

Sliding Tables for Contractor's Saws

by Lee McGinley



Sliding tables aren't often thought of as site equipment. They belong in large shops with cabinetmakers, right? No longer. Two sliding tables that work well for a site shop setup are now available to contractors at reasonable cost. They also work well in a small off-site shop, which allows a contractor to diversify into custom cabinetwork.

That's what I have done. With an add-on sliding table, I now have the ability to fabricate cabinets in a shop, or move saw and sliding table to a job site for custom built-ins. In both scenarios, the sliding table has increased my production, improved the quality of my finished product, and ultimately increased my profits.

The sliding tables reviewed here are the *Mule* and the *Excalibur*. I have used both in my shop and on site to cut stock and 4x panels. I owned the *Excalibur* for ten months and then traded over to the *Mule*, which I have used now for almost a year.

The *Mule* Sliding Table was developed eight years ago by Canadian cabinetmaker, John Withrow. The *Excalibur* Sliding Table was introduced two years ago by *Excalibur Machine & Tool*, a company known for its T-slot replacement rip fence. Two models are available: the EXSLT30 and the larger EXSLT60.

Common Features

The *Mule* and *Excalibur* have several features in common. Both fit most standard 10-inch contractor's table saws, including Delta, Powermatic, Grizzly, Jet, and Craftsman. They replace the left extension wing of the saw table with a long, adjustable fence that slides with the table. *Mule* claims their table can also be attached next to the wing, if needed, thereby increasing the length of stock you can crosscut.

The fences of both sliding tables pivot from 90 to 45 degrees, allowing you to cut wide miters as well as square crosscuts. The *Mule* only pivots from the front, but the *Excalibur* pivots from both the front and the back, allowing you to cut both left- and right-hand miters. This feature isn't always necessary, however, since you can flop most panels.

The fences on both tables also attach to either the front or rear of the table. It's easier to work with

the fence at the front of the table. But for extra wide panels, it's useful to move the fence back. With the fence at the back, and cutting at 90 degrees, the *Mule* can crosscut up to 33 inches (more than enough for chopping standard base cabinet panels); the smaller *Excalibur* can crosscut up to a 30-inch panel; and the larger *Excalibur* up to a 52-inch-wide stock (the only model that can chop a full-width sheet of plywood). All these measurements assume the panel is free of the blade at the end of the cut, so there is no risk of bumping the blade and spoiling the cut.

The crosscut fences must be removed when you need to use the table saw's standard rip fence. When I first started using one of these tables, I found myself wasting time putting the fence on, and then taking it off for each rip and crosscut. But I've since learned to plan my cut list, so I do all my rips first, and then I put the crosscut fence on to do my crosscuts.

Each table comes with stops for making repetitive length crosscuts. This is very useful for making sure that all the sides and all the bottoms of my cabinet carcasses are cut to equal dimensions. The *Excalibur* stop works a bit easier because the leg that holds the work flips up and down as needed. On the *Mule*, this leg must be removed when it's not needed.

Finally, each fence telescopes to support the long edge of extra long stock.

Important Differences

While both sliding tables accomplish the same basic tasks, they are each constructed slightly differently, and so perform differently.

Construction. The *Mule* has a 1 1/4-inch-thick melamine table that slides along two rods parallel to the saw blade. With the extension wing removed (rather than bolted to the wing), the *Mule* adds 15 inches to the width of the saw. A miter slot arcs across the table, and nylon washers are placed between the extruded fence and melamine. This makes for very smooth action.

The *Excalibur* Sliding Tables are built of aluminum extrusions and steel. Two parallel rectangular steel channels, separated by steel cross members, attach to the main saw table. The smaller sliding table adds 29 inches to the width of the saw,

the bigger unit adds 34 inches.

The *Excalibur* "table" is made of an open grid that slides on ball bearings and guides made from a special type of polystyrene that is reportedly self-lubricating and very durable. This makes for a smooth sliding table, but the action of the fence arc is a bit jerky. The fence is extruded aluminum, and the miter angle is adjusted by sliding the fence along a second extrusion that runs parallel to the blade. This aluminum-on-aluminum action could probably be improved with a couple of nylon washers.

Performance. The *Mule* sets up quickly. In 20 to 30 minutes, I can attach this table to the saw and be making square cuts. Surprisingly, the fence always sets up perfectly square. I leave the unit assembled when it's not attached to the table. Even at 70 pounds, it's not awkward to move around single-handedly.

