

## Kickback!

Measure Twice, Cut Once – January 2023

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The word “kickback” should have powerfully negative associations to woodworkers. During Will Neptune’s outstanding November presentation on cove cutting on a table saw (see the video <https://youtu.be/2LYpKcbjk5s?t=420>), he started with a couple of safety considerations. His first point was about the proper positioning of twin fences to prevent the potentially lethal event of a kickback. In his gentle and humorous way, Will commented “the thing – having taught a long time – is that everyone who has a kickback on the table saw is *really* surprised when it happens. Right? Nobody *plans* on this, and it is mind-boggling the force of a saw when that thing comes out of that back of that blade.”

The following week, EMGW member Dan Sichel and I were talking about the program over a delightful lunch (thanks again, Dan!), and were both impressed by that portion of the talk, especially the idea that no one plans on experiencing a kickback. Will noted that a workpiece launched from a table saw travels at “100-something miles an hour.” I did a bit of research on the topic and noticed that there are different estimates of the speed. There is a lively and lengthy discussion of table saw kickback on [physics.stackexchange.com](https://physics.stackexchange.com), and several contributors write that the mass of the workpiece should also be considered when assessing the potential damage.

As with so many issues in the shop, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Kickback is sudden, explosive, violent, and hugely consequential. When ripping on a table saw, it’s essential to confirm that the fence and blade are parallel, and that a riving knife or splitter are deployed, and that effective feather boards and hold downs are in place. One should stand slightly off to the side when feeding the lumber and stop at the first sign of binding. These precautions are all focused on avoiding kickback or mitigating its damage.

Kickback also has meanings outside of the shop. Most American dictionaries offer two definitions for its use as a noun: 1. a return of a part of a sum received often because of confidential agreement or coercion, as in “every city contract had been let with a ten percent kickback to city officials” (attributed to D. K. Shipler) and 2. a sharp violent reaction, as with the recoil of a rifle or chain saw.

Coerced payoffs should be avoided for ethical and legal reasons. One can anticipate and adjust to recoil, if not avoid it altogether. Metaphorically, I suppose, one can be surprised by the verbal equivalent of recoil when a seemingly mild comment elicits a disproportionate response from a listener. This summer, my wife and I were visiting some of her relatives in rural western Tennessee. Knowing we live in the Boston area, but not in the city proper, one asked where exactly our town is. I responded by mentioning the nearest nationally-known landmark, Gillette Stadium. Expecting that they might not adore the Patriots, I tried to provide a humorous trigger

warning that I was about to invoke the name of a team that might not be favored. Much to my surprise, the response was an energetic denunciation of the entire NFL for a variety of offenses. The reaction was not violent, but sure was sudden, explosive, and surprising. I had to backpedal fast.

On the other hand, there's yet another usage of kickback. Insert a space between the syllables, convert from a noun to a verb, and now we're talking about relaxation. Put down your burden, lower your guard, pour a refreshing beverage, put on your favorite music, clear your mind, and put your feet up. The image couldn't be further from that of table saw kickback.

We all need to make time in our busy lives to kick back, but never when it comes to avoiding kickback.