All You Need Is a Track Saw

How to break down plywood and other sheet goods efficiently, accurately, and without a tablesaw

BY JUSTIN FINK

When I got my first track saw years ago, it was an absolute game changer for my trim carpentry work. No more trying to shove full sheets of plywood through a small job-site tablesaw. But for those first few years, I was really only using the tracksaw to break down sheets of plywood into their rough parts, which I would then run through the tablesaw for final sizing. I didn't have confidence in my ability to get consistently sized parts, say for building a bank of cabinets, without the aid of a fence. But as I've refined my techniques, I now feel comfortable processing a stack of plywood into a variety of consistently sized parts and pieces, all without a tablesaw.

Track-saw setups are available from Festool, Makita, and DeWalt, among others. But keep in mind that many parts of these systems are cross-compatible. My saw and tracks are both made by Festool, but the zero-clearance strip on the track, and the clamps I use to secure it to sheet goods, are both made by DeWalt. Similarly, my dust hose is made by Bosch, and I often connect it to a Ridgid vac.

Whichever tools you use, accurate cuts require a thoughtful sequence. I've tried lots of different workflows for processing sheet goods—laying out the full sheet while trying to account for sawkerfs, cutting each piece out one at a time, and more. I find the method shown here to be the most efficient, and it's become my standard practice. After establishing two edges that are square to each other, work from one side of the sheet to the other. Group parts by their width, which allows you to focus first on the long rip cuts. Then those rip cuts can be crosscut to their final length, either individually or as a group. □

Justin Fink is editor. Photos by Rodney Diaz.

GET SET UP

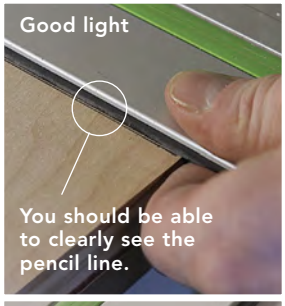
Clean-edged, accurate track-saw cuts require a well-tuned saw, sawblade, and track. Here's my prework checklist for clean, accurate cuts.

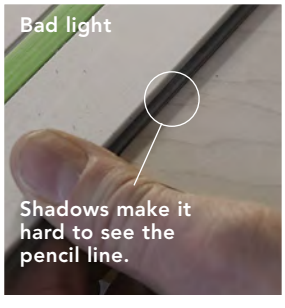
THE SAW AND TRACK

- The saw should engage snugly with the grooves in the track, and the blade should align perfectly with the outer edge of the zero-clearance strip on the track. If it doesn't, readjust the saw on the track and take a fresh cut to zero out the strip.
- Make sure the zero-clearance strip is adhered to the track completely. If the adhesive has started to let go, buy and install a replacement.
- The saw should always be hooked to a vac. Most importantly, it's healthy. But it also keeps sawdust from interfering with layout and solid contact between the track and sheet, and extends the life of the sawblade.

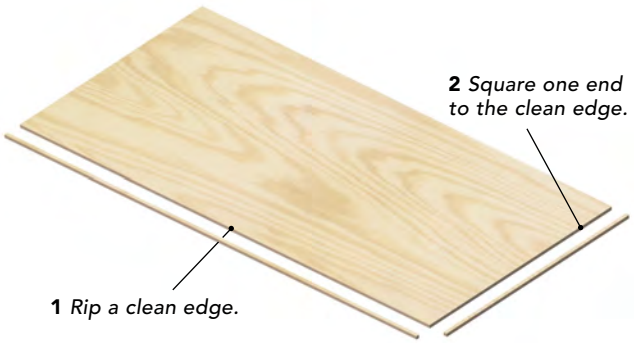
THE WORK SITE

- Ample light, ideally slightly raking, is crucial for layout. If possible, locate the work so the light source is on the cutting side of the track rather than straight above or behind it. Even a small shadow cast by the zero-clearance strip can lead to misaligned cuts.
- To fully support the workpiece in every direction, make all cuts atop a sacrificial 4x8 sheet of rigid foam set on a stable worktable, not spanning sawhorses. If storing the foam is an issue, cut the sheet into thirds, then tape the pieces back together to create a fanfold arrangement.
- When it comes to accurate layout and cuts, don't underestimate the value of a tape measure that's in good condition, and a super sharp pencil. For the latter, use a high-quality pencil with a fairly hard lead of at least H or 2H, and keep it sharp.





