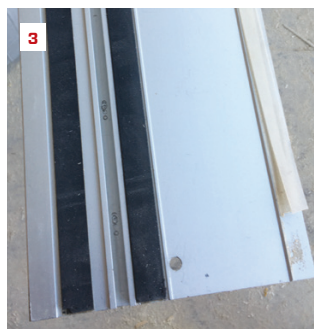


BY DAVE HOLBROOK

Getting the Most Out of a Track Saw



Track saws offer precise cutting of sheet goods (1). To avoid splintered veneer, first make a shallow pass (2), then recut at full depth. Black friction strips on the guide rail grip the cutting surface; the splinter guard edge (white, at right in photo) can drift and delaminate in use (3). The author holsters the splinter guard with vinyl flashing tape to help prevent dislocation (4). For parallel cutting, measure to the back edge of the rail instead of to a time-worn splinter guard (5).

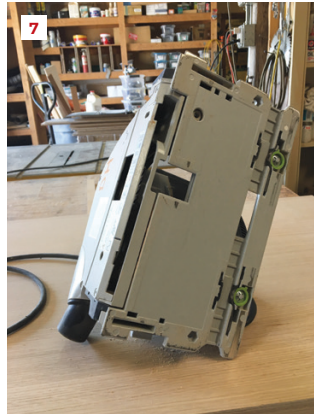
Considering the accessories you're likely to end up wanting once you've bought a track saw, it can quickly become one of the pricier tools in your arsenal. However, I soon found it to be one of those tools you wonder how you did without. I bought my current Festool saw, along with a pair of 55-inch guide rails, in 2013, and it has since joined the basic lineup of my traveling tool kit.

Track saws vs. table saws. Some of the hype claims a track saw will put your table saw out to pasture; I wouldn't go that far. It's a great companion tool to a table saw, for sure. Lay the guide rail at one edge of a piece of live-edge or curved lumber, slice it straight, and run your new edge against the table saw fence to make a flawlessly straight board. Arguably, a track saw beats a table saw for processing cumbersome sheet goods, from sheathing to finish plywood (1); sheets can be cut into manageable pieces lying flat on sawhorses, or on the floor, with complete precision. A parallel rip, though, is best performed on the table saw, because for repeat and truly parallel cuts, a locked-in fence position is more reliable than a track that's set with your tape measure and eye. So, I'll lighten a sheet by making a substantial initial rip using the track saw, but make subsequent, accurate parallel rips on the table saw.

Cutting. A variety of saw blades are available, depending upon the task—including crosscutting and ripping—and material. I stick with one blade 99% of the time, a proprietary 48-tooth ATB (alternate tooth bevel) blade. I don't cheap out when it comes to tools, and there's little difference in cost between these typically 6 1/2-inch blades and their 10- and 12-inch compatriots. But cutting plywood, which is probably 80% of my application, is successfully done with a single blade type, given one caution: To avoid tear-out when crosscutting, I always first make a shallow cut (2), severing only the top veneer, and then I reset the blade depth to complete the cut. This is quick and simple to do with a track saw.

I don't count solely on the vinyl strip—allegedly the “splinter guard”—at the edge of the rail to prevent or subdue tear-out. In fact, I've come to rely less on the splinter guard even for initial cut alignment, its equally touted application. When it's new, it is reliable referenced against your tick-mark. But with repeat use and attendant abuse, the strip becomes frayed, dislocated, and partly detached, especially at either end (3), which is typically where you line up your cut. Plywood, along with every other material, isn't dropping in price, and spoiling a sheet is all too easy. So, when my edge is in weathered condition, I make a slight, exploratory entry nick to make sure the blade is lined up on the mark and adjust the track position accordingly.

Replacement guard strip is only slightly south of \$50, so if you're replacing yours, first thoroughly clean the old adhesive from the



Friction strips are grippy, but track clamps ensure the line is held (6). Safety is enhanced by the fully housed saw blade (7), exposed only during plunge-cutting. Bevel cuts track along the rail edge without any adjustment to position. Here, the author miter-cuts 10-foot black walnut plywood using a 118-inch stock rail (8). A TSO guide rail square converts a rail into a 90-degree crosscutter (9). Without a vacuum hookup, sawdust quickly gums up the rail; constant clearing is needed (10).

track with mineral spirits, followed by denatured alcohol, which, unlike mineral spirits, leaves no chemical trace of its own to compromise adhesion. I've taken to reinforcing replacement strips with a band of vinyl tape (4). Make your first cut to trim the new edge, then enjoy the renewed precision while it lasts.

When I make parallel cuts using a track saw, I first register the entry position with a test nick, then measure from the opposite edge of the material to the back edge of the track (5), rather than referencing the strip edge. I then position the far end of the track to that exact back-edge dimension, double-check both end dimensions, and make the cut. While the friction strips on the underside of the rail do a fairly miraculous job of anchoring it to the material, an accidental bump or shift is still possible. Track clamps instill peace of mind and should be an early buy on your accessory list (6).

