Installing Your Basic Pocket-Door Kit

Get the sequence right and you can make serious time

by Gary Katz

At first glance, installing a pocket-door kit might seem like a pretty simple task. But the truth is, messing one up is pretty simple, too. In this article, I'm going to share some of the lessons I've learned — the hard way — about pocket-door kits, along with some tips for improving their function and feel.

Pocket-door kits come in two types: good and bad. Inexpensive kits with light-duty track and carriage wheels (sometimes called "trucks") are the bane of door-hangers and homeowners. Not only are they difficult to install, but in no time at all the track bends or the wheel bearings wear out. And everyone knows fixing a pocket door isn't easy or cheap.

So whatever kind of door you're using, invest in heavy-duty track and high-quality carriage wheels. Several makers have good kits, including Johnson (800/837-5664, www.johnsonhardware.com) and Hager (800/255-3590, www.hagerhinge.com). The kit shown in this article is a new one from Pemko (800/283-9988, www.pemko.com).

In addition to the split studs and track, which is mounted to the header frame, most pocket-door kits come with pretty much the same hardware (1): two door hangers, two roller carriages, two floor brackets, a rubber bumper, and a wrench.

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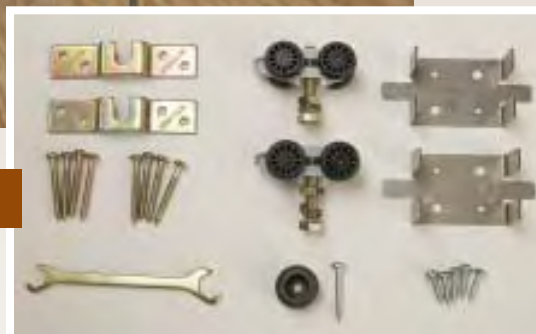
Resizing the Header Frame

The first step when you're installing one of these kits is to check the size of the rough opening (2) and, since the kits are supplied for 36-inch doors, to cut down the head frame if the door is narrower. The width of the rough opening should measure two times the width of the door plus 1 inch. For Pemko's Husky Heavy Door kit, the height of the RO should measure the door height plus 5 inches, though most other models require an additional 4 inches in header height.

For doors narrower than 36 inches, you have to do a little math. Start by doubling the difference between your door and a 3/0 door. For example, a 2/8 (32-inch) door is 4 inches smaller than a 3/0 door; 4 x 2 = 8 inches. Subtract that amount from the header-frame top cleat (3, 4) and from the aluminum track (5), but don't cut anything just yet. A piece of masking tape makes it easier to see the mark on the aluminum frame.

When it comes to the two pieces of wood that cover the sides of the track, which are half as long as the header piece, you want to cut off only the difference between your door and a 3/0 door — 4 inches in this example (6). I use a

jigsaw to cut the wood **(7)** and a hacksaw to cut the track **(8)**, then reinstall the end plate **(9).**
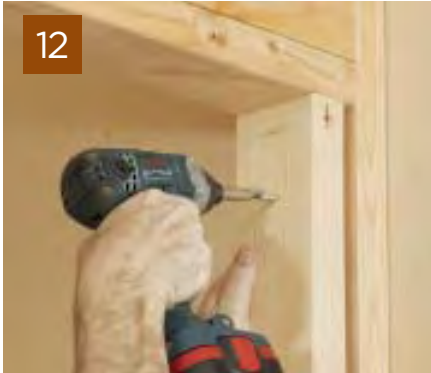
Installing the Frame

Cut out any bottom plate and snap lines on both sides of the opening **(10)**. For 6/8 doors, measure up from the floor $81\frac{1}{4}$ inches on the jack **(11)** and partially drive in a screw, centered on

the stud **(12)**. Don't use a nail for this; it's easy to relocate a screw if need be.

With 80-inch-tall doors, $81\frac{1}{4}$ allows $\frac{1}{2}$-inch clearance from the floor and automatically aligns the head jamb with existing prehung jambs so that the casings will line up around the room. Nothing looks worse or more unprofessional than a pocket door with casing that's an inch taller than that of sur-

rounding prehung doors. Site conditions vary considerably, so be sure to check your door and the jambs on your job before mounting the head track. For odd-size doors, locate the mounting screw by adding $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches to the door height.

Next, slip the header-frame end plates over the screws (13), check that the track is perfectly level (14), then snug up the end-plate screws and install the remaining screws.

Once the head is secure and level, insert one of the split-stud mounting plates into the *bottom* of a split stud (15), then insert the bottom of a second split stud on the other side of the plate (16). Note that the *top* of the split stud has two notches in the aluminum frame so that you can run screws through the face of the stud into the head frame (17).

