


TOOL TEST

Track Saws

These versatile tools make fast, precise cuts and weigh a lot less than your tablesaw

BY DOUG MAHONEY



Clamp-free cutting. High-friction tape on the underside prevents the aluminum track from moving during straight and angled cuts. All track-saw manufacturers offer clamps for their tracks, but they're unnecessary for most materials.

Combining a plunge-cutting circular saw with an aluminum guide rail, track saws have gone from obscure woodworking tools to common job-site problem solvers in less than 10 years. Their unsurpassed accuracy, ease of use, and clean cuts make them perfect for cutting everything from veneer plywood for cabinets and built-ins to plywood and OSB for wall and floor sheathing. Track saws are also great for trimming doors and cutting off overhanging deck boards.

In the past, I used a regular circular saw along with a clamped straightedge for guided cuts. But after getting my first track saw four years ago, I find that method sloppy and tedious. On a conventional circular saw, the blade is seldom parallel to the edge of the base, so cuts are rough and sometimes burned. Track saws are built so that the track and the blade are parallel, resulting in accurate cuts free of burning and saw marks. In addition, the aluminum tracks have flexible edges that prevent splinters, so the cuts are smooth with little or

ALL THE SAWS SHARE THE SAME BASIC DESIGN AND OPERATION

Track saws have two components: a plunge-cutting circular saw and a track that's available in various lengths. The track has a flexible edge that aligns with the path of the blade to aid setup and to prevent splintering.



Cuts are precise. The track's flexible splinter guard follows the cutline exactly, so you don't have to compensate for the width of the saw's base, which speeds setup and reduces mistakes.



Bevel cuts are easy. Unlike with a conventional circular saw, the path of the blade isn't altered when a track saw is set to make a beveled cut. This makes a track saw the perfect tool for mitered corners on tapered columns, range hoods, and built-in cabinets made from sheet goods.



Plunge cuts are accurate. All the saw motors plunge by way of a spring-loaded hinge, so you have to push down on the handle to make a cut. This makes plunge and stopped cuts easy and accurate. Marks on the blade housing show where the blade is positioned within the housing.



no chipping. The improved quality of cut is especially noticeable on materials prone to chipping, such as melamine. Track saws also can plunge cut, which is more difficult and less accurate with a traditional circular saw.

I recently tested track saws from DeWalt, Grizzly, Festool, Mafell, Makita, and Triton. Surprisingly, most track-saw kits come with a single length of track that's only long enough for a 4-ft. cut. I think ripping a full sheet of plywood is an essential task, so I wanted 8 ft.

of track. Although a few manufacturers offer a single 8-ft. track, the hassle of transporting and storing such a large and easily bent piece of aluminum seems like an unreasonable burden. Instead, I prefer to make 8-ft. rips by joining two 4-ft. tracks with a manufacturer-provided connector. When offered by the manufacturer, this is the setup I requested.

One thing I learned during testing is that blade sizes vary slightly in diameter from model to model, so you should stick with blades made

THE BEST SAWS STAND OUT FOR THEIR USER-FRIENDLY CONTROLS



Enclosed blades, riving knives

The DeWalt, Festool, and Grizzly saws have riving knives to prevent kickbacks. All the saws have shrouded blades to aid in dust collection, which was effective on all models when connected to a vacuum.



TOOL TECH

To see a track saw in action, visit FineHomebuilding.com/extras.



Smooth sliding action

Adjustable with a top-side thumbwheel, cams ensure that the saw slides easily without wobbling on the track. Festool's adjustment system has large, low-friction pads for smooth operation. Other saws use small cams, which don't operate as smoothly.



by the saw manufacturer or confirm that a replacement is exactly the right size. I think it's a good idea to have extra blades on hand before you need them because track-saw blades can be hard to find at home centers and lumberyards.

How we tested

In addition to using the saws in my shop and on job sites for a variety of tasks, I ran them through a number of tests using the supplied

manufacturers' blades. I ran each tool through $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. melamine to judge the quality of cut through the material's brittle plastic-coated surface. As a power test designed to simulate how the saws would perform when trimming an exterior door, I cut through 2 ft. of 2-in.-thick oak. Finally, to assess the gripping power of each track, I ripped a $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-thick piece of plywood at a 45° angle without using clamps. During all of these tests, I had the saws hooked up to a Festool CT 26 vacuum so I could assess their dust collection.



Score-setting for veneer

The Mafell, Makita, and Triton have a one-touch scoring feature that sets the blade to take a very shallow pass for clean cuts in difficult materials such as veneer plywood and melamine. The scoring feature is more convenient than setting the blade depth manually.



