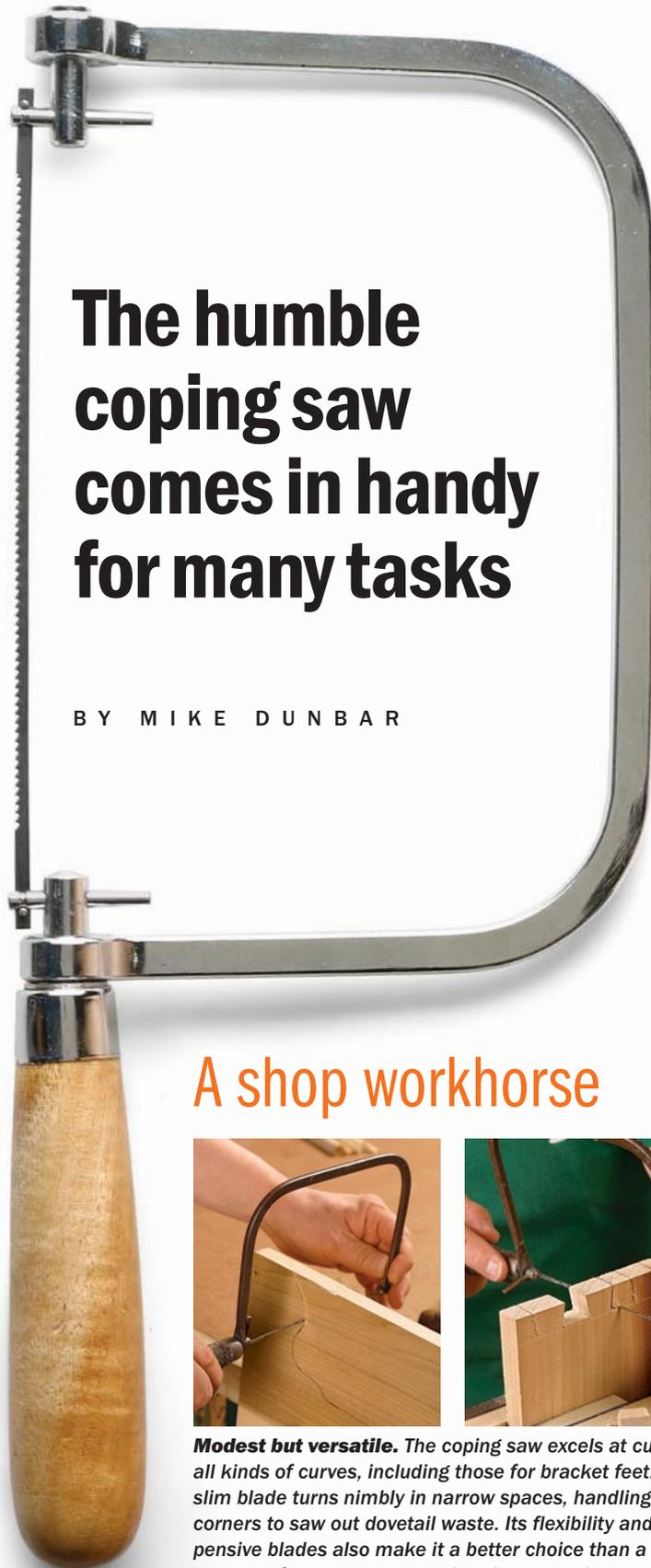


The humble coping saw comes in handy for many tasks

BY MIKE DUNBAR



A shop workhorse



Modest but versatile. The coping saw excels at cutting all kinds of curves, including those for bracket feet. The slim blade turns nimbly in narrow spaces, handling tight corners to saw out dovetail waste. Its flexibility and inexpensive blades also make it a better choice than a backsaw for many general trimming operations.

