Track Saws for Deck Builders

As good as you might think you are with a circular saw, you'll make quicker and more accurate deck cuts with a track saw

by Mark Ellis

I've been building decks for 40 years. For the first 35 years, I was content to make straight cuts with a circular saw following a chalk line—until I saw a demonstration of Festool's TS 75 track saw at a local contractor's show. I liked the way this system delivered faster and more-accurate cuts, but I didn't like the price tag, so I didn't buy one ... then. Besides, what does a deck builder need a track saw for?

Still, I kept hearing the buzz about these saws, and I learned of a couple of well-respected decking contractors who were using them. Finally, when Makita introduced its version of the track saw, which was priced significantly lower than the Festool, I decided to take the plunge (technically, these saws are called plunge-cutting saws). Now I own the Makita SP6000K 6½-inch track saw as well as Festool's larger TS 75 and can't imagine going back to a circular saw and a chalk line for the kind of work I do.

First Cuts

Like a lot of deck builders, I don't just build decks, which is one of the reasons I bought the Makita track saw in the first place. Most early adopters used their track saws for cutting down sheet goods, but my first project was cutting stair stringers out of 2x12 ipe for an

Figure 1. When you're making bevel cuts with the Makita SP6000K, a tab in the base of the saw engages with the track, which prevents the saw from tipping.

Figure 2. The Festool TS 75 EQ has a 2¾-inch cutting capacity; here it is being used to trim decking so that the deck can be picture-framed.

exposed staircase down to a wine cellar. Previously, I had always notched such stringers with a circular saw, but no matter how hard I tried, my stringers never turned out perfectly. They were good enough, but the cuts always wandered slightly as the saw blade entered the stock at an angle, veered slightly off course, and then eased back to the cut line. Excited to try out my new saw, I said, What the heck, and ended up making perfectly straight and perfectly parallel cuts—the best I had ever made.

Why such an improvement? It's partly because the saw itself rides on a straight track, which guarantees that your cuts are going to be as straight as your track, no matter what the angle of your cut is. But it's also because there's no guessing where the blade is going to enter your stock: Just line up the edge of the track on your line or tick mark, and the saw will cut exactly where you want it to. And since the track lays down right on the line, it helps to prevent the wood from splintering (**Figure 1**).

Of course, using a 55-inch guide rail to make a 12-inch cut was a little bit unwieldy, but not a deal-breaker. Actually, a shorter, 18-inch-long track would be a great addition to the system.

Next, I needed to cut plywood for a skirt on a tall deck. Since the ground had a significant slope, I had to cut the plywood to match the grade. With the track saw, all I had to do was mark each edge of the plywood, align my track on the marks, and make the cut—no snapped lines and no clamps. That's because the track has a pair of rubber strips on the bottom that do a good job of gripping the surface of whatever you are cutting.

While the strips are effective, the track can also be equipped with optional clamps, which slide into a slot on the bottom of the track. I bought a pair, thinking that they'd be necessary, but have used them only once, just to try them out.

You can literally make perfect cuts with your eyes closed (though I don't recommend this), and if you're right-handed, you can use this saw with your left hand (and vice versa). I'm right-handed but often find it easier to make cuts with my left hand, something I would be very hesitant to do using my circular saw. With the track saw, I'm ambidextrous.

Trimming Deck Boards

Like most deck builders, I let the decking run long when I install it, then trim it afterward (**Figure 2**). I also typically place my posts outside of the deck edge, which gives my customers a little more room on their deck and eliminates the need to notch the decking all the way around the post.

When trimming the decking with a circular saw, I have to measure the overhang at each end, snap a chalk line between the marks, then carefully freehand the trim cut. But when I'm using my track saw, all I have to do is slide the track snug against each pair of posts, plunge my track saw into the decking, and trim away. Then I slide my track to the next section and continue the process. Not only do I save the time I would have spent snapping chalk lines, I get straighter, splinter-free cuts.

When the posts are set inside the deck framework, the process is a little different.

Figure 3. Makita and Festool tracks can be connected to make a very long rail. For even longer cuts, the author snaps a chalk line and aligns the track edge with the line. Clamps can be used to lock tracks in place but aren't usually needed thanks to soft rubber friction strips on the bottom of the tracks, which grip the cutting surface.

Depending on the length of the side of the deck that I am cutting, I need to either place tick marks at each end or—if the deck is longer than my track—actually chalk a line. Then I just align the track with the tick marks or chalk line and start cutting.

Most track saws come with a single track that is long enough to cut 4-foot-wide sheet goods, but additional tracks in various lengths can also be added (**Figure 3**). Connector bars align the tracks with great precision, and it takes virtually no time at all to connect multiple tracks. I routinely connect three tracks together for about 15 feet of track length, and I'm about to purchase another 118-inch-long track, which will give me a potential track length of nearly 25 feet.