Avoiding kickbacks. When I was first familiarizing myself with a track saw, I neglected to ensure that its shoe groove was correctly engaged with the rail, and I managed to saw a small kerf into the rail itself. Since then, I've gotten in the habit of sliding the saw back and forth on the track to check engagement before pulling the trigger. And once you do pull the trigger, wait for the saw to come up to speed, about one second, before plunging into the cut. If you don't, it'll kick back. Plunging is how the saw is engaged and is ergonomically intuitive. When you are done cutting, the spring-loaded retrieval allows you to set the saw down just about anywhere, as the blade is completely and safely enclosed (7).

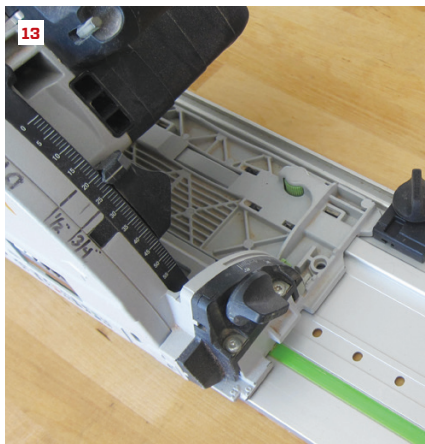
Splinter guard. The saw can be dialed in to snugly fit the rail, eliminating lateral movement. I'm commonly on jobsites where more than one carpenter has a saw and rails, and we interchange equipment on occasion. This highlights the odd fact that one saw of the same make can trim the splinter guard slightly differently from another, so it fits the rail tighter or looser. Finding a splinter guard thus altered is annoying, but ultimately adaptable. It's just something to be aware of when a 1/64-inch difference matters to your work.

Bevel cuts. Track saws are designed to enter the cut line at the exact same point whether the cut is square or beveled (8), so there is no adjustment needed in approach. Although the body of the saw is heeled out over the track edge during the cut, it remains smooth and stable in action and delivers a glue-ready miter. A mild back-bevel of 5 degrees or so is a great aid to executing scribed cut lines, whether you're prepping a board for scribing or actually cutting to the scribed line, depending upon its complexity. I'll often shift the track along a scribe line and remove 99% of the waste material with the track saw before final planing or belt sanding to the line.

Similarly, door edges are easily beveled along the closing edge with a track saw, and door bottoms trimmed just as readily. Again, to avoid chipping the edge when trimming a door to length, I'll first make a shallow cut through the surface veneer only.

Accessories. Among the several accessories available that maximize this tool's versatility, a parallel guide kit promises quick set-up and controlled accuracy for repeat parallel rips. Maybe I'll get one. Rail clamps, as already stated, are basic essentials.

I recently acquired a GRS-16 guide rail square (9) that cam-clamps



Rail connectors allow for longer guide rails but don't guarantee perfect alignment. Keep a slight gap between segments and confirm true alignment with a separate straightedge (11). Proprietary set screws become distorted with repeat use; the author replaces them with 5x5-mm hex-socket screws (12). This limit stop slides and clamps onto the rail at any selected position, preventing accidental advancement of the cut (13). Precise, interior plunge cuts are quickly made (14). Having a selection of rail lengths enhances the flexibility of the track saw system (15).

onto the rail edge and sets you up for accurate 90-degree crosscuts. I've found that the accuracy is best on narrower cuts, but double-check with a good square when you're cutting across something as wide as a 24-inch panel. Apparently, using a guide rail square at both ends of the rail ensures total accuracy, but I haven't tried it or bought a second rail square; that seems a little fussy, and expensive for the perceived convenience. Festool also offers a similarly functioning adjustable protractor for angle cuts.

A guard rail deflector helps ease the vacuum hose over the end of the rail, which can otherwise drag and resist forward momentum.

A tool-actuated vacuum or a dust collector should be considered a primary accessory, since it beautifully controls sawdust, which otherwise accumulates on the track and jams the slide action (10). When I'm making a few quick cuts, I sometimes skip the vac hookup, but then I end up needing to sweep the rail clean between every cut. Bluetooth-equipped batteries actuate paired dust collection with Festool's cordless saw, but, for me, the vacuum

hose is a bigger drag on movement than the cord.

Guide rail connectors allow you to assemble multiple rails to unlimited lengths (11), with the caution that a continuous straight edge isn't automatically provided; I always check the connection against a reliable, second straightedge. The slots in the set screws provided by Festool also quickly strip out; I've replaced mine with 5x5-mm hex-head units (12). A limit stop (13) is useful when you want to prevent overtravel, say in an interior cutout operation (14). While blade progress remains visible during cutting, a stop firmly guards against the oops factor.

If you're careful about ensuring straight connections, a selection of shorter rails (15) will serve just about all your needs; single rails up to nearly 10 feet in length are quick and perfectly straight but almost painfully expensive.

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