Temporarily clamp the tops of the split studs to the header frame, then
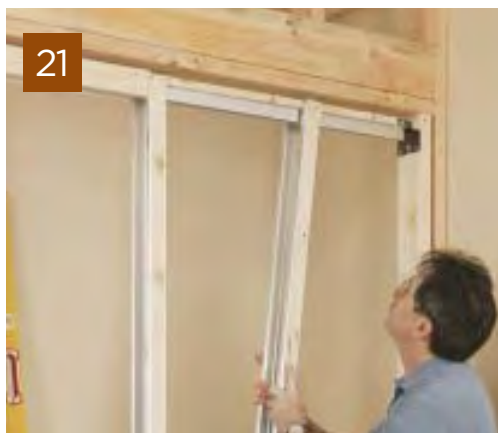
fasten with $1^1/_2$-inch screws **(18)**. Plumb the split-stud pair to the floor **(19)**, then fasten the plate, centered between the snap lines **(20)**. Use Tapcons or anchors on concrete.

Install the second split-stud pair the same way. If possible, be kind to the drywallers and try to align the split studs with the cripple studs above **(21)**. On a remodel, I'll just center the second split-stud pair. Attach each stud to the head with screws, then plumb the bottom, making sure the studs are centered on the two snap lines.

It's important, when drywall is installed before the door is hung, to stiffen the split-stud wall with a temporary brace **(22)**. Otherwise, the drywall installers might bend the inner split studs and pinch the door. (If you hang your doors before drywall and leave them in the pocket, good luck!)

Plywood stiffener. A great way to reinforce the split-stud wall is to install a ripped piece of $^3/_4$-inch plywood between the studs.

First, fasten the top of the plywood to the header frame **(23)**. Then drill $^1/_8$-inch pilot holes through split-stud slots and fasten the split studs to the plywood with $2^1/_2$-inch screws **(24)**.

It's a good idea to position these holes

near the top or the bottom of the slot, so as to leave as much room as possible for fastening the split jamb to the split stud later. When using a plywood stiffener, I install the second (midspan) split-stud pair after the plywood is attached to the first split stud **(25)**; I secure the second split stud to the header, then to the plywood, then to the floor.
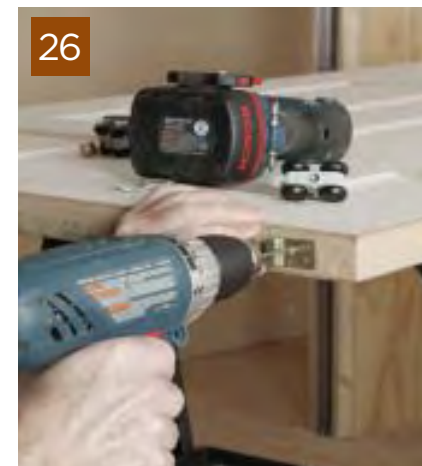
Hanging the Door

Cut the bottom of the door to clear carpet or other flooring. To measure the necessary door height, install the carriages in the track, suspend a carriage hanger from one carriage, then measure from the bottom of the hanger to the floor. Subtract for carpet or other finish flooring, plus allow at least $1/4$-inch clearance.

This is one case where cutting a little too much off the door is better than not cutting enough: If you don't cut enough, you may have to remove the door after all the trim is painted. We've all had to do that at least once. What's even worse, though, is if a tile floor is installed, you may not be able to get the door out of the pocket. Don't ask how I know this.

Center the carriage hanger on the door, approximately $3^{1}/2$ inches from the edge. It's best to avoid mounting hanger screws into the end grain of door stiles, but on narrow doors there's little choice. When I'm working with a heavy door and have to install hanger screws into end grain, I mortise out a section of the top stile with a plunge router and a template jig, then glue a solid block of wood into the mortise.

Always predrill pilot holes for every screw you put into a door **(26)**. Fasten the hangers with $1^{1}/2$-inch mounting screws.
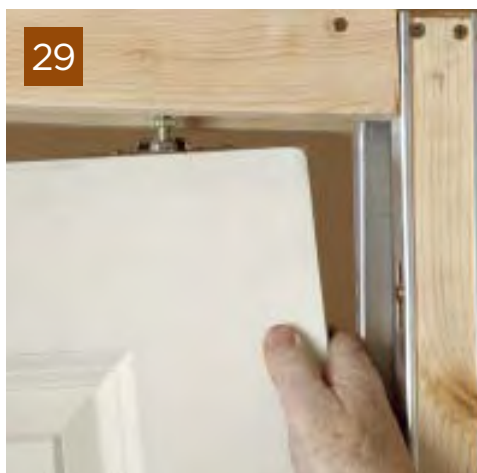
It helps a lot if on the first try you position the hangers with the bolt slots facing the front of the door (27). If you haven't done so already, insert the carriages into the track (28).

