A Portable Panel Saw

by Dan Roden

The panel saw has been around for a long time. Most of us have seen them in lumberyards, but because of the size, few builders would consider buying one for work on site. We thought that, too, before we had a chance to try the model C-4 panel saw from Safety Speed Cut (13460 Highway 65 North, Anoka, MN 55304; 800/599-1647, ext. 15).

Small Is Beautiful

Our company, Excelsior Construction, is small, and we want to stay small. It's just my partner — Jay Pfeffer — and me, plus a full-time carpenter and some seasonal help. For the type of high-end remodeling we do, staying small gives us an advantage in controlling quality. But it means we have to carefully consider all our expenses, including tool investments.

We spend a lot of time at tool auctions. In the past, panel saws have come up for sale, and we've considered buying them. But we just couldn't afford what was available, and the idea of using one on site made the investment that much more remote.

Figure 1. *The author hauled his SSC C-4 panel saw up to the second-floor roof deck to cut wall and roof sheathing.*

Our first introduction to using a panel saw on site came about by unusual circumstances. We did a remodeling job for John Hammett, president of Safety Speed Cut (SSC). He brought an SSC model C-4 to his home and asked us to try it out. We really couldn't refuse, but by the time the job was over, we were convinced that this was a tool worth buying. We went out and bought our own C-4, which retails for about $1,000 plus another $100 for the folding stand.

Since that first job, we've used the C-4 for everything from trimming doors to cutting sheathing. On our current project, a rehab of an old house, we've used the panel saw for cutting plywood sheathing and for ripping the shelving for a bookcase and an entertainment center.

Portability

We use the panel saw both in our shop, which is small, and at job sites. The C-4 is roughly 6 feet tall by 5 feet wide and only about a foot deep when it's closed. It weighs about 150 pounds and can fit in a pickup or van. Because the C-4 is on wheels, it's easy to move around the job site. Once you've got the saw where you want it, you just kick open the stand and it's ready to go. Opened up, it takes up a floor area of about 2 1/2 feet by 6 feet.

On our latest job, we cut plywood for a floor on the first story. Then we took the saw up a ladder to the second story to cut sheathing for walls and a roof (see Figure 1). It took three guys to haul it up to the second-story deck — two with ropes on either side and one guiding it up the rails of the ladder.

Later, we rolled it down a couple of planks to the deck of the new addition on the house. Even at a steep angle, the saw proved easy to maneuver down planks. Made of strong aluminum box extrusions, the frame doesn't flex, even when supported at the far ends. So while it weighs 150 pounds, it's a predictable weight, which makes it much easier to handle.

Speed and Accuracy

The panel saw has a 2 1/2-horsepower Milwaukee motor that drives a 60-tooth carbide blade. The SSC blade that comes with the saw is excellent, but any industrial-quality carbide saw blade would do, provided it's made for panel saws.

For speed in cross-cutting plywood sheathing, there's no comparison between the C-4 and a circular saw. By the time you've marked your line with a drywall square and picked up your circular saw, you've already cut the plywood using the panel saw. For ripping, the saw carriage can be rotated 90 degrees. After positioning the saw blade at a height that corresponds to the width of the rip, you tighten the saw carriage down to the rails with a knob, and feed a sheet of plywood through the blade with the trigger locked on. This is a lot quicker than setting up sawhorses for the circular saw or supports for a table saw. The plywood loads in the panel saw on edge — the same position you carry it in — so feeding it is much faster and easier than feeding a table saw. We cut about 160 sheets of plywood for floor decking, walls, and roof on our recent rehab job in a fraction of the time we had anticipated.

The roller bed is a little short, so the long end of an 8-foot panel can fall off as soon as the blade cuts through. And unless you keep a hand on the long piece of plywood, the blade can bind. To solve this problem, Safety Speed Cut makes 18-inch extensions that bolt onto each end of the bed (cost: $85 per pair). However, the extensions add to the saw's bulk and length, and make it a bit more cumbersome to maneuver around the site.

The C-4 produces clean cuts for fine work, and with the right blade, creates very little tear-out. On our most recent project, we got excellent results using the panel saw to rip the shelving for the built-in bookshelves and entertainment center. The saw has built-in tape measures — a vertical tape for setting the width of a rip and a horizontal tape for measuring the length of a crosscut — which

Figure 2. *The C-4's easy setup and built-in precision allow even inexperienced carpenters to become more productive.*

proved quite accurate (Figure 2). Safety Speed Cut guarantees accuracy to within plus or minus 1/32 inch.

I've used the panel saw to trim doors, too, and have gotten a good clean cut with no flaking. But you've got to be careful in older houses where the door frames are out of square. At times, we've had to use a circular saw to get those cuts right.

Lower Labor Costs

Getting a straight, square cut with a circular saw depends as much on the skill of the operator as it does on the quality of the saw. But no matter how good you are with a circular saw, you can't cut as square as you can with a panel saw. So far, the C-4 has cut straight and square time after time. There are very few moving parts, so it rarely goes out of whack.

In fact, the panel saw doesn't take any special talent to operate, making it especially good for inexperienced employees. With the C-4, less experienced carpenters can increase both their speed and accuracy. This means we spend less on labor and end up with less wasted material.

Most important, the panel saw is safer than a circular saw. When crosscutting a sheet of plywood with a circular saw, you've got to stretch over the panel. You're reaching about 4 feet, and if the saw kicks or the guard sticks, watch out! You don't have that hazard with a panel saw because you're not reaching over your work. And because you're not bending and reaching, there's less chance of back strain. Plus, by using the built-in tapes, you never have to site the blade on a line or reach near the blade for any reason. This means there are fewer opportunities for an eye or hand injury. ■

Dan Roden, a former industrial arts instructor, is a partner in Excelsior Construction in Excelsior, Minn.