

TOOL TEST

Track Saws

For fast, accurate cuts in plywood and more, these compact saws are hard to beat

BY MARK EDMUNDSON

CLAMPS OPTIONAL

The tracks for these saws have a non-slip grip, so you should be able to place them on your mark and simply make the cut. But for added security, all the saws offer clamps as an option. The clamps slide into a groove on the bottom of the track to lock it down.



 **Online Extra**

Build a simple crosscut table to get the most from your track saw. Go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

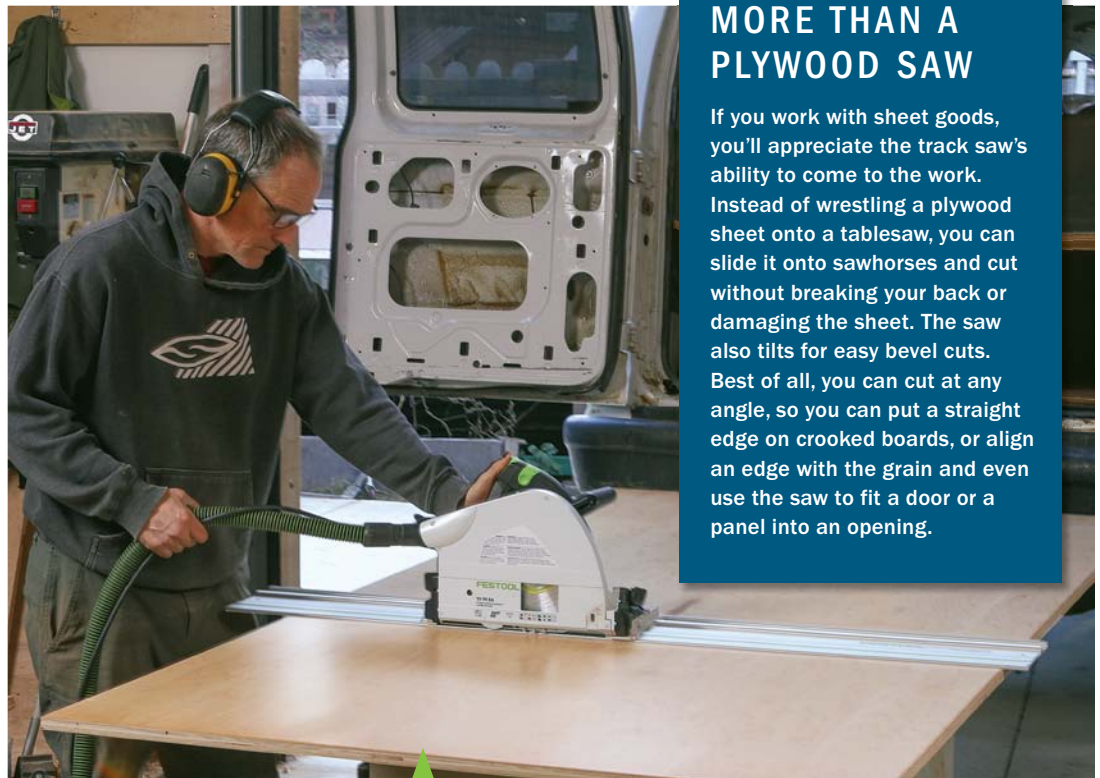
I was one of the first people to review the Festool 55 track saw when it came on the market almost 10 years ago, and I went around for several years afterward telling all my woodworking friends to buy the tool. The magic of the track saw is in the track, which has a nonslip surface underneath and a zero-clearance strip along the edge. In seconds, you can line up that edge with your layout marks, drop the saw onto the track, and make a perfect cut, right on the line. Add the ability to plunge in and out of a cut and you have a truly unique tool, unmatched at a number of tricky tasks that range far beyond its original mission: cutting up sheets of plywood for cabinet work.

Since my first review, other manufacturers followed Festool into the market, and *Fine Woodworking* thought it was high time for a lowdown on the whole lot. We reached out to all of the manufacturers and netted seven saws for our test. Shop Fox and Scheppach declined to participate.

