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If you're just starting out or starting over from scratch, you have at least five track systems to choose from, in addition to the traditional Lionel tubular: Atlas, GarGraves, K-Line, MTH, and Ross. Each has advantages and disadvantages, so it becomes a matter of deciding which is right for your layout, considering the rolling stock your railroad owns and your budget. I recommend doing a little research into your options at the local hobby shop before you begin.

Dick and I went with Lionel tubular sections for a number of reasons. Yes, it is fair to say that we are both rather traditional-values types. Don't discount a heavy element of nostalgia—many of us toy train fans are afflicted with this pleasant malaise.

However, the deciding factor was the hundreds of pounds of perfectly good track we had left from previous adventures in layout building—all eminently recyclable with a little preparation and cleaning. Besides, we like the stuff.

### Reconditioning used track

Lionel tubular track was built to last. Even sections made 75 years ago if they aren't too badly bent or rusted can be refurbished to perform well on a layout today.

Dick and I used a lot of old track on the LL/SF. Some came from his first childhood layout (ca. 1950—he can tell by the residue of brown paint and dried coffee grounds used for ballast), and some with dried mud on it from a flood in the basement of his Illinois home. He also had received original pieces of track from the historic Policeman's Athletic League layout of Rochester, N.Y.

We carefully examined all of this old track, historic or just plain battered and played with.

## Key trackwork questions

- What kind of track will I want: tubular tinfoil, GarGraves, Atlas, MTH, or other track with the roadbed molded in?
- Can I get away with used tinfoil track?
- Do I want to spend the time to clean old track or spend money for new?
- Have I taken the time to check out and tune up the switches?
- What's my preferred method of fastening track to the subroadbed?
- Do I want to add extra ties for a more realistic look?
- Do I want to add ballast? If so, what kind and color?

Then Dick and I cleaned and tweaked every section before using it.

- If your track is just dirty, wash it in a strong detergent solution, scrub each section with a stiff brush, and rinse it under running water. Then stack it and allow it to air-dry. Inspect each section for kinks, warps, bends, and visible rust.

- If you can't satisfactorily straighten a section with your bare hands, you probably should discard it.

- Make sure all the fiber insulators are in place.

- Remove superficial rust with a Scotch-Brite pad, sandpaper, or a wire wheel in an electric drill. (Don't use steel wool—the iron strands will be drawn into the motor of a locomotive and wreak havoc.) Heavily rusted track should be thrown away.

- Make sure all the track pins are tight. If necessary, crimp the holes on the opposite ends with needlenose pliers to assure a tight fit.

- Clean the upper running surfaces of all the rails with a ScotchBrite pad. Follow through by rubbing the rails with WD-40 on a soft cloth.

### Switches need work, too

You should test and tweak (if necessary) all of your automatic switches, even new

## Labels for switches and uncouplers

For years, most videotape cassettes came with little sheets of stick-on numerals and letters. Dick used what he needed and put the rest away in a drawer—the same drawer that holds his balls of string and rubber bands! He knew those stick-on items would come in handy some day.

Well, they did. As we installed the switches and UCS tracks, Dick methodically stuck a number on each one, and on the corresponding controller for easy recognition. The letters and numbers are white on a black background, so from a distance the background disappears into the black Bakelite surface and the number or letter stands out.

Maybe Dick and I thought we would remove the numbers once we had learned the system. Regardless, they're still in place and prove to be helpful under the heat of operations. We may never remove them.

If your brand of videotape didn't provide these stick-ons (or if you're not a packrat and threw them away years ago), you can find sheets of similar numerals and letters at almost any office or art supply store. Of course, you'll have to pay for those.—*John Grams*



**To make operation simple, even for guests, Dick attached numbers and letters from the self-adhesive labels enclosed with video cassettes to switches, uncoupling sections, and their controllers. Most of the labels are black with white letters, so the black background blends into the black Bakelite surface, leaving a nice indication of which switch needs to be thrown.**

ones, before you install them on the layout. Who needs surprises once you've laid the track or, worse yet, applied ballast?

With old Lionel O gauge switches, this is particularly important. They can get lethargic just sitting around for years.

- Clean all the rails with a ScotchBrite pad, followed by WD-40 on a cloth.

- Take the switch apart by removing four screws. Two screws underneath hold the switch motor and switch base together. Two other screws keep the plastic cover housing over the solenoids.

- Inspect the internal mechanism. Check that all the wires are in place. Turn the mechanism by hand to be sure that everything operates freely and fully. Clean out any dirt or dust bunnies.

- Clean the four flat contacts under the moving contact plate with TV tuner cleaner or mineral spirits on a cotton swab. Get off all that black oxide—make 'em shine.

- Sparingly apply a greasy lubricant to all the moving parts, particularly where metal rubs against metal. Catch the rack and pinion, the lock hinge, and other areas where you see evidence of rubbing. Don't lubricate

the solenoids.

- Reassemble the motor and switch base. Leave off the cover housing.

- Apply electricity to test the switch function. Make any necessary mechanical adjustments to achieve optimal performance.

Many operators don't replace the screws

### Trackwork tips

- Choose among the track systems available the one that best suits your layout, rolling stock, and budget.
- Conventional Lionel tubular track is probably the most economical, but it needs some dressing up to appear realistic.
- Used track and switches need cleaning and reconditioning before installation.
- Fit sections together snugly and fasten them securely.
- Straight runs should be straight and curves smooth.
- Consider elevated roadbed of some kind, particularly on the high iron.
- Add extra ties and ballast to provide a finished, realistic look.