Trim Champ

by Chuck Green

For this review, I worked for several months with the Trimtramp 300 saw table, a very clever set of guides and supports that converts any standard 7 1/4- or 8 1/4-inch circular saw (except wormdrive saws) into a sliding compound miter saw. The circular saw is clamped to an aluminum sole plate, which slides between parallel guides set 2 inches above the table. The saw can be pushed through the cut, but pulling gives a much cleaner cut because the teeth bite downward into the work. Any splintering that occurs will be on the underside of the piece, as with a radial arm or table saw.

The table measures 27x39 inches, big enough to allow longer cuts than many stationary radial arm saws: I was able to make 20-inch cuts with the saw I used. The table has a pop-up fence set at 90 degrees to the saw cut, and two long pivoting fences, one on each side of the saw. These can be set to any of the one-degree increments printed on the table or bumped up against adjustable positive stops that ensure exact 45-degree cuts. Despite claims of a precision factory setup, I had to make various minor adjustments. But afterward, I consistently got exact 45- and 90-degree cuts.

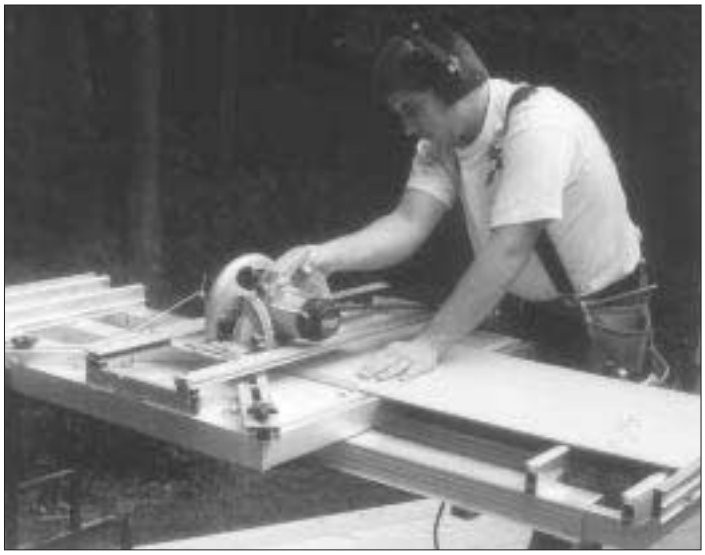
Should you need the circular saw for other work, it takes just 15 seconds to remove it from the table guides while still attached to the sole plate and another 15 seconds to put it back. The 9 1/2x15-inch sole plate doesn't interfere with normal freehand cuts, but if it gets in the way you can easily remove it from the circular saw altogether.

The key to getting good results is aligning the saw blade precisely with the sole plate. For trim work, I mounted a DeWalt 384 8 1/4-inch circular saw to the Trimtramp. The three clamps supplied hold the edge of the saw's shoe to the larger Trimtramp sole plate, and alignment adjustments are made before tightening the screws down fully. Trimtramp supplies a fixed-length aluminum alignment guide, but I preferred to use my adjustable combination square.

Cutting with the Trimtramp seems to be safer than cutting with a radial arm saw, a handheld circular saw, or a sliding miter saw. A simple mechanism holds the saw's blade guard in the retracted position while mounted to the saw table and returns the guard to its normal position when the saw is removed. The exposed portion of the blade stays out of the way, below the fixed aluminum guide bars and away from fingers.

Extension table. The 300 is lightweight and easily transported. It can be set on a bench top, on a Black & Decker Workmate, or on its companion Trimtramp 301 extension table. The 301 table is 6 feet long, with telescoping extension bars that add another 4 feet or so to each side. Each extension bar has a sliding lumber support at the same height as the saw table and an adjustable butt stop. The saw table mounts and pivots on a post in the center of the extension table. (You can also use a miter saw with the 301 table, but you'll have to build up the height of the support bars with plywood or scrap lumber.) The saw table easily lifts on and off the pivot post, and the two pair of sturdy table legs can be quickly folded up for transportation.

