

# A Dovetail a Day

The 30-day workout program that promises you tight tails and no split ends.

I was on our local swim team as a child, and I was an embarrassment to my pool, my parents and mammals in general. Perhaps the coach kept me around to make the youngest swimmers (Team Minnow) feel better about their dog-paddling. Or perhaps my artless splashing lulled competing teams into complacency before a swim meet.

One summer day my mother dropped me off at the pool, and as she drove off I discovered that none of my friends was there. I had the entire day alone before me.

I got in the pool and messed around a bit. As boredom set in I swam a couple laps of breaststroke. After a few laps I wondered if I could stretch my hands forward more. I then wondered if I could tuck my legs in tighter after a kick. Three hours later my mom called me from the pool side to go home.

The next day was a swim meet, and I was in the 50-yard breaststroke against kids who beat me every summer. The starting gun fired, and 50 yards later I looked around. I was alone. I had won by an enormous margin. It was my first and last victory.

You know where this story is going.

Now I've always been a fair dovetailer. I cut my first set by hand 13 years ago and made decent joints. But I was slow. One day the memory of that swim meet returned, and I decided to try the same approach with my dovetailing. I vowed to cut a dovetail every day for a month.

That night I prepped a few boards of cherry and poplar. I laid out my tools on the bench and cut my first set – three tails into three pins. It took more than an hour. I then cut the joint free of the two boards, marked the date on the corner and put the joint on the windowsill. I left all my tools out on the bench, set and ready for day two.

The next day, before I cut the second set, I picked up the joint from the night before. Under scrutiny, it wasn't as nice as I'd

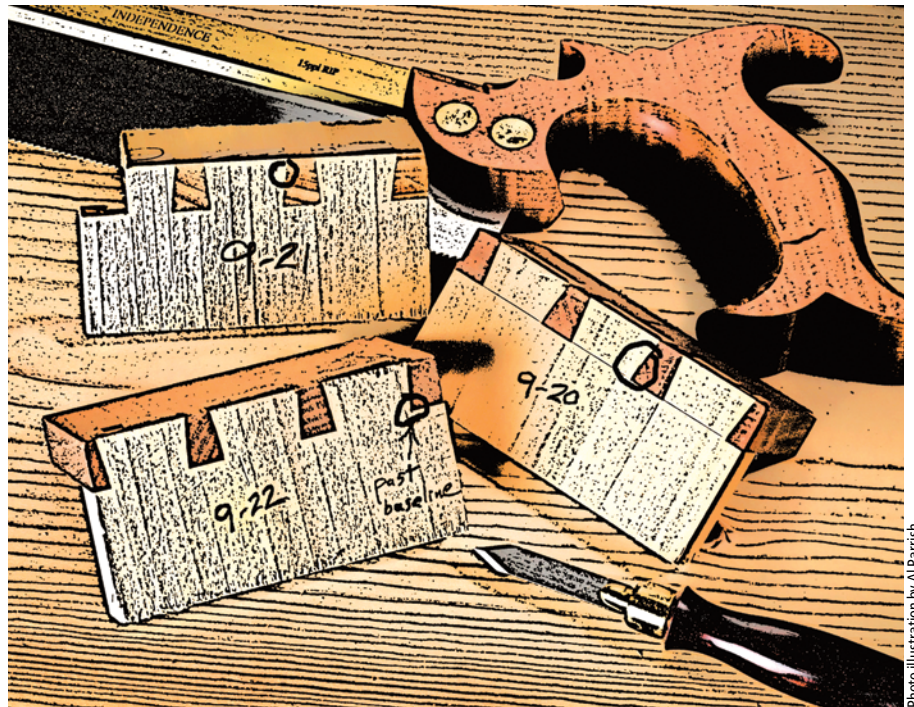


Photo illustration by Al Parrish

remembered. My saw had crossed the baseline here. I had split one pin slightly there.

I cut my next set and tried to avoid crossing the joint's baseline. I tried to ensure the pins on the ends were cut straight. And I made the half pins on the ends a bit wider.

I cut that joint free, dated it and sat it on the sill. After a few more nights I realized that I was just repeating my blunders. Split pins were plaguing me.

So I sawed even closer to my knife lines on the end pins. The next day, no splits.

After two weeks, my dovetails looked tighter. Then I changed their spacing. Then I started to pick up speed and arrange my tools so I wasn't fumbling for the chisel.

After 30 days, I was 10 times the dove-

tailer I was when I began. The operation felt natural. When the 30 days was up, I was worried about stopping my experiment. Would I regress? That had happened when I was on the swim team. I had stopped swimming practice laps and never won another race.

But this story has a happy ending. Once I conquered the dovetail, I used the joint more often in my work. I also began sawing and chiseling more in general, which then reinforced my dovetailing.

So many times we learn woodworking on the fly as we build something. We get our skills just good enough to accomplish that project and then we move on. It's rare to get out a board and just saw it. Or plane it. Or mortise it with our router.

This method might seem like wasting time but it has resulted in some of my most enjoyable shop time. And now I'm thinking that "Inlay a Day" has a nice ring to it. **PW**

by Christopher Schwarz

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