On the Job

Slick Pocket-Door Trick

by Al Constan

I frequently get requests to fix pocket doors that have come out of the track and are difficult to operate. I used to be reluctant to take this kind of job; I could replace the wheels on top of the door, but I couldn't guarantee that would take care of the problem. So I developed a method that resolved this both for me and for my clients. Without breaking into the wall, I remove and replace the old track with a high-quality track and hangers from Johnson Hardware (model 100PD, which costs me around $24; 800/837-5664, www.johnsonhardware.com). Not only does the Johnson hardware roll a lot more smoothly than the typical cheap original hardware, but it's designed so the wheels can't come off the track.

To remove the old track, I take out as many of the attachment screws as I can get to by reaching inside the opening. I bend down that section of the track and cut it off with metal snips. I then use a short combination crowbar and nail puller to remove the remaining track. I cut off the end of the bar so it will fit into a 1-inch-diameter iron pipe, which gives me an extension handle to get back into the recess (see Figure 1). The track rips off easily, but it's hardly ever easy to get all the screws out, so I leave them in place.

Before installing the new track, I have to make a few modifications. Using a grinder to notch the metal, I create a tab at one end for attaching to the stud at the rear of the pocket (Figure 2). I drill a 3/16-inch screw hole in the tab, then bend it

Figure 1. Cutting the end off a small crowbar/nail puller and fitting it into the end of an iron pipe provides a tool for reaching into tight spaces.

Figure 2. A grinder makes quick work of forming an attachment tab on the end of the pocket-door track.

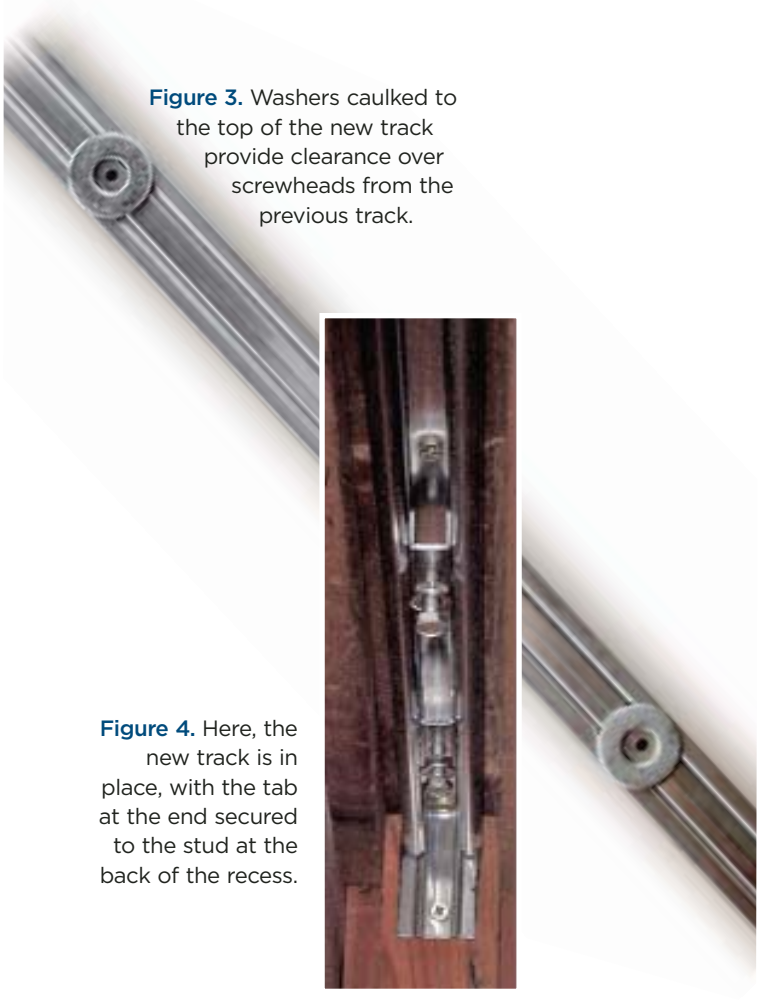

Figure 3. Washers caulked to the top of the new track provide clearance over screwheads from the previous track.

Figure 4. Here, the new track is in place, with the tab at the end secured to the stud at the back of the recess.

over. Also, to accommodate the protruding screwheads that were left in place when the old track came out, I glue flat washers to the new track at each screw hole, and one above the tab at the far end (Figure 3). These act as spacers so the track clears the old screws. Adhesive caulk works fine to keep them in position.

Next, I position the track with one hand and drive a screw through the hole closest to the pocket opening. This keeps the track in place while I use extension bits — up to three — to reach the screw on the tab. I also drive a couple more screws at a slight angle up through the track in the pocket, and the rest of the screws into the doorway overhead (Figure 4).

Now all I need to do is install the hanger brackets on top of the door and make final adjustments. A job like this takes only a couple of hours, and can be billed at around $200, including materials, when working with a hollow-core door.

***Al Constan** is a door hanger in Garden Grove, Calif.*

Smooth Tube Piers

by Dave Doddridge

Tube-formed concrete piers are standard for supporting decks. Often, the paper form gets left in place, and when it's stripped it leaves a characteristic spiral imprint on the concrete. When the piers are tucked away under the structure, no one cares too much about their appearance. But what if you need to pour an "architectural" column — one that will be prominent in the finished work?

On a recent job, the architect called for the 10-foot-tall, 14-inch-diameter columns supporting the second-story decks to have a completely smooth finished surface. The local branch of concrete specialty supplier A.H. Harris & Sons (860/665-9494, www.ahharris.com) told me about Sonotube Finish-Free tubes, which I special-ordered. I was concerned about a cardboard form of this height buckling sideways under the weight of the wet concrete, but a technician at A.H. Harris assured me that we'd have to brace it only at the top and bottom. The cylindrical rebar cages I needed turned out to be standard stock items.

So that we could brace the top of the form and also be able to stand at the top while pumping the concrete, we cut a 14 1/2-inch-diameter hole in the middle of a sheet of 3/4-inch plywood; we supported the plywood on a lumber-framed scaffold just below the top of the form. This allowed us to drop the form through the hole and over the rebar cage onto the footing, then shift the plywood around on the frame to plumb the column before nailing it off. Wood blocks shot into the footing prevented the form's bottom from walking.

Temporary scaffolding (above left) provided a work platform from which to place the concrete, as well as a convenient support for the tube form. Plastic spacers centered the rebar in the tube (above right); note the smooth, reflective surface of the form's inner surface.

We used a 4,000-psi concrete mix; 3/8-inch aggregate helped it flow around the steel cage. We also vibrated the concrete to ensure full, even distribution. After the mix cured and we stripped the forms, we found only a few small pits and voids in the concrete surface. Curiously, the bottoms of the piers had some discoloration — probably from the mix water leaking out and causing a change in the hydration process. Luckily, these spots would be covered by backfill. Other than that, the piers looked good. Including labor, concrete, staging, rebar, pump truck, and forms, the final cost for the columns was about $1,800 each.

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Periodic vibration during the pour helped the mix consolidate around the rebar and against the form's surface (left). Even with vibration, the column's surface had small pits and voids (above); these can be easily grouted flush if the customer wants.