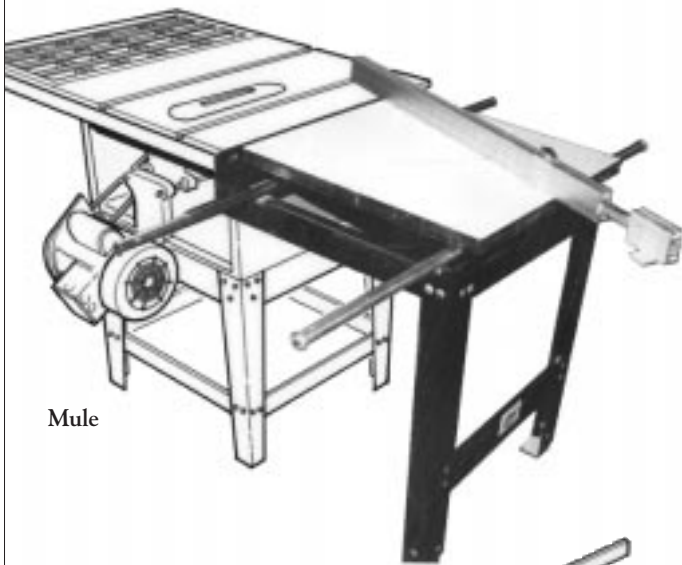
By contrast, the *Excalibur* must be transported in two or three pieces, which I find awkward to handle. With its more elaborate design, and extra adjustments, setup is much more time-consuming and finicky.

The open grid design of the *Excalibur* table keeps sawdust from building up on the cutting area. But I discovered that sawdust does build up on the track that the roller bearings travel on. I had to clean this area frequently to keep the rollers moving freely. The *Mule*'s design slides the table along two rods and the bushings push sawdust from its path. A shot of silicone spray on the rods keeps the table moving effortlessly.

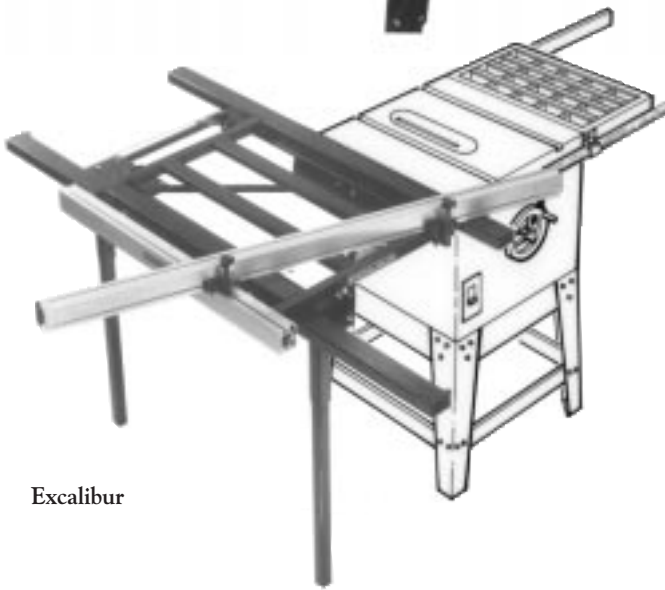
When warped or thin 4x sheets are ripped on the *Excalibur*, the leading left corner of the panel can get caught in the open grid and cause the panel to kick back. Also, the right side of the table is not fastened down, and it can lift up unless you take elaborate pains to level the top precisely.

Nevertheless, both sliding tables are very accurate for crosscutting. I usually check my diagonals on large panels, and even on large 24x96-inch pieces, the crosscorner measurements rarely vary by more than 1/32 inch. The *Excalibur* does have a heavier crosscut fence and telescoping leg, which makes crosscutting long stock easier than with the *Mule*.

Sliding Tables ofr contractor Saws



Mule



Excalibur

Sliding tables for 10-inch contractor saws make crosscutting wide panels easier whether on site or in a small shop. The less expensive Mule (top) is simpler and more portable than the Excalibur (above). But both are very accurate.

In addition, the Excalibur has some features that the Mule lacks. For instance, the T-slot extrusion of the fence permits fitting optional hold-downs to keep stock in place as you cross cut. Also, there are both inch and metric measuring scales on the fence. And the miter scale is marked in degrees, while the Mule has only unnumbered grooves etched in the table.

In summary, compared to using a table saw alone, or trying to cut cabinet panels with a Skil saw, both sliding tables are vastly superior. The Excalibur's design and temperament lend it more to a permanent installation, while the Mule can be moved easily from location to location. I prefer the simpler design of the Mule. Its ease of use outweighs the extra features and options of the Excalibur. And at a lower cost, the Mule is an excellent value.

Cost

The Mule lists for \$329, including shipping, and can be ordered directly from Mule Cabinetmaker Machines, P.O. Box 718, Aurora, ON L4G 4J9, Canada; 416/898-4110. This price includes a two-year warranty on all parts except the bushings, which carry a ten-year replacement guarantee.

The Excalibur tables are a bit more. The EXSLT30 lists for \$544, and the EXSLT60 for \$641. These prices include shipping and a two-year warranty on all parts. Both models are available directly from Excalibur Machine & Tool Co., 29 Passmore Ave. #6, Scarborough, ON M1V 3H5, Canada; 416/291-8190. ■

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