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ROUND

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ISSUE**

Mobile Computing Gets

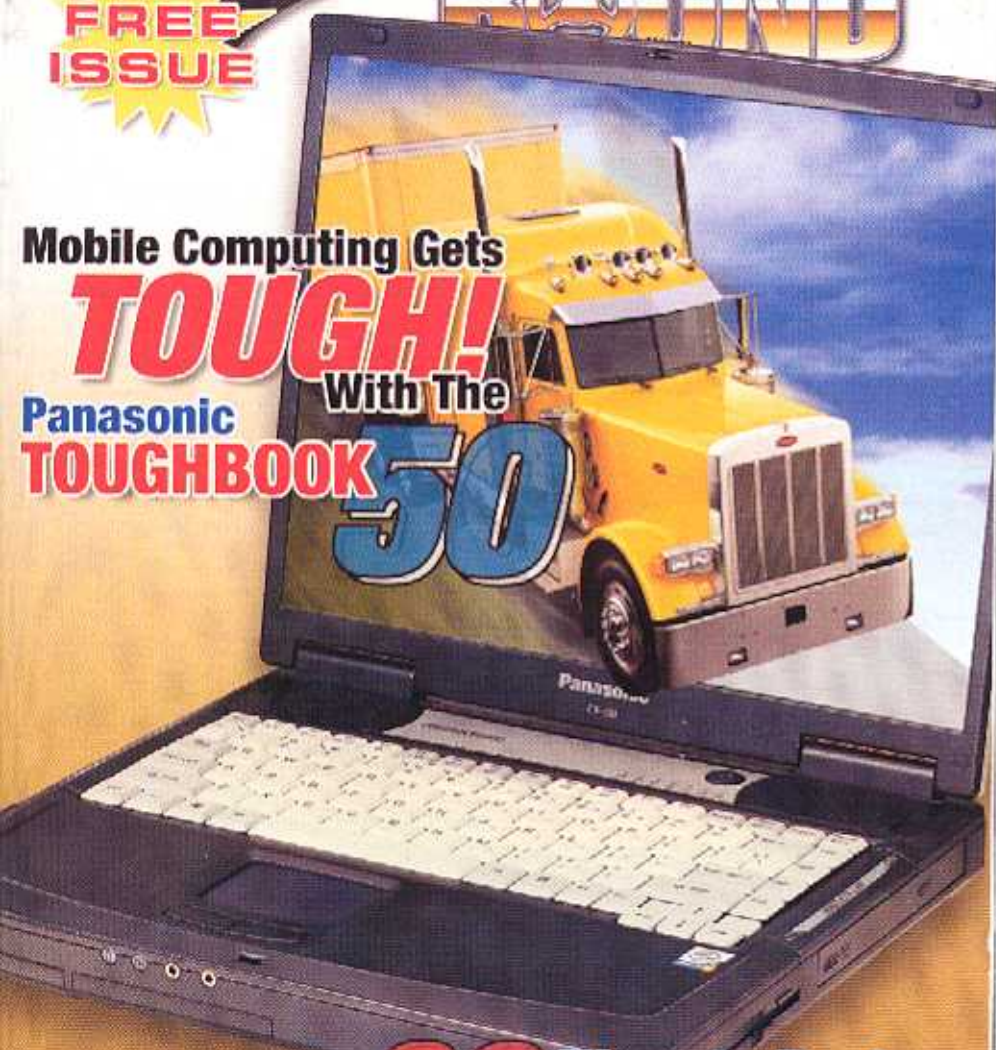
TOUGH!

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Panasonic's Toughbook 50 Is Great For On-Board Entertainment Or "Business To Go"

Mobile Computing Gets **TOUGH!**

By Tom Kelley



Today's truck driver needs to be computer savvy. Not to long ago, if you were a good driver, and an ok mechanic, you had all the skills needed to succeed as a trucker. However, in today's economic climate, having a moderate amount of computer skill is just the price of admission to the business world.

Although there are many training aids available to help the new user learn some advanced skills, the best way to learn about computers is to jump in feet first and buy one. Even the best training is no substitute for hands-on experience.

For the trucker, mobile computers are the natural choice. Taking it with you allows for catching up on paperwork while waiting for a load, or sending e-mail home from the road. Many of today's laptops are as capable as most desktops, so there's no longer a trade-off between speed and portability.