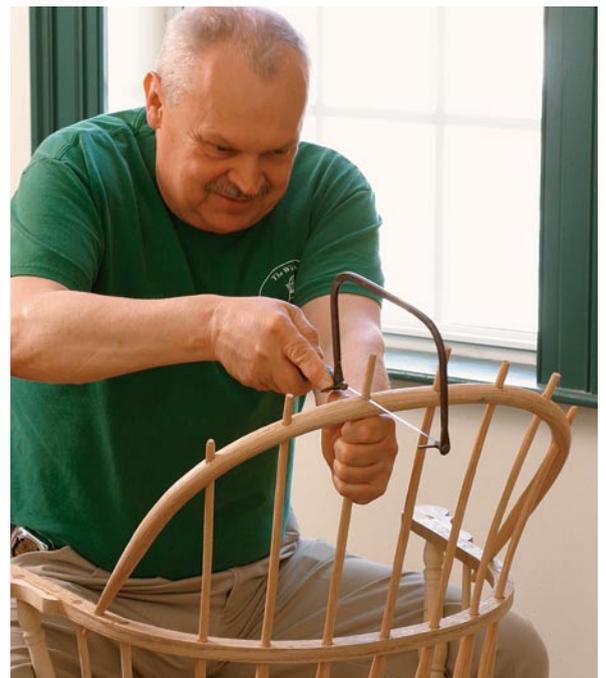
When I was in junior high school in the early 1960s, I had to take what was then called “Manual Training.” Each student had to build a wooden tie rack for his dad. Because we were 14-year-old boys, the instructor would let us use only two tools—a rasp and a coping saw. I grew up thinking that coping saws existed only so that kids and klutzes wouldn’t hurt themselves.

Not so. I use a coping saw in a professional woodworking shop every day. The saw can simply and quickly cut coped joints for molding or curved parts for furniture and other work. Its blade can be threaded through stock to cut interior shapes or worked into tight places to trim waste from joinery. All this from a tool that’s inexpensive and simple to maintain. Whenever I gather my tools, the coping saw is among the first I reach for.

Choose a model with a sturdy frame

A coping saw has a C-shaped steel frame whose two arms are slightly farther apart than the blade is long. These arms pull the thin, flexible blade taut. In the end of the wooden handle and the front arm, two slotted yokes hold the blade.

The handle also holds a captive nut that loosens when the handle is turned. This allows the blade to pivot relative to the frame so that you can adjust the saw to the cutting situation. Be sure to turn the two



Installing a coping-saw blade

Release pressure. Loosen the handle and slightly compress the saw's arms against a benchtop to install the blade.



Seat the blade. Make sure the blade pins sit securely in their notches before tightening the handle. The author mounts the blade to cut on the pull stroke.



Use two hands. Grasp the saw by the handle and front arm, and cut with the blade's full length. Keep your strokes parallel to the benchtop.

yoke pins equally to avoid twisting the blade, and re-tighten the handle afterward.

Not all coping saws are created equal. I prefer an all-steel saw with some heft. For example, Woodcraft sells a sturdy model for \$13.99 (product #141403). Cheaper, lightweight models tend to have weaker frames and poorly attached handles.

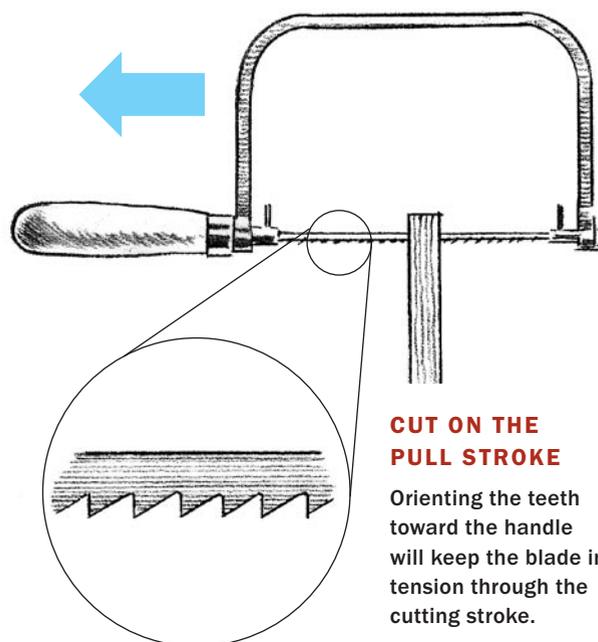
Low-quality blades also can be a problem. Some brands are not as sharp as others; some break easily. I only use Stanley blades, which are available at Ace Hardware. Coping-saw blades are made for different purposes and materials. The fewer the teeth per inch, the coarser the cut. Available sizes include 10, 15, 20, and 24 tpi. For most work, I use a 15-tpi blade.