Track saws are ideal for customizing decks with borders, inlays, seam boards, and other features. The process is similar to trimming the edge of a deck, where I run the decking long and then trim it to length with the track saw (**Figure 4**). Perfectly straight cuts are critical here, since even the slightest waver in the cut line would be highly visible.

On one project, we reinforced some existing posts that were not adequately anchored to the ground by installing new ones next to them, then tying the post pairs together with plywood to create a series of little shear walls (**Figure 5**). Unfortunately, the existing posts were neither plumb nor aligned with each other, and needed to be furred out with tapered rippings before we could install the plywood. We set up a pair of string lines, one at the

Figure 4. When decking meets decking at a slight angle, the author installs a saddle (right), which requires perfectly straight and parallel end cuts in the opposing decking. A little foot pressure is all that's needed to keep the track from slipping during the cut (left).

Figure 5. This unusual project required retrofitted posts tied to the existing posts with plywood sheathing (A). To create the mini shear walls, the author had to accurately rip the sheathing to size, a job that the track saw excels at (B). Once the track is in the proper position, the saw can be operated with either hand, with no loss in accuracy (C).

Track Saw Choices

I originally bought the Makita SP6000K track saw because it was the cheapest entry into the track-saw world, yet had still received very good reviews. Having had good luck with a number of other Makita tools also played a role in my decision. Because we build a lot of pergolas in addition to decks, we eventually decided that we needed a saw with more cutting capacity to handle the 3-by material we often work with. Push came to shove when my 20-year-old 8¼-inch worm-drive saw took a tumble it couldn't recover from. Instead of buying another large circular saw, I bought a reconditioned Festool TS 75, which has a 2¾-inch cutting capacity and came with a 75-inch track.

Which saw is my favorite? The Makita is a great tool, but the Festool has a couple of advantages in addition to its larger cutting capacity, including a much longer cord. I hate snagging cord ends and the longer cord helps in that regard. The depth of cut is also much easier to set on the Festool—you just have to push a sliding depth stop, rather than tightening and untightening a knob, as is necessary on the Makita.

One thing I dislike about both saws is that depth measurements are in metric rather than imperial units. I know how to make the conversion, but here in the United States most tradesmen are more comfortable using inches rather than millimeters and centimeters. I have heard that Festool's newest track saw, the TS 55 REQ, gives you the choice between either unit.

DeWalt's DWS520K is the third major track saw on the market. I know that depth measurements on this saw are in inches, and that the DeWalt tracks aren't compatible with either the Festool or Makita tracks, but otherwise have not had a chance to try the saw out (for more on track saws, see "Plunge-Cutting Circular Saws," *JLC,* April 2009; www.toolsofthetrade.net/images/plunge_cutting_circ_saws_tcm80-1806998.pdf).

Figure 6. Instead of PVC trim boards, the author buys PVC in 4x8 sheets, then quickly and accurately rips his trim to the exact size needed with his track saw.

Figure 7. Trimming deck boards generates a large amount of sawdust. The dust-collection port isn't connected to a vacuum here, but if it were, the jobsite would remain virtually dust-free.

bottom of the posts and one at the top, measured the distance from each post to the string lines, and used the track saw to quickly cut 24 perfect furring strips. Sure, this could have been done with a circular saw or even a jobsite table saw, but not as quickly or accurately.

Once the posts were furred out, we wrapped them with 5/8-inch T1-11 plywood sheathing. Since the columns were of similar widths, we stacked up the plywood sheets and cut multiple pieces at the same time. This would have been a difficult maneuver with a circular saw, since it's not that easy to rip a 4-foot-wide sheet of plywood in half without getting on top of the sheet to see the line. We just set the track guides on our end points and easily operated the saw from the side of the stack of sheathing, rather than on top.

Column Wraps

We often wrap pressure-treated posts with PVC products, especially when building pergolas and other deck structures. In our area, it's much cheaper to purchase PVC trim in large sheets than in individual pieces, and since treated post dimensions vary quite a bit, we can rip to the actual size we need instead of being limited to standard dimensional lumber sizes. Occasionally, we rip the PVC column trim with 45-degree miters rather than with square edges, a task that takes no additional set-up time when using a track saw (**Figure 6**).

Another benefit of the track saw is that it allows us to minimize sawdust on the jobsite, which is especially useful when cutting PVC or composite trim and decking (**Figure 7**). All the track saws we own have a dust port that accepts a standard-sized vacuum hose, a feature that I'm not sure is shared with standard circular saws.

Our track saws don't do anything that we can't do with other saws, but they allow us to do things better, faster, and cleaner, so our projects take less work and are more accurate and professional looking. ❖

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