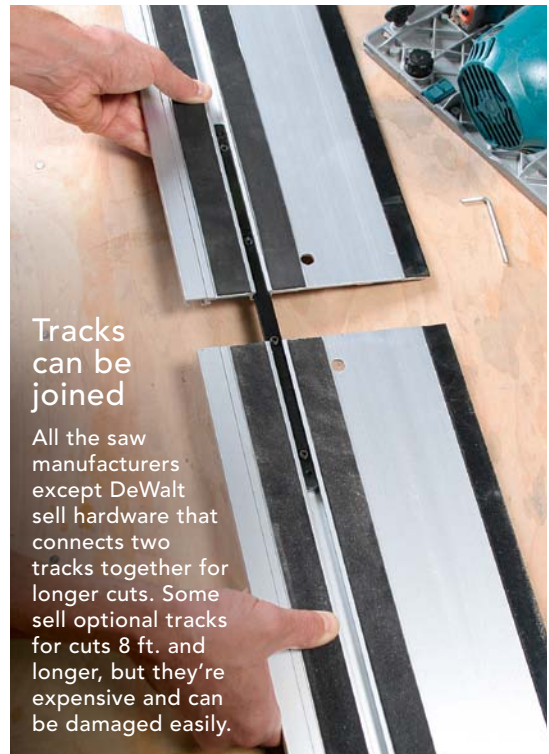
Safety brake

Festool, Grizzly, and Mafell have stop blocks that clamp to the track to prevent the saw from moving backward during plunge cuts. The blocks are preferable to Triton's and DeWalt's systems, which prevent the saw from moving backward at all times. DeWalt's can be turned off, but Triton's requires an override every time you reverse.



Easy blade changes

Pull the lever on the top of the Mafell, and it opens the blade cover and locks the arbor for easy blade changes. Although track-saw blades are close to 6½ in. dia., conventional 6½-in. circular-saw blades have a 5/8-in. arbor hole that's too small for a track saw's 20 mm arbor.



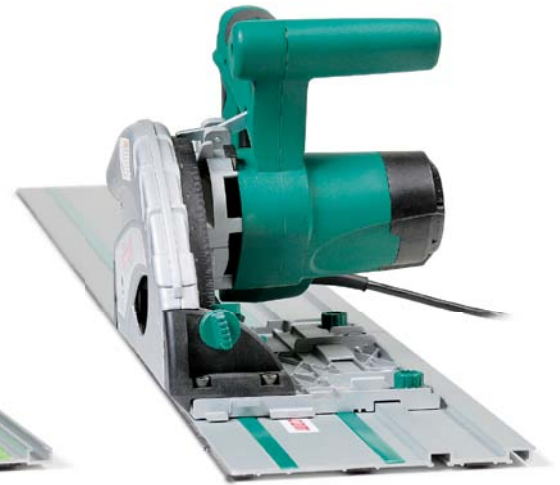
Tracks can be joined

All the saw manufacturers except DeWalt sell hardware that connects two tracks together for longer cuts. Some sell optional tracks for cuts 8 ft. and longer, but they're expensive and can be damaged easily.

Standard features

The six saws I tested all share a few features. Each baseplate has a set of cams that snug the saw to the track, eliminating any side-to-side movement, and every saw has a thumb-operated safety trigger that needs to be engaged before the sawblade will spin and the housing will plunge. Bevel adjustments are similar to those on a regular circular saw, but the baseplates are engineered so that the track always aligns with the blade regardless of the bevel angle. Beyond these con-

sistencies, I was surprised how the features and safety mechanisms varied from saw to saw. Many of the saws have some means of preventing kickback during plunge cuts. The DeWalt and the Triton have a setting on the base that allows the tool to move forward on the track but not backward. Festool's stop block prevents the saw from moving backward during plunge cuts. Grizzly includes a similar device in its accessory kit, and Mafell sells a similar device as an accessory (\$23). The DeWalt, Festool, and Grizzly saws have a riving



DeWalt DWS520CK

The DeWalt's track is the only one with a splinter guard on both sides, so I didn't need to constantly flip the track, an advantage when working in tight quarters. The DeWalt is also the only saw that uses a linkage connection rather than a single pivot point for the saw's plunge mechanism. This means you have to push the handle forward as well as down to make a cut. I found it tricky to make this motion with one hand. In addition, the depth-of-cut dial is too small and is difficult to operate with gloves on. Unfortunately, DeWalt does not sell a track connector, so for cuts longer than 4 ft., the only option is to get a 102-in. track. The DeWalt is built tough, but ergonomically, it's not the strongest of the bunch.

Festool TS 55 REQ

Perhaps it's not surprising that the Festool is the track saw I see most often on job sites. This tool is the complete package of power, precise cutting, and easy adjustments. In a single pass (without scoring), it left a nearly perfect edge when cutting melamine. In the power test, the motor maintained a constant speed while slicing through the thick oak. The depth-of-cut adjustment is excellent, and the track has a thick and effective splinter guard. The Festool also has great dust collection. The depth scale is in metric, but Festool includes a sticker with Imperial measurements to place over the millimeter scale. Power, ease of use, and overall cut quality made this tool stand out above the rest.

Grizzly T25552

The least expensive track saw I tested, the Grizzly has enough power and ability to get basic tasks done at a decent level of quality. The simplicity of the tool makes it easy to use, but it has the smallest motor of all the saws and lacks both variable speed and a soft start. It's also not a very comfortable saw to use. The safety switch is tough to reach with your thumb, and the plunge mechanism has a very strong spring that makes cutting tiring. Also, when I tried to dial in a specific angle, I found the bevel markings to be unclear. The dust collection was good but not great. For occasional use, this tool will get the job done, but if you plan on using your track saw often, it's worth upgrading.

