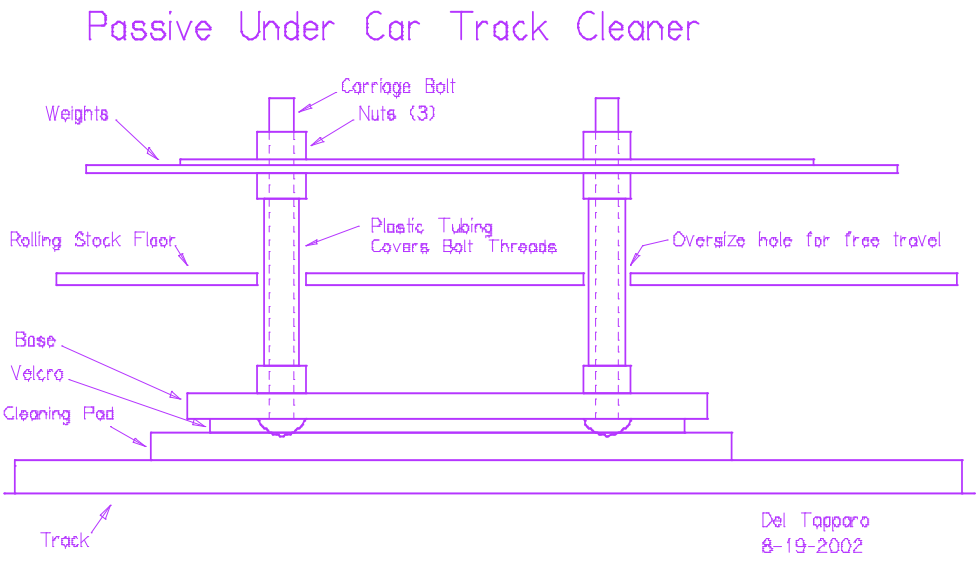
A Simple Track Cleaner You Can Build

By Del Tapparo

While track cleaning is considered to be one of the drawbacks of track power, it doesn't have to be an overwhelming chore. Passive track cleaners are a simple and economical way to get the job done. Basically, they are just a weighted platform with an abrasive cleaning pad, spanning the rails under a piece of rolling stock. All of the weight is on the pad. The rolling stock, pulled or pushed by a locomotive, simply drags the pad around the track.

There are all kinds of fancy designs to redirect the pad in the curves, etc. But all you really need are two vertical rods sticking up through two holes in the floor of your rolling stock. This allows the pad assembly to freely move up and down, and directs all of the weight to the track, while the rolling stock pulls on it horizontally.

Here is how I built mine -



I started with a 30' reefer that was gathering dust. Using a motor tool, I removed the brake details, truss rods, and center sills from the under side of the car between the trucks to make room for the cleaning assembly. Using 1/4" plywood, I made a platform 3 3/4" X 5 1/2", or as long as possible and just wide enough to cover both rails in the middle of my sharpest curve. Two 3" X 1/4" bolts were used for the vertical rods. They were secured to the platform with nuts. The majority of the threaded shaft was covered with 1/4" ID tubing to provide a smooth surface for vertical travel through the floor of the reefer. Another nut on top of the tubing supports the weight plates, with another nut on top of the weight to secure it down. I found some steel bracing at the home improvement store used for tying wooden trusses together, which seemed pretty heavy. I cut it into several pieces about 12 1/2" X 2" X 1/16", so that I would have several combinations of weight to use as needed. The bottom of platform was covered with strips of Velcro to hold the cleaning material in place. Use Velcro loops to hold synthetic steel wool (Red - Medium Grade - #00 is my preference, available at your home improvement store). I also added steel wheels to the reefer for more stability.

The Results -

Much to my amazement, this little contraption works quite well. About 3 or 4 laps around the track appear to do nearly as good a job as my manual drywall pole, with the same type of pad. But, it takes much less time and energy, and you get to run trains in the process. I found 16 ounces of weight is just about right for my setup. The loco, an Aristo-Craft C-16, pulling my cleaning reefer, pulls about 1 amp and can still easily make the ruling grade of 3%. If you want to run the cleaning car continuously as part of a train, you will need to reduce the weight. The cleaning pad clears my LGB turnouts and rail joints without snagging, and seems to clean the outer rail of the curves just fine.

I used to get out the drywall pole prior to each operating session. Now I only need it about every 6 weeks. My routine is still "Always clean before each operating session". It is just a whole lot more fun now.

Photo Captions –

Photo No. 1 – Underside details are removed from the reefer. Holes in the floor are used to mount the cleaning assembly. Plastic tubing around bolts allow free vertical movement.

Photo No. 2 – Cleaning assembly shown assembled outside of car (for easier viewing).

Photo No. 3 – To assemble, insert bolts from bottom of floor, then add weight platform to topside of floor.

Photo No. 4 – Make cleaning area as large as possible without interfering with truck operation.

Photo No. 5 – In operation, the cleaning car is a full load.