

BY JOHN SPIER

Working Smarter, Not Harder

In my last article, “Rules for Better Framing” (Nov-Dec/23), I introduced some guidelines that are important to follow to be a good house framer. These were general concepts that apply to any complex job that is part of a larger, integrated project, and they were mostly aimed at the person managing the job. In this follow-up article, I summarize principles and habits that are necessary to adopt to be an efficient and valuable worker, whether a laborer or a highly skilled artisan. As in the previous article, these are general concepts that apply to any trade.

1. MAKE EVERY MOVE COUNT

Some workers always seem to be in a hurry, and others seem to saunter around a jobsite. Who is more efficient?

In my experience, speed of motion is mostly a matter of personality; whether you are a fast mover or a slow mover, being efficient means not wasting any of that motion. If you need six blocks, for example, collect six scraps, line them up, take out your tape, pencil, and square once, pick up the saw once, cut them all to length at the same time, and then take them all to where you need to nail them up. Instead of letting them drop to the floor, catch and

stack them as you cut; this way, you avoid having to bend over to pick them up **(1)**.

Practice minimizing your moves. If you can hold something where it goes and mark it, why use a tape measure and square? Better yet, if you can hold it in place and cut it, or nail it on and then cut it, you’ve saved a bunch of steps **(2)**.

If a cut doesn’t need to be squared, don’t square it. If you’re climbing stairs or a ladder, don’t make two trips if you can make one.

Efficiency is not brilliant ideas for saving a lot of time (that’s genius); it’s saving little increments of time all day long.

2. HAVE WHAT YOU NEED WHERE YOU NEED IT

As we carpenters get older, toolbelts weigh heavier on our hips and shoulders. But the most inefficient thing you’ll see on a jobsite is that guy who takes his belt off all the time, typically because it is too heavy and uncomfortable or because it’s bulky and gets in the way.

I would feel naked and unprepared doing most jobs without having at least the following on my person: hammer, tape measure, square, utility knife, pencil, marker, chalk line, chisel, nail



When you’re installing blocking, it’s more efficient to measure, mark, and cut all the pieces to length at once than handle them one at a time **(1)**. When “speed cutting,” the author aligns the left end of a scrap 2-by with the left edge of the stud on his left and registers the base of the saw against the left edge of the stud on his right, using the 1½-inch offset between the saw blade and the right side of the saw base to deduct that thickness from the block he’s cutting **(2)**. Shown here are the tools the author usually carries in his toolbelt **(3)**; your selection of must-have tools may vary. You can add a few task-specific specialties as you need them, but loading your toolbelt with tools that you rarely use adds weight, not efficiency.

Photos by Henry Austin



When working with sheet goods, pick up one corner and roll it onto your shoulder in one smooth move to help preserve your body over the long term (4). In the author's tract-house days, he'd get yelled at for carrying just one sheet at a time. To trim a full sheet of sheathing to 91 inches, measure 5 inches from the short end instead of pulling a tape measure and T-square to measure and mark 91 inches from the long end. To mark the cut, you can slide a rafter square along the edge of the sheathing (5), or simply lock your hand on the tape and slide your finger along the edge, holding your pencil on the end of the tape. Similarly, it's a waste of time to mark a notch in sheathing with a T-square or chalk line; marking a notch like this by sliding your hand along the edge with a pencil and a tape takes about five seconds (6). When cutting studs or joists to length off a stack of lumber, skip the pencil line and use a rafter square to guide the saw and make a square cut (7).

sets, small vise grip or pliers, and a selection of nails. Depending on what I'm doing, I'll add a few other items as needed (3).

Some people can and do carry an arsenal around—and more power to them, I say—but most of us need to find a balance. The tools that you use all day long should be in their proper place on your person at all times, and using them should be a smooth, automatic process, a set of moves that you don't even think about. If you're not carrying the basics with you while you're working, you're wasting time.

The same concept applies to power tools—set them up where you need them to minimize the amount of time you spend walking and carrying materials. It's generally more efficient to cut

where you're working, rather than walk back and forth to a distant cut station all day long.

3. LEARN TO USE YOUR TOOLS

There are thousands of tools out there, we love them all, and we say that there's a right tool for every job. However, you don't need all of them to build a house; in fact, you need only the contents of your toolbelt and maybe a couple of saws and drills. By all means, if you have a tool that will help you do a job faster and better, get it out and use it, but don't make anything more complicated than it has to be, and don't use more tools than you need. Understand that



You don't need a pencil to mark cuts that don't have to be perfectly square and a precise length, such as when you're furring out a ceiling or wall with 1x3 strapping for drywall. For longer lengths, just pull a tape and mark the cut with the corner of the tape measure **(8)**. For shorter lengths, use the tape's hook to mark the cut **(9)**.

even the simplest tool is a versatile machine that requires finesse to use well. More tools won't make you a better carpenter; learn to be a better carpenter, and you'll get more work out of your tools.

4. PAY ATTENTION TO BODY MECHANICS

Watch someone work who has spent a lifetime doing manual labor well, and you'll see efficiency in action. Learn from these guys—when they pick up a couple of sheets of plywood or a stack of lumber, there's no struggle, no strain, no wasted energy. When they use a shovel, they're rarely bending over, they're facing the right direction, and they never lift it half full. They pace their efforts so at the end of the day, they're still working efficiently. Learn to do that, and at the end of your career, you'll still be out-working the young pups **(4)**.

5. UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT THE VALUE OF TIME

The cost of the work that's being done is remote to most carpenters, but it's very real to the boss, the customer, and the success of the project. We don't want to work like dogs or slaves, but keep in mind that wasted time is money coming out of someone's pocket. Or worse, being tacked on to their mortgage. In my market, that's somewhere between \$1 and \$2 a minute, so when you add up those bits of time you spend answering your phone, checking your social media, chatting up the neighbor, throwing a stick for the dog, and talking politics or sports, you've basically reached into someone's wallet, extracted a few bills, and torn them up.

6. MAKE TEAMWORK WORK

Two or more people doing a job together should be able to get it done in fewer person-hours than two people doing it separately; otherwise, what's the point? Two workers taking turns watching each other do their parts of the job are essentially operating at

half speed, whereas one worker cutting for two or three others is boosting everybody's productivity.

7. LEARN NEW TRICKS

Good carpenters learn a thousand little tricks for saving time and energy and getting good results faster; the best ones never stop teaching themselves. You can learn a lot by watching how experienced craftsmen do things, but the real secret of tricks is ingenuity and application. For example, watch a drywaller, and you will never measure a 91-inch piece of plywood again—you'll cut 5 inches off a full 8-foot sheet. And to do that, you'll mark it with a square, or your tape and a finger clamp, or the 5-inch edge dimension of your saw base **(5, 6)**.

Or maybe you want four pieces of wood out of one length. Use a saw and square to cut it somewhere in the middle, and then measure, mark, and cut all four pieces at once. Or, say you want two pieces the same length—lay one on top of the other, align the ends, and cut the top piece. Even if your saw doesn't cut full depth, sliding the first one aside and finishing the second cut is fast and exact. The number of time-saving tricks is endless, and they all add up **(7, 8, 9)**.

8. BALANCE TIME AND QUALITY

Understand that every task you do has an appropriate standard of quality. For a stain-grade miter, perfection might be the standard; for a rough opening, "close enough" is probably the standard. Learn how good everything has to be and aim a bit higher than that just to be sure. Not too much higher, because then you're wasting someone else's resources, but never less than you should be, because if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right.

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