Hanging heavy doors alone isn't hard. Start by angling the back of the door into the frame opening, then tip it up on the front edge and slip the rear hanger plate over the carriage-wheel bolt (29). Slide the door into the pocket a little bit, then raise the front edge of the door and slip the front hanger over the front carriage-wheel bolt (30). Don't bother adjusting the height of the hangers until the strike jamb is installed.

Installing the Trim

Install the strike jamb, plumb and straight (31), and fasten it securely to the trimmer (32). Then adjust the carriage-wheel bolts to align the door parallel with the strike jamb (33).

I always attach split jambs with screws, locating the screws in the split-jamb legs so they center on the
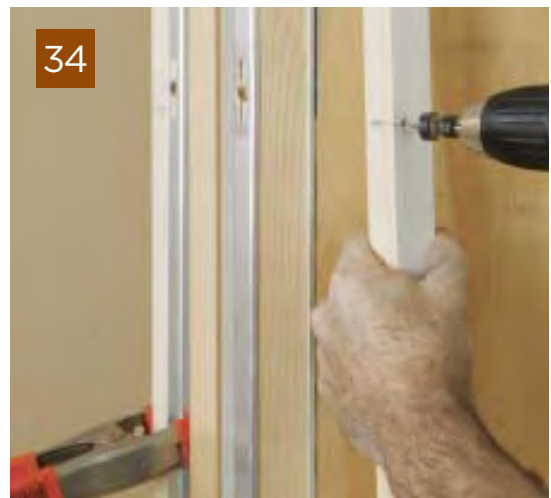
cutouts in the aluminum frames **(34)**. To position the split jambs properly, use a spacer the same thickness as the drywall or other finish wall material **(35)**.

Attach the split-jamb heads last. To make life easier for the next guy, I use screws in both jambs, because replacing the door sometimes requires the removal of both of the top split jambs. Remember that the door stop will cover all the screws.

I install the door guide next. Holding the guide near the bottom of the door, I center the door in the pocket opening, then drive a nail partially into the slots on each side of the guide **(36)**. I adjust the guide up or down while sliding the door in and out of the pocket, checking that the bottom of the door isn't rubbing.

To make sure it's centered, I open and close the door several times; once I'm positive everything is sweet, I stand up and double-check the whole thing one more time, then kneel down and drive two more nails into the holes on each side of the guide plate.

There are several types of door

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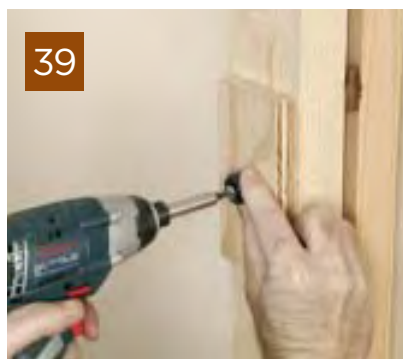
guides available; for custom doors, I prefer a floor-mounted guide. I cut a kerf in the bottom of the door with a router and slot-cutter, wax the kerf with a candle, then mount the guide to the floor, centered in the pocket opening.

I install the door stop using as few 1-inch brad nails as possible **(37)**. To allow for seasonal movement, as well as for a latch, I make the gap between the door stop and the door about $3/16$ inch.

Nail door stop on the legs of the split jambs, too, covering the door-guide plate

(38). I accommodate the thickness of the plate by carving out the back of the door stop slightly. Again, you should use as few nails as possible so the stop can be removed easily if the door ever needs adjustment. And if you can help it, don't caulk the door stop to the split jambs! Also, I don't install stop on the strike jamb unless the client insists; it looks silly and gets scarred every time the door is closed.

Finally, install the rubber bumper on the rear jack stud. If you're not hanging the door before drywall, don't forget to

get that bumper in while the cavity is still open. Use a properly sized spacer block to ensure that the front edge of the door is flush with the door stop at the face of the split jambs when the door is fully retracted into the pocket **(39)**. (Make sure to allow for the thickness of both the split jambs and the stop.)

Now wait for the drywallers to finish the wall, then install the casing **(40)**. One last note of advice: Use $1^1\!/4$-inch nails to fasten the casing to the pocket wall. Do the same for the baseboard. And don't ask me how I know this.

Gary Katz moderates the JLC *Online finish-carpentry forum and is a frequent contributor to* JLC.