To be certain, matching the speed of a desktop PC with a portable will come with an increase in price. Convenience is another factor for the computer-commuter. By using a portable, wherever you take the machine, all of your files and software are with you.

Portable PC designs are loosely divided into four categories based on size.

The laptop PC will generally have a full-size keyboard and is heavy enough that you'd certainly notice if you carried one around all day.

Somewhat more portable are the notebook PC machines that reduce their size by eliminating some components and compressing the keyboard slightly. Unless you are one of those rare few individuals that type fast, using all ten fingers, the smaller keyboard is virtually unnoticeable.

Another group of portables that has been around the fringes for many years, and only recently become a serious contender, are the hand-held or "palmtop" computers. These units share some of the designs and software with the larger notebooks and laptops, but are more like a distant cousin than a little brother. Palmtops frequently operate without a keyboard, using a pen and touch-screen instead. Another difference is that the palmtops are typically limited to having a single application, like expense tracking or navigation, running at one time.

As mobile PC processor speed and other

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Cover Story

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technology has improved, a fourth category has emerged in the market over the last few years. The "desktop replacement" PC, as the name implies, offers nearly every feature available on a desktop PC, but all in a portable package.

With a desktop-sized LCD screen, multiple drives and integrated modem/LAN card, about the only thing missing on a desktop replacement PC is the separate "10-key" numeric keypad normally found along the right side of a typical desktop keyboard. Even so, if you'll be making several numeric entries, most current portables, including the desktop replacement PCs, allow part of the main "alpha-numeric" keyboard to be used in a 10-key mode after pressing a function key.

Looking at another aspect, if you're certain that your portable will never come to any physical harm, then nearly any unit is strong enough. However, if you can picture

the unit occasionally sliding onto the truck floor, being carried in and out of several trucks, or just generally being "really" used in a trucking environment, then the construction of the frame and case are important. Luckily, there are "ruggedized" portables available today.

The subject of our newest equipment test brings trucker-friendly ruggedization, as well as the office-ready features of a desktop replacement, into a state-of-the-art mobile PC. Panasonic's Toughbook 50 is the world's first semi-rugged 1.9GHz notebook computer with an ultra-high-resolution, 15-inch active matrix screen, durable and removable hard drive, firewire (IEEE 1394) support, as well as an integrated floppy drive, LAN card and modem.

Measuring 12.8" w x 10.9" d x 1.85" h, and weighing in at a hefty 7.7 pounds, the Toughbook 50 isn't a PC that you'd want to "carry" all day long, but if top-of-the-line

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performance and no-compromise features are important to you, it's definitely worth the weight. Optional upgrades include integrated WiFi (802.11b) wireless LAN capability, and an integrated "Smart Card" reader.

Because many truckers use their mobile PCs not only for running business software, but also for on-board entertainment, the huge screen and a high-end graphics processor in the Toughbook 50 make it as capable for playing DVD movies or viewing pictures from home, as it is for balancing the books or finding the next load.

As information security has become an increasingly important concern, conventional wisdom says the best way to secure the data on a mobile computer is to remove the hard drive whenever the computer is left unattended. On most mobile PCs, the removable hard drive is so hard to reach, that users are unlikely to take this precaution. The Toughbook 50's shock-mounted 40MB hard drive can easily be removed and replaced with one hand.

To be certain, there are less expensive mobile PCs available on the market today, but not with the power of the Toughbook 50, nor with Panasonic's reputation for rugged durability. Police, fire and military users around the world rely on Toughbook computers for mission critical performance in environments that would render most computers unusable.

In standard trim, the Toughbook 50 features a Mobile Intel Pentium 4 1.90GHz-M processor, a 15" 1600 x 1200 UXGA TFT Active-Matrix Color LCD screen, 256MB of RAM memory, a 40GB hard drive, an integrated floppy disk drive, and a combination DVD/CD-RW drive in a hot-swap drive bay, all for an estimated street price of US\$3,714.00.

Stay tuned to Highway Bound's Digital Driver column, as well as computer coverage in our other publications, Driving Force, RPM, and Big Rig Owner. When our test of the Toughbook 50 is complete, we'll be back with a follow-up review.

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