Track Maintenance

Track condition is especially important in the performance of model trains. Good electrical contact helps to prevent high amperage draw on the power source. Clean track also helps with the data being sent through the rails to the engine command control to run as selected.

Below are some of the do and don’ts of track maintenance.

1. Never use any metal wool type cleaning pads, such as steel, copper, or any conductive material.

I have had seen track electrical shortages happen using these products. I have made critical repairs to engines (especially diesels which have the speaker mounted in the fuel tank belly. The steel wool shards that come off the pads will draw up into the speaker encloser and eventually penetrate the speaker diaphragm causing the voice coil to short out and burn out the amplifier on the circuit board. Also, Lionel Post-war engines have the Magna Traction feature that will pick up steel wool shards. This becomes a costly repair.

1. Usually, the track will have a coating of smoke fluid and lubricating oils from the engines causing traction problem and electrical. The product that has been good for cleaning is the use of 90% Rubbing Alcohol with a clean rag, terrycloth tends to snag the track at track section connections.
2. If you find any oxidation (rust) on the rail top, the best cleaning pads made by 3M Products sold at Lowes or Home Depot in the paint supply section. The green pad is the most aggressive and the blue pad is the least and normally will not scratch the surface. There is another product called Bright Boy which is like an eraser in composition. These are harder to find and have become very costly.
3. Sandpaper use after cleaning with rubbing alcohol. Avoid any sandpaper product they may have carbon in the grit. Carbon is a conductor of electricity and may cause a short. Sandpaper with 300 course grit and up works well. The track will need to be wiped down again after using.
4. It is also best to avoid using aerosol cleaners like carburetor cleaner or brake cleaner, these may have a chemical reaction with glues used to bond road ballast causing them to loosen. Making it able to get into the gearing of diesel locomotives and post-war steam that have exposed gearing. This will cause the drive line to lock up. These sprays may cause plastic roadbed on MTH RealTracs, Lionel Fastrack, and other track that use plastic for the track ties to break down.
5. Using WD-40 will leave a film on the rails after it dries out. It is as a water displacement product, and it has fish oil in its composition. And 3 and one oil are good for door and gate hinges only.