BY TIM UHLER

Festool Reinvents the Circular Saw

I am a framer, concrete former, and sider by trade, but since I was a little kid watching the New Yankee Workshop, I've always dreamed of being a finish carpenter. For whatever reason, finish carpentry didn't become my vocation. Maybe it's out of nostalgia for my childhood, but for the last few years, I've read a lot of reviews and forum posts about Festool products that were geared towards finish work. Most of the technical info goes over my head because working outside and to rougher tolerances, I don't need these products. I especially don't have much use for the dust collection for which Festool has become well-known.

A few months ago, *JLC*'s sister magazine *Tools of the Trade* asked me to review the new (to the U.S.) Festool HKC 55 cordless circular saw and crosscut guide. I agreed to do it, without really understanding what this saw was or how I might find a use for a Festool product.

THE SAW

This saw is cordless with a brushless motor that spins a 6 1/4-inch blade and is available as a bare tool ($375) and in two kits. Both kits come with two 5.2-Ah Li-ion batteries, an 18-tooth blade, and a SYS 4 Systainer and charger; one kit comes with the rail ($690) and one without ($570). The kits are also available as a corded saw (HK 55), which has all of the same features as the HKC except that it is also equipped with a speed adjustment knob. With more control over the motor, you have more options for cutting various materials like metal, PVC, or laminates; material-specific blades are available as well. I used an 18-tooth framing blade.

This is a blade-left saw that bevels up to 50 degrees. The depth adjustment differs depending on whether you're using it with the track or without and is very accurate with clear markings. The tool can also be turned into a plunge saw and used with other Festool guide rails. The dust port, which can be hooked to either a bag or a vacuum, features a new design that works with a new locking hose and fits on all Festool dust extractor connections.

FSK GUIDE RAILS

The FSK guide rails are different from the FS rails for Festool's TS track saws that you may be familiar with. They hook to the saw to become a unit, and they are self-retracting. Even better, they can be

set to an angle up to 60 degrees, making it easy to achieve shop-quality repetitive miters. These rails come in three lengths: 9.84 inches (FSK 250), 16.53 inches (FSK 420), and 26.38 inches (FSK 670). All guide rails include an integral splinter guard.

On the underside of the guide rail are a plastic pivot and an adjustable "stop" (see photo, bottom right). You simply put the track on the piece of lumber and rotate the saw and rail until both the pivot and stop are up against the material to set the cut angle. You can adjust the angle to register to either the left or right relative to the material.

HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?

Let's take the dust collection first. I didn't use this saw with a vacuum or bag. I angled the port down and to my right because that keeps the dust off the track and off the material I'm cutting. I was inclined to cut right-handed with my left hand on the track. Whichever hand you use, you will likely want to have your free hand holding the track down in front—particularly with larger material. While Festool doesn't claim that this saw collects all dust, I found that I had basically no dust on the surface I was cutting. I used this HKC 55 saw to cut three stair stringers, all of my 2x8 riser material, and 1-inch OSB tread material. I then took the saw off the crosscut rail and used it with one of the FS rails to rip the treads. During all of this, my workstation stayed clean.

The saw had plenty of power for cutting through dry 2x12 Doug fir. I kept a steady speed and didn't force the saw. I don't have any complaints about power. The depth was easy to set, and the guard was easy to retract using a convenient lever just to the left of the blade. You can set this saw into a plunge mode that retracts the blade completely up; when you're cutting in this mode, it is nice to be able to raise the guard with the lever. Once we framed the house and papered the roof, we could use this saw to do pick-up work inside. When ripping sheathing, I found that using the saw and long rail was as fast as snapping a line and cutting freehand.

The FSK rail works very well. The splinter guard aligns precisely on the cutline just as with the FS rail. I didn't set the angle to cut the riser and tread lines on my stringers; I could have, but I found that it was easy enough and fast to set the track on the line and cut. Like the FS rail, the FSK rail has rubber strips along the bottom, which help it to stay on the material without slipping.

We got this saw in time to frame a roof that had I-joist rafters. In addition to the rafters, I had nearly 100 10-inch web stiffeners to cut. I had planned to bring our sliding compound miter saw and stand to cut them but forgot the stand. So instead, I used the HKC and guide rail. I set the angle to 30 degrees and quickly cut 100 5/4x8 10-inch web stiffeners with 30-degree miters on each end. I went through one-and-a-half batteries.

I noticed that every 20 cuts or so, the rail was failing to retract, so I took the saw off the rail to shake out the dust. This was OK with me because even while I was using a guide, my shoulder was getting a workout, so the quick break was helpful.

Another task I used the saw and FSK rail for was cutting I-joist blocking. We had a lot of 13 7/16-inch and 9 7/16-inch I-joists to cut down. The lumberyard sends us lineal footage of I-joist to cut into

When mounted to the FSK guide rail, the HKC 55 (shown) and the corded HK 55 saws can follow the cutline by aligning the guide rail's splinter guard along the mark. Before making your first cut, you'll need to trim the splinter guard to align it with the blade.

This view of the underside of the FSK guide rail shows the pivot point (black plastic, top) and angle adjustment point (green thumb screw, below), as well as the foam anti-slip tape. The green thumb screw moves to set the angle; the black pivot point stays fixed.

blocking. Normally, I use a beam saw for this, which is hard on my arm and not too accurate.

This time, I made all the cuts with the Festool; I finished with a cordless recip since the flanges were 2 1/2 inches deep and the Festool cuts about 2 inches deep with the rail. I found that we had perfectly cut blocks, and it was actually faster than using the beam saw—I didn't have to scribe any lines, and I left my framing square in my pouch. All I had to do was align the guide rail to my mark, and it squared the cut for me. And it was much easier on my arm.

IS IT REALLY WORTH BUYING?

I have been grappling with this question for the last month. I absolutely loved using this saw for cutting stair stringers. The set of stairs I built with it look very clean. Using it to cut repetitive blocks without pulling out my square was also clean and fast. And we had a number of walls to frame up to rafters on the house we are working on, and they all had either 30- or 40-degree miters. I liked not pulling out a square to mark the angles.

As a rough framer, I initially thought: I really don't need this saw, and most framers don't need it either. However, after using the saw, the rail it came with, and a 118-inch FS track, it occurred to me that I will never need my table saw and stand or my 12-inch sliding compound miter saw and stand on site again. I also tend to rip faster using this saw and guide, because I'm not watching the line.

We have a Rosseau table set up with outfeed tables for our table saw and a 12-inch sliding compound miter saw with a Saw Helper stand (no longer available). Now, they stay tucked away in our shop. The cost of those tools and stands add up to between $1,500 and $2,000. I can buy the HKC 55 Cordless kit plus the 420 FSK guide rail (16 1/2 inches long) for $690 plus the FS 118-inch guide rail for $355 and still save money.

When I add the convenience of taking my saw to the material instead of the material to the saw and consider the fact that I get shop-quality cuts on a rough jobsite, then I absolutely recommend this tool. Another advantage is that everything but the track fits in the Systainer box, which is easy to roll out and put away and doesn't clutter the van. I would suggest that you invest in one or two more batteries, though, or consider the corded version. Even with a good blade, cutting through 2x6 up to 2x12 wears out the batteries faster than they recharge.

This is a tool I think we'll continue to find uses for in the coming months. I know we'll have it out most days we are siding and installing exterior trim. If you're a carpenter or a remodeling contractor who has been waiting to take the plunge into buying a Festool, I think this is the place to start.

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