Guide the saw with both hands for straight cuts, smooth curves

To install a blade, compress the saw's arms to close the distance between them and slide the ends of the blade into the yokes. Be sure to seat the small pins securely on the ends of the blade, or the tension in the frame can launch the blade like a slingshot.

I was taught to install the blade so that it would cut on the push stroke, and I still use it this way for making coped cuts. But I've found I have more control making other cuts on the pull stroke, as with a Japanese saw. In this orientation, the blade is less apt to bind, which can cause it to break or allow the blade to spring out of the saw.

Most woodworkers use a coping saw for cutting curves on a board's edge. These cuts can be for



CUT ON THE PULL STROKE

Orienting the teeth toward the handle will keep the blade in tension through the cutting stroke.

Coped cuts for seamless corners

Coping is the process of fitting one three-dimensional surface to another. Often, those surfaces are moldings. When moldings are mitered, seasonal movement can cause the joints to open. If moldings are coped, the two surfaces slide imperceptibly across each other when they move, and a gap never develops.



Coping a corner joint. To cut a coped joint, miter the workpiece and highlight the edge to mark a clear path for your coping saw (1). Cut along the pencil mark, back-beveling the rear surface to allow the joint to close completely (2). To avoid chipping the surface, mount your blade to cut on the push stroke. The finished cut will mate closely with its neighbor to form a tight corner (3).

making furniture or architectural parts, or for shaping the mating edge of a scribed joint. Many users imagine the coping saw as a hand version of a scroll saw. They clamp the wood flat to the bench and try to use the saw vertically. This method does not permit good control. I secure the wood vertically in a vise and use the saw horizontally.

I keep the saw's frame upright and turn the blade so that the direction of cut is horizontal. Being right-handed, I grip the handle in my right hand and the front yoke in my left. I keep my stroke smooth and regular, using as much of the blade as I can without running the yokes into the workpiece.

I am careful to keep my hands parallel to the benchtop for a square edge. If you want a beveled edge, you can create it by purposefully raising one hand as you use the saw.

A coping saw also will cut interior shapes. First drill a small hole in the waste. Remove the blade and pass it through the hole. Remount the blade and use the saw in the same way as for an exterior cut. You will have to reposition the wood in the vise to allow the saw to cut the entire perimeter.

Trimming joinery and hard-to-reach corners

The coping saw is also handy for removing the waste between dovetails. After cutting the tails, run

a coping-saw blade down the kerf. At the bottom, begin sawing as you turn the blade horizontally. This turn will leave a small, round corner. Cut across the waste just proud of the scribe line and into the opposite corner. Pare the round corner and down to the scribe line with a chisel.

I often keep a coping saw nearby when I'm using the bandsaw. I find the hand tool makes quick work of trimming tight corners and other spots that are time-consuming and awkward to reach on the machine.

Being a frugal Yankee, I also use my coping saw for a lot of trimming that many woodworkers would do with a backsaw. Here's why: When my backsaw gets dull, I have to send it out to be sharpened. It is gone for a week, and it costs me \$10. When a coping-saw blade gets dull, it usually breaks. I pop in a 65¢ replacement, and I am back to work.

Because an improperly mounted blade can be launched by the frame, it is always a good idea to wear safety glasses when changing blades. And while you're unlikely to cut off a finger with a coping saw, it can give you a nasty, ragged cut that will hurt a lot more than a nice, clean slice. Such cuts usually occur during trimming. Be sure not to place a free hand where the blade will exit the workpiece. □