Drawings: Trevor Johnston



ALWAYS START SQUARE

Never, ever trust the factory edges on a piece of plywood. You can't assume they're straight, or square to each other.

CREATE A CLEAN EDGE

If you want quality results, the first cut should always be along the length of the plywood, about ¼ in. to ½ in. in from the edge. I set the track for this first rip cut by eye, because at this point the goal is simply to get a straight cut, not be dead parallel or square.

CLAMP OR NO CLAMP?

Track-saw tracks have grippy strips to help them stay in place, so technically you don't need clamps unless you're cutting melamine, prefinished plywood, or a sheet with some other slick surface. Still, a pair of clamps can cost less than a single sheet of plywood, and will ensure you start right on the cut marks and stay that way, even if the cord or hose catches the track.

SQUARE UP THE END OF THE SHEET

Use the one long, clean edge as a reference to create a second clean, square edge. A framing square is too small for this work. Either square up using measurements and a 3/4/5 triangle, or get a big folding layout square (C.H. Hanson; about $50). Again, keep the cut close to the factory end of the sheet to maximize the stock.

RIP CUTS FIRST

With two fresh-cut, square edges to work from, move on to the long rip cuts. Each cut is laid out with two measurements, one at each end of the sheet.

MEASURE ACCURATELY

Hold the tape parallel to the edge you're measuring, and roll it down flat to the surface with two fingers while marking between.

DROP THE TRACK

After marking both ends of the sheet, position the track on the sheet so that the zero-clearance strip is aligned with the pencil marks on both ends.

DOUBLE-CHECK

With the clamp in the track but left loose, measure again—this time from the cutting edge of the track back to the clean edge of the plywood—confirming you're still dead on layout before clamping the track in position.

SMOOTH CUTTING

Let the blade get up to full speed before plunging to your preset depth and advancing into the edge of the plywood. With the track secured, one hand pushes the saw, and the other guides the hose and power cord to avoid snags.

TRICK FOR NARROW RIPS

When ripping pieces narrower than the width of the track, use double-stick carpet tape to hold the piece down to the foam, and an offcut of the same thickness to help support the track.

THEN CROSSCUTS

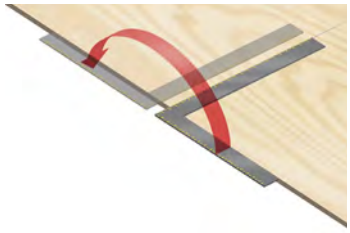
There are a few options for making crosscuts. The method you choose depends on the width of the piece to be cut, and the number of same-size pieces you need to create.

THE BASIC CUT

As long as the piece to be crosscut isn't more than about 24 in. wide, the fastest method is to measure along one edge of the piece, mark the length, and use a framing square to mark the cutline. If it's wider than 24 in., revert to the method for marking rip cuts.

Check your square for square

Framing squares are sometimes out-of-square right from the factory; other times they get dropped or otherwise damaged. The best way to check is to hold the square against a clean, straight-edged piece of plywood and strike a pencil line along the square's blade. Then flip the square over, strike a second line, and see if the two lines are parallel. If they aren't, it's time for a new square.



CUTTING NARROW PIECES

Often pieces will be too narrow for easy clamping, and the overhanging length of the track becomes a hassle. Unless you have a short track for these cuts, put offcuts under the overhanging end of the track so you can use the clamps.

GANG CUTS

Many jobs involve multiple sheets with multiple pieces of the same size. In these cases, align the pieces, clamp them together, and cut them as a group.

QUICK CHOPS

If the pieces to be crosscut are narrow enough to handle with a miter saw, that's a better option. It's fast, and—if you need many parts cut to the same length—allows you the option to use a stop block.