Saw and track combinations vary a bit, so in each case we ordered the saw with a track at least 48 in. long, because a track saw should be able to crosscut a sheet of plywood. And for some insurance on critical cuts, we also ordered the accessory clamps that lock the track to the workpiece.

What I tested and why

To evaluate the power and quality of cut, I used the saws to cut through a wide variety of thick hardwoods—ripping 8/4 maple and oak and 4/4 alder, and crosscutting a 1½-in.-thick maple butcher block. I also took a skim cut on the edge of the butcher block to check for blade deflection, and I cut a variety of veneered sheet goods. All of the saws produce clean edges under their zero-



MORE THAN A PLYWOOD SAW

If you work with sheet goods, you'll appreciate the track saw's ability to come to the work. Instead of wrestling a plywood sheet onto a tablesaw, you can slide it onto sawhorses and cut without breaking your back or damaging the sheet. The saw also tilts for easy bevel cuts. Best of all, you can cut at any angle, so you can put a straight edge on crooked boards, or align an edge with the grain and even use the saw to fit a door or a panel into an opening.

Break down sheet goods

clearance strips, and the best deliver a clean edge on the outboard side of the kerf, too. I also noted the smoothness of the plunge action and how comfortable the handle was.

Some of the saws set the depth in metric units and others in imperial, but I didn't find the measurement units to be a big issue. However, I do like the fact that some saws factor the track height into the depth measurement.

I find track saws to be very useful when cutting bevels. To test their accuracy, I used the saws to cut two long 45° bevels in plywood to see if the joint would close with no gaps. In the process I evaluated the bevel gauge for accuracy and readability. Some of the saws have a catch that prevents the saw from tipping off the track when bevel cutting, a handy feature.

Dust collection is tricky on track saws, where the hose tends to catch on things as the saw moves. That's why some of the saws have dust ports



Put a straight edge on lumber



Trim doors and drawer fronts

Track saws head to head



FESTOOL TS 75 EQ

\$780 with 75-in. track, plus \$80 for two track clamps

The Festool TS 75 EQ was the powerhouse of the lot, blowing right through the thickest, toughest materials, and with an unmatched 3-in. depth of cut. There was no blade deflection, cuts were very smooth, and the track side of the blade kerf was super-clean. Bevel cuts were very clean and accurate, but it can't bevel below 0° and there is no stop at 45°, minor inconveniences. The trigger is easy to engage, and the plunge action is the easiest of any saw in the test. The depth-setting adjustment is also the easiest to use, but you have to factor in the track height. The dust collection is efficient. The track did not slide and is long enough to crosscut a sheet of plywood (longer tracks are available, too). The strips on the edge of the track are translucent so that you can keep better track of your pencil line. The Festool clamps are the best, and they fit everything except the DeWalt and Mafell tracks.



Power. To compare the saws' power, Edmundson made ripcuts on 2-in.-thick oak and hard maple, timing each cut. The Festool 75 powered through without slowing.



MAFELL MT55CC

\$870, plus \$154 for 63-in. track and \$62 for two track clamps

The Mafell is compact and powerful, with a motor that was by far the quietest and smoothest. The surprising power might have something to do with its blade, which is the narrowest in the group (but did not deflect in the skim test). The quality of the cuts was also excellent in all materials. Accuracy was just as good, with the 45° bevel joint closing up nicely. And the track is a standout, too, tied for stability with the Festool tracks. We went with the 63-in. model, as the next size down is under 4 ft. long. The track stayed put during the slip test. The depth setting is one of the easiest to change, and, like the Triton, the scale factors in the track height. There are accurate bevel stops for both 0° and 45°, and the saw can also tilt past those settings. The dust collection was the most efficient of any saw in the test.



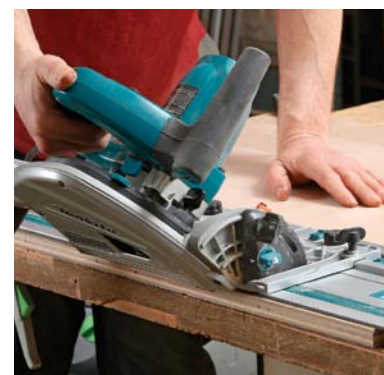
Track length. Edmundson opted for the 63-in.-long track on the Mafell, which lets you plunge the saw fully, with the saw fully engaged in the track, before entering the cut on a full sheet of plywood.