Cutting crown. The Trimtramp can be used for most trim work. It's easy to bevel-cut stock in preparation for coping, and you can even cut very wide crown moldings, like Fypon, which are too wide for power miter boxes. In fact, the Trimtramp is the best tool I've seen for crown molding work. (The four-page guide sent with the unit, "Cutting



Trimtramp's 300 saw table converts any 7 1/4- or 8 1/4-inch circular saw into a sliding compound miter saw that can make cuts up to 20 inches long. When used with the 301 extension table, the guide system can be used for crown molding and production cutting of jambs and casings.

Compound Miter Angles," gives excellent instruction on cutting crown molding using Trimtramp.) I like to cut outside miters and mid-run joints for crown molding with the stock held flat on a sliding compound miter saw. I find it's easier and more accurate on repeated cuts to angle the saw rather than to hold each piece of stock at the appropriate angle in the miter saw.

Setting the circular saw blade angle for compound miters is no more difficult — and no easier — than when you use the circular saw normally. But if the Trimtramp's guide bars get in your way, it only takes a minute to pull the saw out of the guides, set the angle, then slide the saw back in place.

Trimtramp comes with a printed chart called a "nomograph," which makes it easy to draw lines between marks to determine angles for both miters and bevels without having to make any calculations in the field. (For a copy of the chart, send $2 to Trimtramp Co., 151 Carlingview Dr., Unit 11, Toronto, Ont. M9W 5S4, Canada.) Another chart giving common settings is printed directly on the saw table.

Sighting the cut line, however, is difficult because both the saw shoe and the auxiliary sole plate obscure your view of the work. I needed to stoop down until the sole plate was almost at eye level before I could align a pencil mark with the blade entry point.

Nothing's perfect. I had several problems with the Trimtramp, though none proved disastrous. First, I wanted to be able to lock down the saw table when it was mounted at 90 degrees to the extension table. It's easy to hold the work against the fence and to get a square cut, but a slight rotation of the saw table on the center pivot can cause inaccuracies when using the length stops for repetitive cuts. (This is more likely to affect wider pieces, but I also had this problem with 6-inch clapboards.) Two clamps are supplied to hold the saw table at 45 degrees to the extension table, but none for the 90-degree setting. It was simple enough to use hand-screws, but because most other components were so well thought out, this omission seemed odd.

Second, at some miter angle settings, the amount of stock on the waste side of the cut is limited to about 1 inch. Any more than that and the work bumps into the other adjustable miter fence. This does not occur with a 45-degree cut, but the closer the angle is to 90 degrees, the more the 45-degree stops get in the way.

Finally, the Trimtramp makes good-quality cuts, not *great* cuts. I aim for cut edges that are smooth to the touch; the Trimtramp leaves slight but noticeable chatter marks on the face of the cut, even with 40- and 60-tooth blades mounted on a quality circular saw. For trim, I normally use one of three power miter saws I own, depending on the quality I need; any of these saws produces slightly better cuts than I could obtain with Trimtramp. In my shop, a factory rep and I tried various combinations to correct this problem while cutting poplar — we cut with his saw, tried different blades, cut extra slowly — but I still consider the chatter marks a bit strong. After five months of working with the Trimtramp, I have concluded that the problem appears to be the slight deflection of the guide bars through the cutting stroke. With casing and other narrow pieces, the saw first cuts into the stock when it is at about mid-span on the guide bars — the point at which the stress on the guide bars is greatest. Stiffer guide bars would probably solve the problem.

Still, the quality of the cuts is good to very good, and the Trimtramp will do well for most trim applications. With an optional router guide, the Trimtramp can be used as a router table as well as a miter saw. Trimtramp also makes the 500, a specialty cutting table system for siding (including vinyl), and the 4900, a panel saw for cutting plywood panels. Most carpenters will get along fine with just the 300 ($249). When you add the 301 ($249) and the router attachment ($39), the whole setup costs less than my dedicated sliding compound-miter saw. If you're not already tooled up and have a limited budget, the Trimtramp is a good all-around choice. ■

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