greatly in price so check out what they cost for each different brand you're trying out. Also check if they have stock of them in store and is there an additional brochure for all the different feet available (this is not always free of charge).

Don't be scared to asked questions during a demonstration (there is no such thing as a dumb question), make sure you can have a sew yourself on the machine and make sure you are able to thread the machine successfully in front of the demonstrator before taking the machine home. It is in the interest of both parties that the purchaser has a successful 'out of the box' experience on the first attempt at using their new machine. Too many times we hear "I hated my machine from the day I bought it" or "I gave up sewing because my machine was useless". This can be mainly due to the lack of instruction before taking the unit home. Years ago some companies would not allow the machine to be removed from the shop until the purchaser came in for their first lesson with the demonstrator, or the machine would be delivered to their home and the lesson took place there and then.

Making the instruction manual 'bedside reading' for a few nights is a good thing to do as it will encourage you to attempt some of the suggested stitches on the machine with total confidence. Most of the manuals are written very well these days and are full of great diagrams, and some machines come with a video or DVD! Technology has never been cheaper and the cost of a sewing machine in the lower range is only a third of what we paid for one 20 years ago, plus we're getting a lot more features for our money. This is probably the main reason that sewers keep hold of their old machines for so long, as it was a lot of money at the time of purchase. Some sewing machine dealers offer a '7-day exchange' on new purchases to ensure you have bought exactly what you need, so ask about this as 'buyer remorse' can lead to not bonding with your new machine.

Buying a second-hand machine seems like better value for money, but there is no way of telling what the machine has been required to do by the previous owner and, if it doesn't come with a written warranty, it could end up costing much more than a new machine.

Whatever brand you buy, make sure you like the outlet you're buying from as this holds the key to your future enjoyment!



Janome – Sewist 625E

Janome DC3050



Husqvarna Viking Emerald 122



Pfaff 1142



Brother NS30LE



Elna 3210



Bernina - Bernette 92c