MAKITA SP6000J1

\$410 with 55-in. track, plus \$40 for two track clamps

The Makita is not as polished as the Festool or Mafell tools, but it is comfortable to use and performed very well. Power was very good, slowing only in the 8/4 hardwoods. After some adjustment to make the blade parallel to the baseplate, it delivered clean cuts in all materials. Like the Triton, the Makita has a tab on the base that keeps it from tipping off the track when tilted for bevel cuts, and the saw can tilt past 0° and 45°. The bevel scale is not accurate, but if you make some test cuts, you can set the positive stops at 0° and 45° accurately, which is mostly what matters. The plunge action was smooth with a comfortable handle angle. Dust collection was good, and the track did not slide under pressure.



Bevel cutting. Track saws do a great job cutting long bevels if you keep them steady. The Makita (above) and the Triton have a little clip on the base that keeps the saw from tipping off the track.



DEWALT DWS520SK
\$475 with 59-in. track,
plus \$32 for two track clamps

The DeWalt had no problem in $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-thick stock but really bogged down in $\frac{8}{4}$ oak. It left a smooth cut and a clean edge under the track, the blade showed no deflection, and the measurements are in inches. However, unlocking the trigger to plunge the saw is an awkward experience, and the depth setting is a bit cumbersome to adjust and doesn't factor in the track thickness. The dust port was difficult to pivot but it did a good job at collecting dust. The 55-in. track is longer than most of the others and is the only one to allow cutting on both sides. The track slid under pressure, but the DeWalt clamps work well and will fit all of the tracks except the Mafell.



FESTOOL TS 55 REQ
\$660, plus \$130
for 55-in. track and
\$80 for two track clamps

The Festool TS 55 REQ has less power than some of the other saws, but the trigger is easy to engage, and the plunge action is the easiest of any saw in the test. The depth-setting adjustment is also the simplest and easiest to use, but you have to factor in the track height. The saw has positive bevel stops at 0° and 45° and allows for -1° and $+45^\circ$ settings. There was no blade deflection, and cuts were very clean, even when beveling. Dust collection is very efficient. The Festool clamps are the best, and they fit everything except the DeWalt and Mafell tracks.



**GRIZZLY T2552
MASTER PACK**
\$260, includes 55-in. track
and two track clamps

The Grizzly's plunge action was much too stiff, and the angle of the handle and locations of the trigger and lock made the saw difficult to use. The blade deflected when taking a skim cut, and the saw rocks on the track a little bit, causing inconsistencies in the bevel cuts. The track slips easily and the dust collection is not very effective. On the positive side, the depth setting is straightforward and uses standard measurements, and the bevel gauge is easy to read.



TRITON TTS1400
\$315, plus \$85
for 59-in. track, and
\$50 for two track clamps

The Triton's cuts were not as smooth as those made by the top-performing saws. The plunge action was stiff, and there was some blade deflection when making skim cuts. The depth setting uses an inconvenient twist knob, and there are no positive stops on the bevel adjustment. The dust collection was not very effective, and the track moved. On the plus side, the track clamps worked well, and the saw features a tab that keeps it from tipping when making bevel cuts. Also the depth gauge reads in inches and factors in the track thickness.

that can be positioned at a certain angle and will stay there, keeping the hose away from the track and the edge of the material. All of the ports fit the smaller-size vacuum hoses.

Some of the saws have a riving knife behind the blade and others don't. I didn't find those to be a factor on track-guided cuts, but they are helpful if

you use the saw without the track, like a normal circular saw, to crosscut a big piece of rough lumber, for example. However, these saws are awkward to use without the track. You have to push forward while also pushing down.

All of the tracks I tested are capable of reaching across a full sheet of plywood, but

some extra length is convenient, because you don't have to be so precise when positioning the track and you have room to plunge the saw fully before pushing it forward to cut.

Conclusions

I have two picks for Best Overall: the Mafell and the Festool

75. For value shoppers, I recommend the Makita. It might take a little fussing with the settings to get it to cut perfectly, but once you do it offers clean cuts, good power, and easy adjustments. □

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