Model	Base cost	What you get	Weight	Riving knife	Anti-kickback
DeWalt DWS520CK	\$613	Saw, 59-in. track, 102-in. track	11 lb., 8 oz.	Yes	Yes
Festool TS 55 REQ	\$640	Saw, 55-in. track	10 lb., 1 oz.	Yes	Yes
Grizzly T25552	\$245	Saw, 55-in. track, clamps, connector	10 lb., 9 oz.	Yes	Yes
Mafell MT55cc	\$836	Saw only	10 lb., 2 oz.	No	Yes
Makita SP600J	\$406	Saw, 55-in. track	9 lb., 6 oz.	No	No
Triton TTS1400	\$300	Saw only	11 lb., 9 oz.	No	Yes

knife to keep the blade from binding while cutting. The knife deploys when the blade is plunged into the material.

Depth-of-cut adjustments

With all of the saws, the depth-of-cut adjustment is more precise than you'll find on a regular circular saw. On the high-end track saws (Festool and Mafell), the adjustment is made by squeezing the depth stop and sliding it up and down the gauge. The rest of the saws use

locking dials. The squeeze adjustment is more ergonomic and more precise. The dials can be tricky, especially when the depth of cut is bottomed out and the dial is hard up against the saw's baseplate and bevel gauge, leaving little room for fingers. One feature I especially like—which can be found on the Mafell, Makita, and Triton saws—is the setting for making a shallow scoring cut. Using the scoring setting before making a full-depth pass creates a much cleaner edge on finicky surfaces such as melamine or veneer plywood. While all of the



Mafell MT55cc

The Mafell backs up its high price tag with precise adjustments, easy-to-read gauges, and the simplest blade change I've seen on any circular saw: Pull a lever, and the entire blade shroud pops open. The Mafell track is only 5 in. wide—over 1½ in. narrower than the rest—so it's easy to work with narrow material. Using the scoring feature, the Mafell made a perfect cut through the melamine and, like the Festool, kept constant power while cutting the thick oak. On the downside, the Mafell doesn't have a front handle, which I kept trying to reach for, especially when cutting at an angle. Overall, the Mafell is a nice tool with superior dust collection, but I wish it had a front handle for better control.



Makita SP600J

The Makita's handles are comfortable, and the plunge spring offers just the right amount of resistance. The thumb safety switch is the easiest to use, and I like how the saw's base locks into the track for added stability during beveled cuts. When I used the scoring setting, the Makita made an almost flawless cut in the melamine. The dust collection was also very good. The Makita weighs at least ½ lb. less than the other saws and easily plowed through ¾-in. plywood; however, it struggled a little with the thick oak, leaving burn marks as it cut. I was surprised to see that the depth-of-cut scale is in millimeters. Because it was so comfortable and easy to use, though, the Makita was my favorite midpriced saw.



Triton TTS1400

The Triton toggles easily between cutting, scoring, and blade-change mode. It also has an anti-kickback mechanism and can lock into the track—handy for steep bevel cuts—with the turn of a dial. Unfortunately, when using the scoring function, I could never get the second cut to line up perfectly with the first. I also didn't like how the kickback stop needed to be manually overridden every time I slid the saw backward. It's especially tedious because the knob is located in a hard-to-reach spot under the motor. The Triton has a good selection of features, but its overall design makes it a difficult and frustrating saw to use. On the plus side, it's the second-least-expensive saw in the test.

Depth of cut	Amps	Bevel	Scoring feature	Setup for 8-ft. rips	Connectors	Available track lengths (in.)
2½ in.	12	0° to 47°	No	\$613	Not offered	59, 102
2 in.	10	-1° to 47°	No	\$787	\$18	32, 42, 55, 75, 106, 118, 197
1½ in.	9	0° to 45°	No	\$295	Included in kit	55
2 in.	10	-1° to 48°	Yes	\$1211	\$76	32, 43, 63
2½ in.	12	-1° to 48°	Yes	\$520	\$27	55, 118
2½ in.	12	0° to 48°	Yes	\$400	In optional \$100 kit	59, 27.5

saws can be set manually to scoring depth and then reset to the cutting depth, the ability to toggle between the two settings saves time.

The bottom line

The saws are priced at three levels. At the top (about \$800 and up for a setup for 8-ft. rips) are Festool and Mafell. These two saws stood apart from the rest due to the smoothness of their motors, excellent dust collection, and overall build quality. The middle range (about

\$400 to \$620) includes saws by Makita, DeWalt, and Triton. I had some issues with the Triton, but even though the DeWalt and Makita are missing some of the finer points found on the upper-tier tools, they would both perform admirably on a job site. The Grizzly costs roughly a quarter of the most expensive saw, so it's no surprise that it lacks the features of the other saws and has poor ergonomics. □

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